

New England Antiquities Research Association



Faces a Riddle Written in Stone

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By Adam Gorlick

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They've been overlooked as useless oddities for decades - flat-backed stones with sunken eye sockets and gaping mouths carved into them - stowed in bowling ball bags, left in barns or fashioned into candle holders by those who found them in the woods of central Massachusetts.



(Photo by Dan Boudillion)

Now in the hands of retired state geologist Joseph Sinnott, the five stone faces found in Sturbridge and Southbridge are getting the attention of archaeologists and antiquity researchers throughout New England who are wondering whether they were sculpted by American Indians, prehistoric settlers or practical jokesters.

"I'm not saying I know who made these," Sinnott, 73, said. "I'm looking for information on who made them. Nobody I've spoken to has ever seen anything like these."

When Sinnott saw the first face, he wasn't too impressed. The 16-pound rock was given to him two years ago by a Southbridge man who said he found it in 1991 near the Quinebaug River. He took the rock in a bowling ball bag to Sinnott's house in Worcester, and said he could take the geologist to the spot where it was first picked up.

The outing turned up no new evidence, and Sinnott shrugged off the stone as a curiosity. But a year later, Sinnott found himself staring at a second stone face in the custody of another Southbridge man.

"After seeing two, I thought we had something worth showing the public," he said.

Three more stones - all chunks of granite weighing between six and 25 pounds that were found within eight miles of each other - have been turned over to him since stories about the faces appeared in local newspapers. He recently received a call from a woman who said she found a sixth in nearby Brookfield.

One rock that Sinnott examined had been kept in a family barn for about 60 years. Another was coated with wax after being used as a candle holder.

Sinnott, who retired as the state's top geologist in 1992 after a 22-year career that included overseeing the raising of the only pirate ship ever recovered, argues with those who say the visages are a hoax.

There is no evidence that the wide, smiling mouths and deep eye sockets are hollowed out with modern metal tools, he said. And the carvings - which can't be dated with certainty - appear to be hundreds of years old because of how they're oxidized, he said.

"These weren't made in a day, maybe not even a month," Sinnott said. "You'd have to spend weeks just picking out the eyes with a stone."

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