

Group works to raise historic Indian's Head Rock from river

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PORTSMOUTH, Ohio -- History, someone jokingly pointed out, takes a lot of time.

So appears to be the case with a historic preservation effort for the Indian's Head Rock -- a sandstone boulder which, until recently, rested upon the floor of the Ohio River near Portsmouth. What separated the nearly 80-ton behemoth from countless surrounding river rocks is that on the surface of this particular boulder is the image of a human face, reportedly carved centuries ago by a Native American.

This rock carving, or petroglyph to use a more scientific term, was nearly always under the water, even before navigational dams were constructed on the Ohio River. But during those dry summers of long ago, when the Indian's Head Rock was exposed, Euro-American settlers intrigued by the ancient enigma took the opportunity to add their inscriptions to the boulder as well.

By the late 1800s, the appearance of the rock drew large crowds, and the petroglyph boulder was the subject of speculation in books, newspapers, on postcards, and was even depicted in a traveling panorama. The Indian's Head Rock was last visible above the water in October 1920, when a steamboat damaged the dam downstream, temporarily lowering the water level. With the repair of the dam, the boulder sank beneath the water and the celebrated Indian's Head became a mostly forgotten footnote in local history.

That was until eight years ago, when the story of the lost monument captured my imagination. While writing the script for a documentary film on prehistoric rock art, I became aware these cultural treasures were being erased at an alarming rate from the effects of acid rain, weathering and vandalism. Since that time I've worked to locate, document and encourage the preservation of prehistoric carvings found throughout the Ohio Valley. I suspected the Indian's Head Rock still existed, could be found and could once again become part of Portsmouth's rich history.

In the summer of 2000 with a group of Huntington-based divers, I began exploring the river bottom in the Portsmouth area. It took numerous dives over a three-year period, but persistence paid off, as the team located and photographed the boulder, discovering the ancient Native American image and historic inscriptions clearly visible and in excellent condition. However, recovering the 16,000 pound rock from the river would present an even greater challenge.

According to a nearly 100-year-old newspaper account, I was not the first person who hoped the Indian's Head Rock could be lifted from its watery resting place. An Oct. 8, 1908, article in The Portsmouth Daily Times reported community leaders, led by Henry Lorberg, petitioned the river authorities to raise the rock with the aid of a snagboat -- a vessel designed to remove obstacles from the river. Once the rock was landed, it could be displayed, along with its history, in a local park. Although there appears to have been a good deal of interest and support for the project, the monolith remained on the river floor.

I had better luck, but it would take time. Five years after the re-discovery, I teamed with search and rescue SCUBA divers and river enthusiasts Dave Vetter, Dean Dixon, B.J. Cantrell, Darrell Ramey, Max

Dixon and James Madison. Pooling their skills and resources, a plan emerged for the rock's possible recovery.

This summer's water conditions allowed the divers to clear the loose rock at the base of the boulder and carefully rig a heavy nylon strap harness, to which were attached a number of air bags capable of lifting 2,000 pounds each. 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," Dixon said. "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."

Air lines were again reconnected, lift bags inflated, but the rock, once more, remained unresponsive. In addition to the bags, the team attached a number of barrels to the rigging encompassing the boulder. Vetter, owner of Underwater World SCUBA in Portsmouth, 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," he said. "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 divers secured the now buoyant boulder to a pontoon boat, and slowly towed it to the Portsmouth landing. Arrangements for the final lift from the river were made, with J & H Erectors of Portsmouth contributing a 40-ton crane to the effort. On Sept. 9, a cheering crowd of locals gathered to watch as crane operator Greg Dillow hoisted the Indian's Head Rock from the water.

Both the re-discovery and recovery of the Indian's Head Rock were important, pointing out no other single artifact from the region represents so much of the area's pre-history and history.

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 recovery team is working with the City of Portsmouth to preserve the historic rock and place it on public display.