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"The Old Stone Bank"

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**ROCKS of
RHODE ISLAND**

R. I. Hist. Soc.

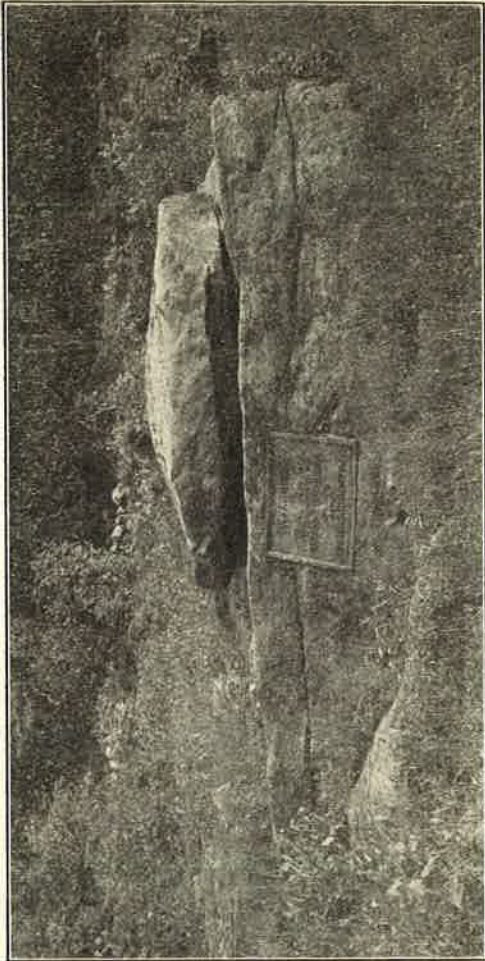


Presented by

"The Old Stone Bank"

Providence, R. I.

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Rocks of Rhode Island

IF BLOOD cannot be squeezed from a stone, how shall one proceed to squeeze a story from a rock? That is a fairly logical question to consider, yet easy of answer. Although rocks are inanimate they often, either through fact or fancy, lend themselves to be molded into many a tale by human imaginations. Fundamentally, of course, rocks are symbols of strength, despite the fact that the legendary Cyclops hurled them like so many pebbles after Ulysses and his departing ships. The Christian religion uses the rock as a metaphor for steadfastness in many a biblical story and teaching. Yet to a New England farmer the rock in itself is something to be cursed. It breaks his scythe blades. His plow will not subdue it. Year after year, with the aid of frosts and thaws, it resists his every effort to rid himself of it. But enough of such considerations! We who seek a story must see how many a rock has come to be more than a stubborn mass of matter — how human association has endowed it with legend, romance, or outright personification.

In various other states of New England the names of certain rocks immediately leap to the tip of one's tongue. In New Hamp-

shire, high in the White Mountains is that famous likeness to the human profile that has been known for scores of years as the "Old Man of the Mountain." The same mountains boast another profile, that of an Indian head. Closer still to Rhode Island, in Plymouth, Massachusetts, is that stepping stone of the Mayflower Pilgrims, Plymouth Rock, carefully preserved in its present enclosure and as much an object of curiosity to hundreds of travelers as a rare animal from the heart of Africa. There are many cases of balancing rocks, too common to mention, but all marvels of equilibrium to those who behold them.

To come down to Rhode Island, what rocks have we of mythical or romantic importance? There are many, and we can only touch on the most prominent.

Perhaps no other rocks have ever come in for so much speculation as the inscribed boulders that have been discovered in the past near Mount Hope and in various parts of Portsmouth and Newport. Ezra Stiles, once a minister of Newport and later president of Yale College, found rocks covered with queer hieroglyphics at five different places about Newport. Others have stumbled on similar specimens at the other end of the island. However, the most famous specimen, and the one which has been the center of a storm of controversy, is near the foot of Mount Hope, just south of the narrows of the Kickemuit River. It lies on the shore, a large, light-gray boulder, worn by

time. On one side are still discernible characters unintelligible in meaning but provocative of many an explanation. They seem to have been cut with some sharp iron tool and not patiently chipped in with any stone implements. There is one main character that distinctly resembles a boat and beneath it a number of strange markings that seem a brief notation in a forgotten language. Those who have always liked to favor the story of the visit of the Norsemen to Rhode Island have confidently claimed that the inscriptions were cut by these Vikings when they landed in Mount Hope Bay. To them the boat and the unintelligibility of the rest of the markings are sufficient proof. Others have believed them runic markings, and for a while the boulder enjoyed the title of Runic Rock. However, in final analysis, neither of these beliefs can be taken as truth. Professor Delabarre, whose study of the markings was probably more thorough than that of other observers, believes that the truth of the inscriptions can never be wholly known. He discredits the Norseman theory on the grounds that through the natural wearing away of the rock, season after season, the marks would have been obliterated long before the settlers of the 17th century could have had a chance to see them. His opinion leans toward the belief that the marks are the work of the Cherokee Indians, whose alphabet is very similar; but that very belief would make the inscriptions only slightly more

than a hundred years old. Opinions will differ as long as the marks remain visible, however, until the question is solved for good.

Nearby, on the east side of Mount Hope, is another section of rock that history has endowed with romance. The formation is slightly similar to a chair or throne and has consequently been named King Philip's chair by those who fondly believe that here the famous Wampanoag chieftain held his tribal councils, seated in the rock chair. To the south, near Second Beach, Newport, are the overhanging rocks where the memory of Bishop Berkley, owner of Whitehall and guest pastor of Trinity Church, still lingers. Here, sheltered from the sun and rain, with the sea before him for contemplation, this philosopher composed most of his *Alciphron*. Travelling southward from the bishop's rocks, the explorer finds that curious formation in a high ledge which has been called Purgatory. The ledge is sliced with a deep and narrow fissure through which the incoming tide roars with a dull booming sound, while on stormy days the breakers seethe into the cleft with all the angry boiling and churning of a witch's cauldron. Many are the legends that surround this rock, some of them implicating the Devil, saying that he once hurled an Indian squaw into the abyss. But then, every rock that has any strange mark similar to a forked hoof-print has been open to association with his satanic majesty. More amus-

ing is the story of the young woman who, during a walk with her lover, came to the cleft and invited the young man to give proof of his love by leaping it. The very audacity of the girl stunned the youth for a moment, until stung by her repeated taunts of cowardice he risked the danger of death and leaped the fissure. Once on the other side, however, he turned his back on the girl who had so explicitly shown the shallowness of her affections, and walked away, leaving her to lament her foolish whim and the loss of a lover.

South County has its famous rock of romance, the ledge from which the unfortunate Hannah Robinson used to gaze out over the Rhode Island countryside and to which she asked to be carried on the evening before her death. Hannah's Rock has henceforth been the name of the ledge and the spell of romance has drawn many a sightseer to the spot to gaze, like Hannah, at one of the finest views of Rhode Island.

One of the oddest rocks to be found in Rhode Island, and a fitting climax to this story, is Drum Rock, (see illustration) hidden in the woods near Apponaug and Warwick. Back in 1824, in the *American Journal of Science*, we find a letter from a Mr. Taylor to Professor Stillman of which the following is an extract: "It (meaning Drum Rock) reposes on another rock, which rises a few feet above the ground; touching it at two points. Upon these two points it is so exactly balanced that a child of 5 may set

it in motion. What makes it particularly interesting is that when the left hand side, as we see it in front as we face it, strikes, it gives four distinct pulsations; hitting at four distinct points and producing a sound much like the sound of a bass drum except that it is louder. This can be heard on a still evening six miles away. The rock weighs some four tons, and in composition appears an indurated ferruginous clay, with here and there small portions of quartz."

This strange phenomenon evidently existed for many years before this letter, although at one time the top and base rocks were surely one. The Cowesett and Narragansett Indians once used the rock as a signal stone, setting it in motion and letting its dull booming carry messages to other tribes miles away. However, after the people of the villages nearby found the rock and its peculiar properties they used the spot frequently for picnics. A fine spring nearby provided good water, while the rock itself supplied amusement for the children and older people alike. The result was that the points upon which the upper rock rested soon became worn down, and with this wearing down the volume of sound it could produce and the distance it would carry diminished. Yet, by 1870, the booming of Drum Rock could still be heard for three or four miles. Now the sound can no longer be produced; the rock has been too much worn. It can only exist as a curiosity for those who have the patience to seek it out. It has been

marked by the historical society but to this day there are many people living in the general vicinity who have never seen it, or perhaps never heard the name—Drum Rock.