

Indian Head Rock back in Kentucky after 3-year fight with Ohio

BY STEPHANIE DEARING

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Frankfort - Indian Head Rock used to be situated in the middle of the Ohio River, although on the Kentucky side. That is, until the eight-ton behemoth was removed by an intrepid upholsterer and whisked off to Ohio.

Upholsterer and amateur historian Steven Shaffer, who is from Ohio, set out on a mission to find the legendary Indian Head Rock, an eight-ton boulder. CBS News reported that historically, long before the river was dammed, the rock was readily visible, and received attention from graffiti artists from days gone by, including, it is thought, petroglyphs made by the natives that used to live in the area. Shaffer and his friends spent three years diving in the river, finally locating the boulder, and taking it, claiming a coup for Ohio.

Taking an eight-ton boulder that lies well below the surface of a river is not an easy feat, and Shaffer, who has been described as an amateur historian, pulled together a team and removed the rock, which then sat in a garage in Ohio for years while a fight raged over the boulder, reported WSAZ 3 News Channel. Shaffer was threatened with up to five years in prison for removing the rock, which is a crime under Kentucky's Antiquity Act. Shaffer also apparently violated the Rivers and Harbours Act. At the time, Shaffer said

"I had no idea. It's just a rock with graffiti."

When Shaffer found the rock, he issued a press release calling the rock an important historic artifact. The release describes the efforts put into finding and raising the boulder from the river bed.

The rock did not come out of the water readily, said one of the recovery team. The team cleared loose rock away from the bottom of the submerged rock and rigged the boulder with "a heavy nylon strap harness, to which were attached a number of air bags capable of lifting 2,000 pounds each." Dean Dixon wrote,

"... As the group watched with anticipation, the bags were inflated, but the rock refused to budge. "Everyone in the group was disappointed after the first unsuccessful attempt. But myself, I took it personal and got mad. I went back and did some math, located additional air bags and barrels, and we went at it again."

The team added more air lines, but still that was not sufficient, and they ended up adding barrels to the rigging. Team member Dave Vetter,

"was below the surface of the river feeding air into the last barrel when things began to happen. "I heard a noise, and then noticed the nylon ropes in front of me were beginning to stretch and lengthen. Then, below me was this explosion of silt and stone and I thought – Wow! This rock is moving. It was really something to see."

The then-floating rock was secured to a boat and towed to Portsmouth and lifted out of the river with a forty-ton crane that was donated for the purpose. At the time, Shaffer said

"It was a wonderful project, and obviously one that wouldn't be hurried. Raising the Indian's Head Rock is also an example of grassroots preservation teamwork at its best. I'm happy to have been a part of it, and I'm glad Portsmouth's future generations will be able to see and ponder the Indian's Head as well."

The Indian Head Rock recovery team pulled together by Steven Shaffer.

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George Vetter

The rock was returned to Kentucky on Thursday November 4, and is temporarily stored in another garage until a location for the rock has been decided upon by a committee. The return was the result of a law suit launched three years ago in a bid to regain the rock, reported WFMJ. Some local Kentucky residents think the rock will be a good tourist draw. Judge-Executive Robert Carpenter told WFPL News,

"It's very neat to look at it. I've went and looked at it a couple times, and it's got a lot of interesting things to look at."

The Northerner said the rock had been protected by Kentucky law in 1986, and is described as an "artifact steeped in Kentucky history."

A 1903 visitor poses atop the celebrated Indian' Head Rock.

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Southern Ohio Museum, Carl Ackerman Collection

The return is part of a deal reached by Kentucky and Ohio, which saw the civil law suit dropped. The agreement was reached in July, reported American Archaeologist. At the time of the agreement, Kentucky Heritage Council executive director and the state's historic preservation officer Mark Dennen said

"While we are relieved that an agreement has been reached to return this artifact to Kentucky, our concern has always been and continues to be the protection of Kentucky's archaeological resources. Federal and state laws exist to protect these sites from looting."

In September, the American Archaeologist reported that looting of archaeological sites is common. An expert contacted for the article said

"Sadly, archaeology sites are being looted every day."

The expert went on to tell American Archaeologist that Antiquity trafficking is a "\$6billion to \$7 billion industry, is the fourth-largest illegal market in the world, according to a study by the U.S. National Central Bureau of Interpol, the world's largest international police agency." Hardly any cases involving the theft or trafficking of artifacts make it to court, the magazine reported.