

# The wild side of north american prehistory



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The American public's interest in the fantastic secrets locked away in the new found North American was at it height in the early 1800s. There were many people wiling to step up and fill the public's taste of adventure and mystery buried in their neighboring hills. The people couldn't get enough of the fantastic. These were the days of the traveling freak shows and snake oil salesmen. This national atmosphere was conducive to accepting almost any purported archaeological discovery, no matter how absurd.

The American public and some enthusiastic members of the archaeological field have been too anxious to accept the fantastic findings as truth. Many times they blindly accept these revelations even in the face of obvious debunking. During the Pre-Civil War era there was a considerable interest toward the remarkable findings, providing glimpses into this nations history.

“ ‘Humbug’ consists in putting on glittering appearances ... by which to suddenly arrest public attention.” P. T. Barnum

P. T. Barnum was one of the most recognizable hoaxers. He is considered a master in the art of “Humbuggery.” His exploits took him around the country displaying his “discoveries.” In one of Barnum's sideshows he produced an elderly black women (Joice Heth) who claimed to have been George Washington's nurse. This purported her to be over one hundred-sixty years old. Later it was discovered that she was no older than seventy years old.

Although it was commonly know that Barnum was defrauding the public he still meet with success. Barnum later (1865) wrote a revealing book into the

ways of his deception. A commentator said, “ He never befouled the public to its injury.”

The lack of professional archaeologists at the time added the ability for hoaxes to sweep the nation with out any significant challenge. There were only a handful of notable professionals perusing true archaeology, namely: Atwater, Squirer, and Davis. These men were all self taught. There also were a few geologists and linguists studying Greek, Latin and Sanskrit. Archaeology was open to anyone with sufficient desire.

There are several cases in which the public was defrauded by a hoax. One in particular was the Grave Creek Stone. The story is set in the Ohio valley. There are many mounds scattered though out the area. In 1775 Nicholas Creswell saw a mound he said to be over one hundred feet high with ditches around the base. In 1805 Meriwether Lewis said a tree on the mound was at least three hundred years old. In 1820 Atwater estimated this significant mound to be only ninety feet high. In actuality it is only seventy feet in height.

The Tomlinson family owned this significant mound. In 1819 there was brief investigations into “ this lofty and venerable tumulus ... contain many thousands of human skeletons.” Joseph Tomlinson was praised for his preservation of this landscape relic.

Later Abelard Tomlinson thought the tremendous mound needed more excavation with the intentions of public viewing. They dug a shaft thought the center of the mound, and a drift from the ground level. They didn’t strike the multitude of skeletal remains as anticipated. They did find a timber lined

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vault covered with rocks. This vault contained two skeletons, shell beads, and a bone ornament. A second vault was discovered thirty-four feet above the lower vault. The second vault contained one skeleton with over two thousand shell beads, copper bracelets, and over two hundred pieces of Mica. When they enlarged the entrance tunnel they found a mass burial of ten skeletons.

The burial was not the main cause of interest. Over five years after the initial excavation Henry Rowe Schoolcraft visited the site and claimed finding “ this curious relic lying unprotected among broken implements of stone, pieces of antique pottery, and other like articles” in the building that has been erected to house the artifacts collected from the digs. This “ curious relic” was to be called the Grave Creek Stone. This stone is one and three quarters of an inch in length, containing three lines of inscription. It was said that the Stone was taken out of the mound. They did not know which vault it was associated with. It probably was taken out in a wheelbarrow load of dirt. There is no contextual data associated with the Stone. There are also a series of conflicting statements surrounding the discovery of the Stone.

Schoolcraft published his conclusion in 1845. He determined that the twenty-five characters on the Stone were alphabetic. They were from different languages, all being from the Old World. Schoolcraft termed the Stone to be “ Intrusive Antiquity,” or not to be of Indian origin.

There were many attempts to decipher the inscription on the Stone. Here are some of the publish interpretations of the stone. “ The Chief of Emigration who reached these places has fixed these statues forever.” ” The grave of

one who was assassinated here. May God to avenge him strike his murderer, cutting off the hand of his existence." An interpretation with French flair, "What thou sayest, thou dost impose it, thou shinest in thy impetuous clan and rapid chamois." Some investigations found the inscription to be Lybian or Numidian. People were trying to make a connection of the Moundbuilders having a written language. They wanted to point to the Grave Creek Stone as evidence.

Many experts of the time published their opinions on the Grave Creek Stone. In 1856 Sam Haven said, "If genuine, it is at least unique, and is unsupported by an similar or analogous relic." On two occasions E. G. Squier voted no saying there is no good reason to support notion of Moundbuilders having and system of writing.

They reached these conclusions though many different tests. In 1877 Ohio geologist Matthew Canfield Read "undertook to divest himself of all pre-conceived opinions, to investigate the mater de noco [sic], and with judicial impartiality." He asked four questions of the Grave Creek Stone. 1) Is it alphabetic? 2) If alphabetical, does it represent a know language? 3) Is it an authentic find? 4) If alphabetical and authentic, what does it indicate? He was left to gather this information thirty-nine years after the discovery. Read wrote to the major participants for their recollection of the events surrounding the finding of the Stone.

He wrote Alberlard Tomlinson, the owner of the mound, Colonel Wharton, a witness to the discovery, and C. B. Catlett, who claimed to find the Stone. Tomlinson denied that Wharton and Catlett were involved. Also Tomlinson's

description of the shaft and drift were not in accord with the records.

Tomlinson was then approaching seventy years old. Thus, Read concluded that the Wharton and Catlett accounts to be the most accurate. Having been dumped from a wheelbarrow, Catlett described finding the Stone in a pile of dirt outside the mound. Exactly where the Stone came from no one will ever know.

There were several problems with the inscription. In pursuit to find if it was alphabetic, Read devised a test. He asked four participants (a teacher, a school girl, a druggist, and a professor) to write down twenty-five arbitrary symbols. These symbols were to consist of only straight lines, and not resemble any characters known to them. The results were amazing. "In every case an inscription was produced as many indications of being alphabetical as the one under discussion [Grave Creek]." All four tests had produced characters that could be pronounced Cypriot, Pheonician, Pelasgian, Coptic, Gothic, or Runic. Some characters were even recognizable in English.

Read's conclusions were that "there is nothing in the form of the characters [on the Stone] which requires us to decide that they are old, that they are alphabetical, or if alphabetical that they are derived from a known alphabet. The inscription is precisely of such character as would be the result of an ordinary attempt to manufacture an inscription." Any of the labors could have made such an inscription.

With these findings the issue of The Grave Creek Stone should have been laid to rest. The enthusiastic amateur often ignored debunking. This issue resurfaced in 1974 as a forth translation was given by Barry Fell. "The

mound raised-on-high for Tasach / this tile / (His) queen caused-to-be-made.” He pronounced the language as Phoenician. Fell’s inscription refers to itself as a “ tile.” Remember that the Stone is only one and three quarters long.

“ One day in 1930 Andrew Price, president of West Virginia Historical Society, accidentally solved its riddle ... A casual glance at the inscription caused part of it to form the figure ‘ 1838.’” With some printers knowledge he translated the inscription as “ Bill Stump’s Stone, Oct 14 1838.” This seemed to be the work of someone simply trying to amuse himself.

Price’s other work on this subject contained many tell-tell sign of a spoof. His finds are considered unsubstantiated. Thus, there is no clear translation of the Stone, if one exists. This Stone has been proven to be a hoax by many notable authorities at the time of its find and today. Although this evidence against the Stone stands, there still seems this desire to dug up this dead issue and give it a translation.

Other such archaeological discoveries have lead to similar hysteria. We have the Cardiff Giant that was found by well diggers in central New York (1869). Four doctors diagnosed that the Giant was a fossilized man. Controversy raged among the community. Owner William Newell and relative George Hull took advantage of the growing crowds the Giant attracted. They sold admission, food, drinks, pamphlets, and so on. Newell sold the Giant for \$37, 000 to local citizens wanting to display the Giant on a broader scale. The Giant was declared to be nothing more than a hoax. O. C. Marsh said it was neither a fossil nor a good piece of art.

Hull ended up admitting to fabricating the Giant. He purchased a piece of gypsum in Fort Dodge, Iowa, and had it crafted in Chicago, treated and aged there. It was then shipped to New York, carted by heavy wagons to the Newell farm to be buried one year before the discovery. Hull's expenses totaled approximately \$2,200. Hull said his motive was to win an argument with an evangelist over the validity of Giants mentioned in Bible. Hull confessed after three months the Giants tour didn't end for almost a year. "Although it is now best seen as a piece of nineteenth-century folk art, the Cardiff Giant did have a wonderful career on stage of American gullibility."

Around the same time (1877) in Davenport, Iowa Reverend Jacob Gass discovered some unique tablets. There were three inscribed slate tablets, one called the Calendar Stone. Also revealed were two stone pipe effigies of elephants. Gass was found to have been involved in trading fake pipes. The Calendar Stone slate was obviously done with a compass on a roof slate from a building near the museum. The nail holes were there for all to see. The childlike drawings on the tablets revealed themselves fraudulent. It is hard to believe that these stones could be dug up without any dirt adhered to them. There is no contextual evidence for the tables or the pipes. The Davenport Conspiracy is less believable than the Grave Creek Stone.

Finally we look at the Michigan Relics. There were over seventy-five unbaked clay figures brought to light. Most of them are small tablets with engravings. These clay images were easily dismissed. The bogus hieroglyphics were stamped on the tablets. The unbaked clay dissolved easily in water. Thus it is impossible to have existed for an extended period of time in the ground. One figure was a small vault / box with a lid. The lid resembled a winged lion,

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similar to the Arc of the Covenant. The lid was dried on a machine-sawed board. Even though the bogus findings were published the Michigan Relics went on a traveling show named, “ Deposits of Three Thousand Years Ago.”

It is evident that the people of the time were more interested in what they wanted to believe than the truth. There was a division between the true professional pursuit of knowledge and the amateurs desire to produce a “ good show” and make a buck. The archaeologists had their hands full during those times debunking these ever increasing frauds. When items were sufficiently pronounced hoaxes or non-authentic, there still were pursuits to count it among the truly antique pieces of collected artifacts. Our American history is filled with people willing to deface the establish profession of archaeology for the almighty dollar.