

Was it an Indian grinding stone or just a pothole?

By Gordon B. Seavey

When the town fathers and the Agnew family passed papers on the 30-acre lot of land off Lowell Road, designed for conservation and recreational purposes, the Conservation Commission insisted on receiving a certain hunk of New England granite.

It is, to wit, a rather round piece of stone, polished smooth by abrasive action, and weighing about fifty pounds. It was thought to be the missing pebble to an Indian grinding mill located on the property to be transferred.

In all sincerity, members of the Commission felt this would be an interesting artifact worth saving, an important factor in showing off the mill. It was produced with great ceremony.

Behind this all lies an interesting story: a "believe it or not." Is the corn mill a myth — or a fact?

The mill in question lies on a hillside about 600 feet across the street and opposite the Captain Peletiah Fletcher homestead.

This is the old colonial at 54 Lowell Road, occupied by the Treat family, and is of Revolutionary fame.

The mill is a depression in a ledge just off a bridge path. Its dimensions roughly are 30 inches deep and about a foot across.

Old timers in town always heard that this hole was used by Indians to grind corn as they camped summers in Stony Brook Valley. The farmlands in the vicinity are rich, ideal for growing vegetables such as corn and squash. The women attended the crops while the men fished the falls in the nearby brook and the Merrimack River.

It was surmised that corn was poured into the hole, at the bottom of which was a heavy, rounded stone. With a long pole using the rock as a pestle in a mortar, the corn was turned into cornmeal. As the depression often collects water, maybe the finished product was cornmeal mush, an old colonial dish.

Twice-told tale

There have been theories over

the years as to the use, if any, to which this granite hole has been put. Half a century ago, a Wellesley College professor surmised that it was a true Indian corn mill, even to the point that the squaw who milled the grain was left-hand because the pole wore one side of the lip of the hole more than the other.

Picture anyone stirring a small boulder at the bottom of a narrow pit with enough pressure to grind corn? Or, since it must have taken many, many moons to make this hole, were all the squaws left-handed?

What many have thought over the years to be a true Indian artifact now may be considered the creation of nature. A distinguished geologist visiting Westford seven years ago quickly determined it was geological phenomena caused by glacial action 15,000 years ago. In other words, a pothole.

As melting water on top of the mile-thick ice cap found an opening in the sheet, it let water loaded with sedimentary material pour with tremendous might to the earth beneath. This rushing stream, carrying particles of sand and gravel whirling

around, no doubt scoured this hole in Westford, as it did in other areas.

All this scientific explanation came from no less a person than Dr. John W. Salisbury, an Acton resident for twelve years until moving to Washington. He is the scientist who determined the type of material the astronauts would find on the moon.

Dr. Salisbury, a graduate of Amherst, earned a doctorate in geology at Yale. He is now chief of the department doing research on geothermal prospects for easing the energy crunch.

Other glacial action

He noted two other prominent pieces of glacial erosion in Westford. They are on the gneiss outcroppings on Beaver Brook Road nearly opposite the Caloss Farm and also in front of the Connell home at 20 Depot Street.

But as for the Indian rock, he said the hole as all the ear marks of this natural process, the eroding of weaker rockbeds by the combined action of water swirling abrasive materials in a compact area. In other words, what he examined is a good example of what geologists term a

pothole

As to the authenticity of the so-called Agnew rock left at the town hall, it could very well be the same rounded and smooth boulder that "Josh" Decatur, who farmed the old Fletcher farm more than a century ago, brought up from the bed of nearly Stony Brook, thinking that an Indian grinding mill wasn't complete unless it had a loose stone as the pestle.

This tale was told to old-timers still living by Amos Polley, also a nearby farmer of Decatur's generation.

Real mill

What may be a true Indian-developed mill, however, can be

seen alongside Hunt Road on Frances Hill. Found half-buried, it was dug from his orchard by Carl Anderson who spotted an unusual depression on top. Adding a rounded stone, it makes a perfect example of this crude mechanical device to pulverize native corn.

Some townspeople may be disappointed to learn that the myth and Indian lore is disputed, but science is science and fact is fact.

But let us say that Westford still has among its many Indian artifacts and relics other grinding mills that seem more probable and practical than the one on Fletcher's hill which long has been touted as genuine.



HELLO CHINA — Two women inspect the so-called Indian grinding stone in the woods off Lowell Road. The controversial rock formation was included in a recent town land purchase.

(Photo courtesy Gordon B. Seavey)