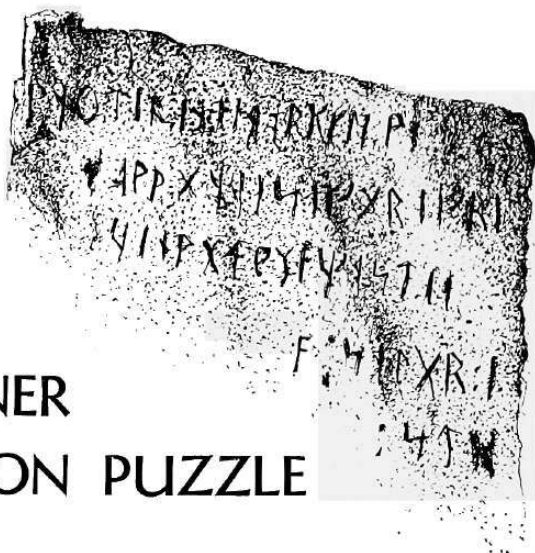


FREDERICK J. TURNER and the KENSINGTON PUZZLE

THEODORE C. BLEGEN



THE KENSINGTON RUNE STONE, unearthed in November, 1898, caused a flurry of public interest and discussion early in 1899. It had been disengaged from the roots of a tree that a farmer near Kensington, Douglas County, Minnesota, was grubbing. On two of its surfaces were runic characters that told of an expedition westward from Vinland in 1362. The inscription was exciting both because of its date, long after the time of Leif Ericson and more than a century before Columbus, and because the find was made far in the interior of North America, where no one had reason to believe the Vikings had explored.

The find was not documented in the fashion of modern archaeology, with photographs and detailed contemporary notes about the stone in situ and at various stages of its removal and examination. Indeed, the first known written reference to the Kensington rune stone is a letter dated January 1, 1899; and the earliest known mention

of it in print is an item in the *University of Minnesota's Ariel* for January 14, 1899.¹ As copies of the inscription were made and translations of the runic words appeared, the question inevitably came up as to whether or not the inscription was a genuine record from the fourteenth century or a modern hoax.

The earliest known translation was made by Olaus J. Breda, a professor of Scandinavian languages and literature in the University of Minnesota, and his judgment was that the inscription was "probably spurious."² The next scholar to study the inscription was George O. Curme of Northwestern University, an expert in Germanic philology. He examined, first, a copy of the inscription, then the stone itself; made an improved translation; and concluded that the inscription was modern.³

¹ The letter was written by J. P. Hedberg of Kensington to Swan J. Turnblad, publisher of *Svenska Amerikanska Posten*, a Swedish newspaper in Minneapolis. The article in the *Ariel* is based upon information supplied by Professor Breda. The *Ariel* story antedated by more than a month the earliest known newspaper reports of the Kensington rune stone. These appeared in Minneapolis and Chicago during the last ten days of February, 1899.

² See *Ariel*, January 14, 1899.

³ *Minneapolis Journal*, February 22, 24, 1899; *Northwestern*, a publication of Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, March 9, 1899.

MR. BLEGEN'S first contribution to this magazine was published in November, 1915, and his work has appeared regularly in its pages ever since. As a former director of the Minnesota Historical Society and author of a history of the state published in 1963, he merits the title "Mr. Minnesota History."

Not long after these early judgments by Breda and Curme, a distinguished archaeologist in Norway, Professor Oluf Rygh, wrote a brief statement about the Kensington inscription for a newspaper in Christiania (Oslo), in which he pronounced it a fraud. It had been perpetrated, he suggested, by a Swedish emigrant who had been Americanized to some extent.⁴ Meanwhile the stone, which had been sent to Professor Curme in Evanston, was returned to the farmer who had found it, and interest in the Kensington inscription began to subside.

In 1907 Hjalmar Rued Holand of Wisconsin, a writer interested in the history of Norwegian settlement in America, visited Kensington, examined the rune stone, and was soon convinced of the genuineness of the inscription. He made his views public in 1908. From that time until his death in 1962, Holand was an indefatigable champion of the rune stone. In all, he wrote five books and a large number of articles about it; he spoke widely concerning the inscription in this country and abroad and was ready always to do battle with critics of the stone.⁵

Unquestionably Holand's advocacy caused the Minnesota Historical Society to authorize its museum committee to make a study and present the society with a recommendation respecting the "authenticity or the fraudulent origin of the Kensington Rune Stone and its inscription." The leading figures in the committee, which consisted of five men, were Newton H. Winchell, state geologist of Minnesota and professor of mineralogy in the University of Minnesota, and Warren Upham, secretary and librarian of the Minnesota Historical Society. Winchell seems to have taken the lead in the investigation, and the committee's report states that he made three trips to the Kensington locality. The committee prepared and presented a report on the stone and its inscription to the executive council of the society on May 9, 1910. This was published separately in December of that year, and, with some additions, it was included five years

later in volume 15 of the Minnesota Historical Collections.⁶

The museum committee, notwithstanding the fact that its membership did not include a linguist, believed that the Kensington inscription was genuine. It so declared in its report of 1910, and it reiterated its affirmative view five years later.⁷ The position taken by the committee has naturally been given large emphasis by Holand and other defenders of the Kensington inscription, but some readers of the controversial literature concerning the stone seem not to have noted the important fact that the executive council of the Minnesota Historical Society, after reviewing the committee report, did not endorse it. Instead, it reserved for itself and for the society any conclusion "until more agreement of opinions for or against the rune inscription may be reached."⁸

Although the museum committee in 1910 rendered a favorable opinion of the authenticity of the Kensington stone, it did so with a proviso that the references in the report should be verified by "a competent specialist in the Scandinavian languages" and that the specialist himself should approve the conclusions of the report.⁹ The committee did not observe its own condition, however. The scholar it selected as a specialist in the

⁴ *Morgenbladet* (Christiania, Norway), March 12, 1899.

⁵ Holand, *The Kensington Stone: A Study in Pre-Columbian American History* (Ephraim, Wisconsin, 1932); *Westward from Vinland* (New York, 1940); *America 1355-1364* (New York, 1946); *Explorations in America before Columbus* (New York, 1956); *A Pre-Columbian Crusade to America* (New York, 1962). Holand also included a chapter on the stone in his first book, *De Norske Settlementers Historie* (Ephraim, Wisconsin, 1908); and he devoted several chapters to the subject in his autobiography, *My First Eighty Years* (New York, 1957). In checking the story of the stone one may also consult Erik Wahlgren, *The Kensington Stone: A Mystery Solved* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1958).

⁶ "The Kensington Rune Stone, Preliminary Report to the Minnesota Historical Society by Its Museum Committee," *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15: 221-286 (St. Paul, 1915).

⁷ *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15:286.

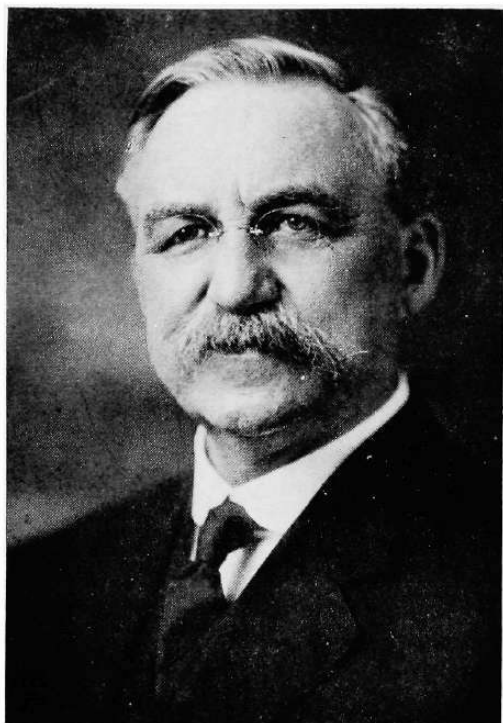
⁸ *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15:268.

⁹ *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15:268.

Scandinavian languages declared as early as 1910 that in his opinion the Kensington inscription was not authentic.¹⁰ Nevertheless, in 1915 the committee announced that it considered the inscription a "true historic record." Nor had a monograph published by another specialist, Professor George T. Flom of the University of Illinois, caused the committee to modify its conclusions, though Flom, like Curme, treated the inscription as modern.¹¹

THE LINGUISTIC authority chosen by the museum committee in 1910 was Gisle Bothne, professor of Scandinavian languages and literature in the University of Minnesota. He had been brought to Minnesota in 1907 from Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, to hold the chair that had been held in the 1880s and 1890s by Professor Breda. Bothne had taught Greek and Norwegian at Luther College from 1884 to 1907, and his education had included undergraduate work at Luther College and graduate work at Northwestern, Johns Hopkins, and in Germany and Norway. His field of greatest interest was not philology, but Norwegian literature.

It is not known precisely when Bothne began to take an interest in the Kensington problem, but he was a member of a committee of three appointed in the autumn of 1908 by the Norwegian Society of Minneapolis to investigate the stone. A report on behalf of this committee, written by Dr. Knut Hoegh, a Minneapolis physician, was published in 1909. There is little indication that Bothne took much part, if any, in this investigation, but Dr. Hoegh made several



GISLE Bothne

trips to Kensington, and his conclusions were favorable to the authenticity of the inscription. On February 15, 1910, the museum committee of the Minnesota Historical Society instructed Upham to consult Bothne and other linguists with respect to the Kensington inscription. That committee adopted its report on April 21, 1910, and presented it to the executive council of the society on May 9. Bothne had been selected as the committee's expert for "verifying references" and with the proviso that a favorable report was conditional upon his concurrence.¹²

On April 11, 1910, Bothne wrote Upham that he had not had time to look into the inscription as carefully as he would want to do before going on record with respect to it. A few days later, on April 16, he wrote Winchell that he would be glad to verify the references in the typewritten copy of the committee's report. Still later, on May 24, he wrote to Winchell offering to go to Kensington with Professor Andrew Fossum of

¹⁰ Minnesota Historical Collections, 15:286.

¹¹ George T. Flom, *The Kensington Rune-Stone: A Modern Inscription from Douglas County, Minnesota* (Springfield, Illinois, 1910). The monograph was an address delivered before the annual meeting of the Illinois State Historical Society.

¹² Minnesota Historical Collections, 15:268. The record of the museum committee for February 15, 1910, is in the Kensington Papers of the Minnesota Historical Society. The report of the Norwegian Society's committee is in *Symra*, 5:182-189 (Decorah, Iowa, 1909).

St. Olaf College so that he (Bothne) could judge for himself "about certain points."¹³

Bothne sent his final report to Winchell on July 19, 1910. In it he said that he had visited Kensington and its neighborhood, but unhappily he recorded no details as to precisely where he had gone, whom he had met, what inquiries he had made, or what information he had elicited. He had read, he said, "most of the papers and articles relating to the rune stone," but his further studies of the matter had not altered his earlier judgment that the language of the inscription was "too modern, besides being faulty." This opinion, Bothne wrote, he held in common with certain great authorities in Norway and Sweden. He did not consider the stone authentic, but he recommended that it should be sent to Norway to be examined by expert runologists, for nothing else would "dispose of the matter." Nothing was said in the letter about the verifying of references.

Bothne's letter was brief. Unlike Flom's monograph, it offered no linguistic analysis and no evidence with respect to the finding of the stone. Professor Bothne did make it clear, however, that he did not approve of the committee's conclusions.¹⁴ As has been stated, the committee republished its findings in 1915, with some additions, but neither then nor later did the Minnesota Historical Society, acting through its executive council, endorse the runic inscription as an authentic record from 1362.

THE REFERENCES cited in relation to Professor Bothne and the society's museum committee fall between the dates of February 15 and July 29, 1910. Nowhere in the correspondence, nor indeed in the published literature of the Kensington stone, does there seem to be any mention of the fact that at some time before February 10, 1910, Bothne had communicated with the noted historian, Frederick Jackson Turner of the University of Wisconsin, requesting his advice on the Kensington puzzle.

In 1910 Turner was at the height of his

powers. It was then seventeen years since he had written what still stands as the most thought-provoking essay on the interpretation of American history.¹⁵ His fame was nationwide, as Bothne certainly understood in turning to him for advice. Turner took the matter seriously and sent a seven-page reply to Bothne, the original of which, dated February 10, 1910, and written in Turner's own hand, is preserved in the collection of Gisle Bothne Papers presented to the Minnesota Historical Society by Mrs. Bothne in 1936. The Turner letter is an important document in the field of rune stone methodology, and it is also a revealing illustration of the incisive, analytical quality of Turner's mind, here applied critically to an unsolved problem of evidence.

On the question of the authenticity of the Kensington inscription, Turner declined to offer a personal judgment. He knew nothing about runes, and he made it clear that he was skeptical with respect to the stone. He thought that if the leading scholars of runology took a stand against the authenticity of the inscription and were able to sustain it, the case, because of the "improbability of the whole matter," would be so strong that their decision could be accepted. But he emphasized the word "improbability," for in the story itself, he saw no "impossibility," predicating his view on a reading of the inscription as specifying forty-one days' journey from the sea instead of fourteen.

If, however, linguistic experts admitted that the text of the inscription "might have been the product of a man of the fourteenth century," then the question turned to "matters of physical evidence." Unless the case against the inscription was "decidedly clear," a careful testing was the "more im-

¹³ The letters referred to are in the Kensington Papers.

¹⁴ Bothne's report of July 19, 1910, is in the form of a letter addressed to Winchell, published in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15:268.

¹⁵ The reference of course is to Turner's address in 1893 on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," first published in 1894 and reprinted many times. See Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920).

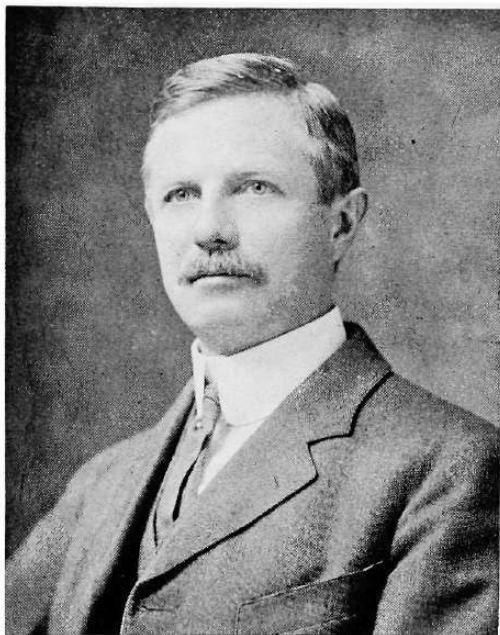
portant" because one would have to take into account the possibility that the inscription would make necessary a "re-considering of the existing rules." If Turner knew nothing about runes, he knew much about historical evidence, and he was not servile in the presence of traditional rules. "Rules," he wrote in a characteristic Turnerian phrase, "are formulated from inscriptions, as well as inscriptions tested by rules."

Turner then detailed his suggestions for gathering up and using whatever evidence could be found by painstaking inquiry. His ingenuity and originality as a scholar found expression in a systematic formulation of practical steps that might be taken to clarify the puzzle. The "balance" was against the stone, but he would not commit himself until the whole matter had been more carefully inquired into. There were suspicious circumstances about the time and place of the find, but the "puzzle should be worked out deliberately and not on the basis of assumptions one way or another." What mattered to Turner was the truth, whether for or against the authenticity of the inscription.

BEFORE TURNING to the text of Turner's letter, one must raise the question of why this document has remained unknown to students of the Kensington problem, and why the ideas it contained were not applied in 1910.

There is no evidence in the Kensington

¹⁰ The present writer has searched the Kensington collection of the Minnesota Historical Society, as well as the society's correspondence file for 1910 (also 1909 and 1911) for any references or materials bearing on Turner in relation to the Kensington question. The only Turner letter that has come to light is one to Upham dated January 1, 1911, from Cambridge, Massachusetts, in which Turner acknowledged a copy of the preliminary report of the museum committee and asked to be kept in mind because "I should like to collect the data published on this topic." Holand, writing to Upham on February 17, 1910, tells of a lecture in Madison and reports that Turner had said he would be willing to use his influence for Holand in arranging lectures in "academic circles of the East" if Holand would exhibit the stone. This offer, Holand said, he rejected. Minnesota Historical Society correspondence file.



FREDERICK J. Turner

collection of the Minnesota Historical Society or in the published report of its museum committee that Winchell, Upham, and their colleagues ever saw the Turner letter.¹⁶ It was written more than five months before Bothne made his final report on July 19, 1910. During that period Bothne had been in close touch with both Winchell and Upham, and he undertook an official responsibility in aid of the committee. It seems almost incredible that he should not have mentioned the letter or called Turner's suggestions to their attention. But how otherwise can one explain the committee's silence about the document, the failure to implement Turner's ideas, the absence of records pertaining to the letter in the society's Kensington manuscripts, and the fact that the original turned up, not among the Kensington materials, but in the Bothne collection?

If Bothne withheld from the museum committee all knowledge of Turner's letter, one naturally wonders why. Perhaps the simplest explanation is that to Bothne the communication might have seemed very personal—a letter of confidential guidance to him on a problem of history and archae-

ology. In opening, Turner said that he was not writing for publication. He did not say, however, that Bothne should not communicate the ideas set forth to those who were investigating the Kensington problem, and the missive was not marked "confidential." In fact, the very character of the letter suggests that Turner was mapping out lines of inquiry which he hoped would be followed in the effort to ascertain whether the inscription was fraudulent or genuine. But Professor Bothne was a courtly gentleman of the old school, and he may have felt that the bar upon publication in effect made the letter confidential.

Did Bothne feel that the museum committee, in its independent investigations under the leadership of Winchell, was proceeding along lines similar to those recommended by Turner? Or did he withhold the historian's suggestions because he felt that the Kensington problem was purely linguistic? If he simply filed the letter among his papers, did he do so because he was convinced that the only conclusive answer would be a verdict from Old World runologists? He is on record as asserting that only such a verdict would dispose of the matter.¹⁷

Unless further evidence comes to light, these questions cannot be answered. Certainly Bothne was conscientious in seeing to it that Turner's letter was not published, even though, with the benefit of hindsight, it seems highly desirable that the recommendations in the letter should have been transmitted to the museum committee. A more aggressive man than Bothne perhaps would have written to Turner asking his permission to communicate the contents of the letter to the committee or even to publish it in whole or in part. A hardheaded, unbiased, critical investigation, applying Turner's methods, following up the questions that he raised, and carried out little more than a decade after the stone was unearthed, might have clarified many questions on which there has been lack of precise information or sharp difference of opinion through the more than half century since

Turner wrote to Bothne. Such an investigation might not have solved the Kensington problem, if the inscription is genuine; if it is fraudulent, however, it is at least conceivable that the fraud would have been revealed. The full text of Turner's letter of February 10, 1910, follows:

Dear Professor Bothne

I do not yet possess sufficient information about the Kensington rune stone to reach a well grounded judgement, though I am skeptical, on the basis of present information. What I write will not be for publication, but in order to raise some questions that I should raise if I were engaged in clearing the question up.

Personally I know nothing of runes or the Scandinavian languages. My colleague Professor J. Olson tells me that the linguistic and runic tests go strongly against the authenticity of the inscription.¹⁸ If the leading experts take this view, and sustain it, then the case against the stone is so strong in view of the improbability of the whole matter, that the case could be left with their decision. I say "improbability,"—for I see no impossibility in the story itself, if the reading 41 is admissable [*sic*] instead of 14.¹⁹ But pretty strong evidence of genuineness would be requisite to authenticate the "find," even granting the unassailability of the text.

(1) If on the other hand the *experts* on the runes and language will admit that there is real doubt about the text; that is that it might have been the product of a man of the fourteenth century, then of course the question turns to matters of the physical evidence regarding the stage of weathering exhibited by the runes as compared with the rest of the stone; the reliability of the wit-

¹⁷ *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15:269.

¹⁸ Julius E. Olson (1858-1944) was professor of Scandinavian languages in the University of Wisconsin. He edited a series of documents on the Viking voyages for volume 15 of *Original Narratives of Early American History* (New York, 1906).

¹⁹ The final and unquestionably authentic reading was 14.

nesses to its finding; the degree of scholarship needed to forge it, etc.

These latter lines of enquiry are the more important because unless the case against the text is decidedly clear, we must admit the *possibility* that the inscription was one that demands a re-considering of the existing rules. Perfectly authentic inscriptions *have* been found which compelled the rules to be re-written. Rules are formulated from inscriptions, as well as inscriptions tested by rules. Of course an inscription may be too obviously corrupt to permit any doubt. The opinion directly of the best experts should be sought on this.

2. Professor Cirme [*Curme*], and others who saw it when first found, should state exactly what impression the inscription made upon them from the point of view of its apparent age. Ten or twelve years' direct exposure to air would cause considerable weathering. Did the color of the lettering seem lighter than that of the face of the stone generally when he first saw it?

Experts, like geologists, *stone cutters*, etc., should pass on the question of how much more recent the lettering looks than the general face of the stone *now*.

3. Mr Holand read affidavits here regarding the finding of the stone; but they do not make it clear that all the carving could not have been done (even granting Mr. Ohman's truthfulness) while the stone was *in situ* under the roots of the tree. Mr. Ohman should testify more fully on this point. Would he swear that the tree roots bound the inscribed parts, in such a way that the inscription could not have been carved while the stone rested under the tree? There is room enough on the un-inscribed part of the stone for the roots to have bound it (as Mr Holand read the affidavit here,) and still leave space for the inscription—which could thus have been carved *in situ*.

²⁰ This is perhaps the most interesting of all the suggestions made by Turner.

²¹ The second most interesting suggestion—and one that was never followed up.

²² No one has thus far found evidence of a visit by a scholar with runic knowledge.

It is also possible, I presume, that the stone could have been *placed under* the tree so that the roots could in a few years have clasped it in the way related by Mr Ohman, even if his credibility be granted.

4. Some competent and keen Scandinavian *lawyer* should go up to Kensington and investigate these questions of testimony. The investigation should not be made by one already favorably disposed to the stone, and seeking evidence to bolster it; but by at least an unprejudiced person, or even one hostile, in order to get all the testimony; and by a man accustomed to testing evidence: i.e. a lawyer, or judge.

5. Such investigation should show among other things, these:

a. Was there a craftsman, of any kind,—engraver, jeweler, stone-cutter, painter, or what not, capable of doing the really neat lettering and incision shown on the stone?

b. Was there a professional man, like a school teacher, minister, lawyer, etc., who had the general training needed to frame the text?

c. What were the relations of these men and the carpenter-farmer, Mr. Ohman?

d. Which of them has taken most interest in the stone—to have it looked up—to urge its authenticity, etc.?²⁰

6. Men like yourself should discuss the question whether the necessary apparatus of runes and language for writing the inscription existed in books probably available to the men in the Kensington community—prior to 1899. Ohman's rune-book should be examined, e.g. (I am told the runes he had were in a Swedish grammar). Enquiry should be made about other manuals.

7. If not, was there any member of the community whose previous residence near libraries—e.g. St. Paul, or Minneapolis, gave him access to the needed data?²¹

8. If not, does the text require an expert scholar, or at any rate some scholarship beyond that of the community of the time, for its forgery? And is there any evidence that such a scholar visited the community?²²

In brief, then, I await fuller information. I wrote a letter to the (Madison, Wis.) State Journal of February 10, 1910, repudiating their report of my discussion of Mr. Holand's paper which they published on the 9th. This denial I sent to the Secretary of the Minn. State Historical Society.²³ The report had made me out as declaring for the validity of the stone.

The balance is against the stone at present, I think. But I should wish the whole matter more carefully enquired into before finally committing myself on the basis of now published information. It is suspicious that the stone was found just about the right time after a general and heated discussion of whether Scandinavians were within the limits of the United States prior to Columbus; and in a Scandinavian community; but the puzzle should be worked out deliberately and not on the basis of assumptions one way or the other. Mr. Holand, of course, sees only one side of his question, and is a useful advocate for the stone. But the other side must be heard also.

Turner's letter to the Wisconsin State Journal of Madison, referred to above, is also of sufficient interest to warrant publication in full. On February 9, 1910, the Journal reported a lecture on the previous evening by Holand. Turner, among others, had taken part in a discussion which followed the talk. The newspaper said that Turner found it difficult to reconcile the inscription "with any theory of forgery." The story was headlined: "Prof. Turner Is Impressed—Leading History Authority at University Says Evidence Rather Against Forgery."

On the next day (February 10, 1910) the same newspaper carried the text of a statement in which Turner disclaimed various utterances that had been attributed to him. It was dated February 9.²⁴

To the Editor:

The report of the discussion of Mr. Holand's paper at the State Historical society

rooms last evening on the so-called "Kensington rune stone" may give an impression which needs correction.

I expressly stated that I did not take sides on the question of the authenticity of the inscription. I have no knowledge on the subject of runes; no expert knowledge of the history of the period concerned; and no knowledge personally of the local conditions and persons concerned in the alleged discovery; and I have never seen the stone. I did not speak of "the apparent inviolability of the stone to hostile criticism" etc. I did not conclude "that the stone is either genuine or else the work of a scholar of most remarkable runistical and linguistic attainments; and that such a scholar could not very well have been found in a pioneer settlement thirty or forty years ago." In short I desire to disclaim the utterances attributed to me.

I did raise various questions, not reported in the account, and I did say that if Mr. Holand's exposition of the linguistic and runic aspects of the question was correct (and I ventured absolutely no opinion as to whether he was right) then it was hard to see how any one but a scholar could have forged the inscription. If it is a hoax, I gave no opinion on the question whether there was such a scholar, nor at what time he would have had to have been in Minnesota in order to have produced the inscription.

²³ No copy of the denial has been found in the Upham Papers or the official correspondence files of the Minnesota Historical Society.

²⁴ The State Historical Society of Wisconsin has kindly supplied reproductions of the news stories in the *Wisconsin State Journal* for February 9 and 10, 1910.

THE SKETCH on the title page is by Jeremy G. Welsh. The portrait of Turner is used through the courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, and that of Bothne is from the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.

THE INDEX for volume 38 of *Minnesota History* is now in the hands of the printer and will be ready for distribution early in 1965. Requests will be placed on file and filled as soon as copies become available.



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