

Harvard Historian Debunks Westford's Mysterious Knight

By Gordon B Seavey

WESTFORD — Did the early Irish or the Norsemen ever come to Westford

Some fifteen years ago, a stir occurred when persons interested in early explorations of the New England area "discovered" in town, inscribed on a ledge what was taken to be the figure of a knight in armor.

Unless one had considerable imagination, abetted by a chalked-in outline, the ledge seemed to hold for the casual viewer nothing but a glacial-scarred outcropping of gneiss rock. Or at a closer look there is the outline of an Indian tomahawk, plus something that might be taken for an Indian peace-pipe.

The great glacier, some 15,000 years ago, undoubtedly did the scarring. Old timers recall that the "Fisher boys" were the ones who later decorated the rock. A century ago, Alvan Fisher was a prominent man in Westford, who reared a large family and lived near the so-called "Indian Rock." Among the boys were Fred, Edward "Pete," Tom and Alec. It was attributed to one or more of these boys as being the artist or artists who laboriously pecked out the Indian signs for others to wonder about at a later date.

An insurance executive of Hartford, Connecticut, the late William B. Goodwin, is alleged to have spent a fortune following various archaeological will o' the wisps. This included a pre-Vinland theory that possibly Henry Sinclair, Earl of Orkney, had visited Westford for a sketched-in figure on the Indian Rock showed a portrait of a knight in armor, carrying a shield, pronounced to bear the arms of the Sinclairs'. This theory was featured in Yankee magazine by Lawrence F. Willard in 1958 captioned "Westford's Mysterious Knight."

Another idea floating around at this time was that the figure might be that of a Viking or Norseman leader who died while exploring the Westford region. A knight in armor, complete with all the trappings and his likeness was imposed on the ledge as a monument to his resting place nearby where the digging was easier.

From a practical point of view it would hardly seem likely that an early exploration crew which travelled by water would even bother to come to Westford. From the coast they would have to sail up the Merrimack River from

Newburyport, hoist their knarr or small ship over the falls at Lowell, and then enter Stony Brook at North Chelmsford. It is doubtful that Stony Brook then, as it is now, was hardly wide enough for a canoe, with many portages. On the basis of how an airplane would fly, the distance is at least forty miles. And then would it be worthwhile to climb Tadmuck Hill just for a look-see?

Dr. Samuel Eliot Morison, distinguished American historian, who started lecturing at Harvard College in history in 1915, and winner of two Pulitzer prizes, doesn't hesitate to distinguish fact from figment in his most recent book, "The European Discovery of America." Also, as a former admiral in the Navy, he knows his sailing ships and their capabilities. As a historian, he brings up a highly controversial period of American history and as for Westford's "Mysterious Knight," he has this to say:

"William S. Fowler, who examined the rock, reported in the Massachusetts Archaeological Society Bulletin in 1960 that the only man made part of the design is the outline of an Indian Tomahawk of the period 1700-1750, similar to one now in the museum of the Rhode Island Historical Society.

"That outline had been pecked out with a 'case-hardened iron center punch of earlier days, in common use by blacksmiths of those times.' Thus the tomahawk, despite its awkward design, has been extended into a sword, the knightly head is a pure figment of imagination, and the shield showing alleged Sinclair arms has been painted on by some enthusiast."

Professor Morison's newest book, published by Oxford University Press, \$15.00, was selected as a Book-of-the-Month offering and his theories about the "Knight" are on Pages 89-90 and 107-108. The Indian Rock is located at the turn of the road on Depot St., about half-a-mile north from Westford Common, opposite the home of Mr. and Mrs. Fisher Buckshorn. His uncles were the "Fisher boys."

If one with just a normal imagination, it would be difficult to pick out the Indian Tomahawk and the pipe. Perhaps with a greater imagination who knows what Westford's Mysterious Knight might become next?