

our uncommonwealth - Kentucky and Ohio brawled over Indian Head Rock; now it's in a storage shed

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Long before it was a battleground between Kentucky and Ohio, beginning in 2007, **Indian Head Rock** was a regional sensation on the Ohio River between Kentucky and Ohio.

The rock, of which only a portion protruded out of the Ohio River, was a popular attraction for a less complicated time. Then, people swam out and had their picture made. One lady, who in 1903 had her picture made on the rock in her finery, obviously was ferried from the shore for her portrait: It was the kind of thing people did even before they had Facebook and Instagram.

The rock was submerged in 1920 with the development of the lock and dam system on the Ohio River to provide a minimum depth of water for boat traffic. And that's where the rock stayed until 2007, when Ironton, Ohio, resident Steve Shaffer brought up the rock and donated it to Portsmouth, Ohio.

The Buckeye State! But everyone knows that the Ohio River and all its rocky contents between Kentucky and Ohio belong to Kentucky, right?

Apparently not, because then things got weird. And then, just as quickly, they got very quiet.

Steven Middleton, a Morehead State University instructor and filmmaker, said he got a call from a police officer in Greenup County asking whether he had considered doing a piece on **Indian Head Rock**.

The officer said, "Look it up, read about it and call me back."

Middleton did. What he found was a fight of national interest that had been largely forgotten since it began in 2007 and ended in 2010. State legislatures, attorneys general, media, archaeologists, historians and others weighed in on a rock that, although mildly interesting, should not have been a matter of unending fascination.

But it highlighted big, and sometimes comically territorial, issues: a cat fight between states, whether an antiquity is of any interest when removed from its context (in this case, unseen below the river), and whether any person has the right to go Indiana Jones-ing, even with the best of intentions.

You bet Steven Middleton wanted to do a film about it. The resulting effort, "Between The Rock and the Commonwealth," is now being pitched for play on Kentucky Educational Television. It already has been snapped up by Ohio Public Television.

For his effort of raising the rock, Shaffer was slapped with a felony charge of removing an antiquity. He faced a sentence of one to five years in prison if convicted. Charges were dropped eventually, and the rock was sent to Greenup County, where it sits in a storage shed, invisible to almost everyone but firmly within the control of the commonwealth of Kentucky.

"It being closed off isn't good for either state," Middleton said.

The ruckus over the rock was reported both regionally and nationally in a "media show," as Middleton calls it. An editorial in the Charleston, W.Va., Herald-Dispatch sniffed that the charges

against Shaffer were ludicrous: "Whoever heard of storing a historic artifact in 16 feet of water, where practically no one would ever see it? ... If it was removed without a proper permit, that can be taken care of. But there was no intent of theft or personal financial gain."

National Public Radio, ever-ready to put a pun on it, headlined its piece, "Ohio, Kentucky Feuding Over Rock in a Hard Place." The New York Times headline was "Between States, Hard Feelings Over a Rock's Place."

The "Indian Head" is a smiley face carved into the rock, along with numerous bits of old graffiti that might have been carved by area residents; the smiley face itself might have been carved by an Ohio child in the 19th century or might be an Indian petroglyph. Middleton said the face looks like a Charlie Brown.

Middleton's film notes that a "panorama" drawing of the area at the time had the **Indian Head rock** portrayed as more of an Easter Island-style long-face statue sticking up out of the river.

It also features an entertaining recounting of the story by former gubernatorial candidate and Kentucky attorney general Jack Conway, who wryly recalls when he first heard of the controversy via a call from Ohio's attorney general, who suggested that the two states work out something about the custody of the rock by trading it off every six months.

Conway is amused by the ruckus that broke out between the two states, but he said that the conflict reminded him that regardless of whether a conflict is popular, the law must be enforced.

Alas, the rock itself, subject of so much controversy after it was brought to the surface, is not resting in a nice museum space somewhere, with a neatly framed display of photographs of its history.

It's in a Greenup County government storage shed. Middleton got to see it, but the rock is not generally available for viewing, and the film closes with a brief flash of light on the rock as the shed doors are shut once more.

The Ashland Daily Independent reported in March that the rock might finally find a home inside a proposed shelter in South Shore - if the Kentucky Department for Local Government provides the money to build a gazebo for it near the South Shore city building. Greenup Judge-Executive Bobby Carpenter told the newspaper that he gets calls about the rock "all the time."

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Other films by Steven Middleton

"Commonwealth Curiosities: An Ode to Kentucky's Unique Attractions Volume Two" (2016)

"Commonwealth Curiosities: An Ode to Kentucky's Unique Attractions Volume One" (2015)

"Never Get Out Alive: An Appalachian Perspective on Life and Death" (2014)

"Junkers Lament" (2013)

"Tobaccolachia" (2012)

"Zen Furnace" (2011)

"Fire in the Mountains" (2010)

The rock was once a sensation on the Ohio River. Then its protruding top fell below the water line. An Ohio man fetched it from the depths. Then things got weird.

- **Caption:** Indian Head Rock is a six-ton rock that once rested in the Ohio River. Decades ago, before it became submerged, it was a popular site for photos in an era long before Facebook and Instagram. Steven Middleton, an instructor at Morehead State University, made the film "Between The Rock and the Commonwealth." Photos provided A woman dressed in her Sunday best posed for a photo on Indian Head Rock in the Ohio River about 1903. Photo provided An unidentified man stood on Indian Head Rock on the Ohio River in the early 20th century, when the rock was a popular destination for photos.