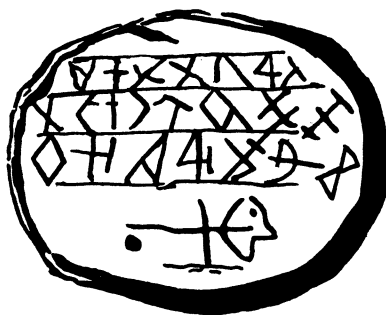


The famous Grave Creek Mound inscription, now pronounced a hoax. Nineteenth century scholars argued over it long and heatedly. Some declared it to be written in Canaanite or other ancient language. An American printer has at last read it in "good old West Virginian." The separate letters as shown on the right are easily read.



▽ I X X Λ 4 Λ
B I L-S T-U M

9 5 5 7 0 X H
P S S T O N E

◇ □ 7 4 8 9 8
O C T-1 4-1 8 3 8

Printer's Knowledge of Dickens Solves Scientific Hoax

Archæology

By Emily C. Davis

"BIL STUMPS STONE Oct 14 1838"

This inscription in cabalistic writing, cut into a little piece of stone, has baffled scientists both in America and abroad ever since it was dug out of an Indian mound in West Virginia almost a century ago.

Many experts on the world's languages tried in all seriousness to translate the cryptic writing, believing it to be written by ancient man in Canaanite, Celtic, Runic, or what not. Some of the scholars announced success, and strange and weird were their translations.

It has finally taken a West Virginia printer, who knows his Dickens and who has a keen sense of humor, to succeed where the scholars failed. His reading of the inscription "in good old West Virginian" clears up one of the greatest hoaxes in the record of American science. That hoax, perpetrated by some unknown practical jokesmith, has stood triumphantly undetected for ninety odd years.

The printer, Andrew Price, is an historian by hobby. He is President of the West Virginia Historical Society and a member of the West Virginia Academy of Science. He has been intrigued by the inscription for a long time, but never tried his hand at deciphering it until recently.

In a statement explaining how he came to solve the riddle, Mr. Price reminds us of the delightful bit of satire in a novel by Charles Dickens which gave the American joker his

idea. Poking fun at British scientists of a century ago, Dickens had concocted the following inscription:

X
BILST
U M
PSHI
S.M.
ARK

Dickens had his famous character, Mr. Pickwick, discover this strange inscription on a small broken stone, lying partly buried by an ancient cottage. Mr. Pickwick, very much excited, asked the cottage owner about the age of the stone and was told that "It was here long before I war born, or any on us." Whereupon Mr. Pickwick bought the stone and returned in haste to London feeling that he had attained a great ambition. He, the Chairman of the Pickwick Club, had unearthed a curious inscription of unquestionable antiquity.

Dickens, tongue in cheek, continues the astonishing adventures of the antiquarian discovery:

"It appears from the Transactions of the Club, then, that Mr. Pickwick lectured upon the discovery at a General Club Meeting, convened on the night succeeding their return, and entered into a variety of ingenious and erudite speculations on the meaning of the inscription. It also appears that a skillful artist executed a faithful delineation of the curiosity, which was engraven on stone, and presented to the Royal Antiquarian Society, and

other learned bodies—that heartburnings and jealousies without number were penned upon the subject—and that Mr. Pickwick himself wrote a Pamphlet containing ninety-six pages of very small print, and twenty-seven different readings of the inscription. That three old gentlemen cut off their eldest sons with a shilling apiece for presuming to doubt the antiquity of the fragment—and that one enthusiastic individual cut himself off prematurely, in despair at being unable to fathom its meaning. That Mr. Pickwick was elected an honorary member of seventeen native and foreign societies, for making the discovery; that none of the seventeen could make anything of it, but that all the seventeen agreed it was very extraordinary."

Then came forward a Mr. Blotton "with the doubt and cavilling peculiar to vulgar minds" and a theory of his own. He had cross-questioned the man who sold the stone and had been assured that the stone was indeed ancient, just as he informed Mr. Pickwick. But the inscription on it, that was another matter. The cottage owner had carved that to amuse himself one day, and it said simply, "Bil Stumps, his mark."

Blotton's version was received by the Pickwick Club with the contempt it deserved. Blotton was ejected from the club. He wrote pamphlets. The learned societies wrote pamphlets. There were translations of the pamphlets into all sorts of languages. "And,"

the story concluded triumphantly, "to this day the stone remains, an illegible monument of Mr. Pickwick's greatness, and a lasting trophy to the littleness of his enemies."

And now we can see how truth came to parallel fiction when the West Virginia joker got to work. This unknown and unsung person read "Pickwick Papers" and scratched an inscription very similar to Mr. Pickwick's discovery on a scrap of sandstone less than two inches long. He used, however, more complicated and obscure lettering. The hoax was planted in the Grave Creek Mound, at Moundsville, West Virginia, and was discovered by workmen in 1838, the very year following the publication of Mr. Pickwick's antiquarian adventure.

The Grave Creek Mound was a big and exciting excavation that summer. The mound stands in the town of Moundsville, rising like a mysterious giant cone seventy feet tall and covering an entire city block. Tunnels and shafts cut into the cone proved it to be a giant tomb. There were two vaults found inside. One vault contained a single human skeleton, and the other vault two.

Little was known about the mound-building Indians of prehistoric America in the eighteen thirties. So great a burial place for three people called to mind the building of the royal pyramids in Egypt, and this naturally led to the speculation as to which civilized race of ancients built the American tomb. Objects taken from this mound and from mounds of the same sort in other states revealed a manner of living very different from the lives of the "wild Indians" of hunting tribes.

The three who came to rest in the giant tomb of the Grave Creek Mound had been honored members of a group that understood agriculture. They wore ornaments of copper. The burial mound demonstrated that the people of their community were capable of handling large enterprises, involving organized labor. It was commonly believed that people with all these attainments could not be Indians, but that they must have occupied America before the red men came. Were they

the Lost Tribes of Israel? Ancient Welsh? Egyptians?

The question had often been raised as to whether these mound builders could write. A bit of their writing might show the language they spoke and clinch some theory as to the land from which they immigrated. And here, out of the Grave Creek Mound, came a stone with writing on it.

We may well wonder if the person who planted the joke was standing by as the discovery was made, waiting for scientific fireworks. In Dickens' novel there was rapid drama. But the Grave Creek inscription was a little too good. It was accepted for the time being as the work of the ancients and probably unreadable.

Within three years, a room had been built up with brickwork inside the Grave Creek cone and here a little museum was established. For twenty-five cents, the tourist could enter one of America's prehistoric equivalents of the Egyptian pyramids. By faint candle-light he could look at the skeletons of some of these mysterious "Ancients." He could see their copper bracelets, beads, stone weapons—and a sample of their writings or charms. The Grave Creek inscription was still regarded as merely one exhibit among many from the mound.

But, gradually, the hoax began to work. Impressions of the inscription began to be made and sent to language specialists in this country and abroad. Papers on the inscription were read at meetings of learned societies. Pamphlets on it were printed. Some

scholars pronounced it a fake antiquity, like many other fakes that have been planted for various reasons to deceive science. But none of these wise judges reached Mr. Blotton's triumphant state of being able to read the stone in ordinary English.

A report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, published fifty years after the inscription first appeared, sums up the more impressive attempts at mastering the Grave Creek inscription:

A French scientist, in 1856, translated the letters to mean: "The Chief of Emigration who reached these places has fixed these statutes forever."

Another French scientist, 1875, read a paper at the Congress of Americanists at Nancy, in which he translated the inscription as being Canaanite. His version was: "What thou sayest, thou dost impose it, thou shinest in thy impetuous clan and rapid chamois."

Another linguist decided that the meaning of the letters was: "The grave of one who was assassinated here. May God to avenge him strike his murderer, cutting off the hand of his existence."

One scholar who pored over the letters on the bit of stone, found there four characters which he called ancient Greek; four Etruscan; five Runic; six ancient Gaelic; seven old Erse; ten, Phoenician; fourteen old British; and sixteen Celtiberic.

The Bureau's report, which rehearsed these labors of science, took a cautious stand. (*turn to page 332*)

Mr. Pickwick making his great antiquarian discovery. This incident in the Dickens novel gave an American joke-smith the inspiration for a real scientific hoax. (Engraving by "Phiz")



Pithecanthropus erectus—Continued

found, in the neighborhood of the skullcap, make it very highly probable that both belonged to the same individual; and now, since we have shown that the anthropoid skullcap may not have belonged to an ape, but possibly to a being that walked upright, this probability increases quite to certainty, for this reduces the deficiency in human characters which the skullcap showed when compared with the femur. The femur is not human in the usual sense, for it, as we have seen, shows features that occur only very seldom in human femora. Besides, the similarity of form may, as before stated, be sufficiently explained by a similarity of function, so that an entirely human form of femur need not necessarily have belonged to a man, but be found likewise in some other genus. Only an examination of the entire skeleton could give a complete solution to this question.

According to the relative proportions of these parts they can not both have belonged to an ape. For an ape with such a cranial capacity would, as we have seen, have been a giant, whose femur would certainly have been much larger than twice the size of that of a siamang. But a man with a cranial capacity of 900

cm. would have a shorter femur; for all men, except microcephali, that have so low a capacity as this have a much smaller stature than that of 165 to 170 cm., which is the height of the individual, as calculated from the length of this femur according to human proportions. This is again an evidence that the individual in question was, in the anatomical sense, neither an ape nor a man.

With the length and breadth measurements of the skull, however, the length and breadth of the femur well, both from a human and anthropoid point of view. A man with a skullcap of these dimensions could well have had a femur of that size, and if we conceive the proportions of a siamang to be doubled, the length and breadth of the skull and the length and breadth of the femur will exactly correspond with that of *Pithecanthropus*.

Nothing contradicts the view that the possessor of this cranium had a body to which this femur belonged. The skull requires exactly such a femur and no other.

As therefore, from different points of view, probability speaks most strongly in favor of the common origin of these fragments, it is carrying skepticism too far to longer doubt that both of them, and the

teeth as well, belonged to one skeleton.

I believe that it now hardly admits of a doubt that this upright-walking ape-man, as I have called him, and as he is really shown to be after the most searching examination, represented a so-called transition form between men and apes, such as paleontology has often taught us to recognize between other families of mammals; and I do not hesitate now, any more than I formerly did, to regard this *Pithecanthropus erectus* as the immediate progenitor of the human race. This is my conviction after the most careful testing of the matter, and has only become stronger after having submitted the specimens to many anatomists.

The exact position to be assigned to the ape-man in a system is more or less a matter of taste. According to the anatomical characters ordinarily used to separate the groups of mammals, we must at any rate exclude it from the genus *Homo*. Unless we considerably change and extend the characters that have hitherto been considered good for the family of the Hominidæ, it can not even be admitted there. Quite the same may be said of the Simiidæ and its species.

Science News-Letter, May 24, 1930

Solving a Scientific Hoax—Continued

asserting that the jumble of ideas about the alphabetic writing on the inscription proved pretty well that it was not alphabetic at all.

The joker, if he lived through these decades, continued to enjoy his private jest with the world's scholars. There is no doubt that he has died long before now, and so he is missing the present climax of the affair.

To Andrew Price, printer, the Grave Creek mound and its inscription have long been part of the familiar local traditions of his state. He never saw the stone, but he has seen various copies of the inscription, and being a printer, his first interest was to sort out the separate letters on the stone. This gave him his first clue. The figures do not stay neatly on their separate lines, like most printed letters, but instead he saw that they run together in some instances above and below the lines.

In his statement, he says humorously, "I conceived a new test for the tablet, and hunted up a number of

alphabets, including Hieroglyphic, Hieratic, Babylonian cuneiform, Semitic, Phoenician, Greek, Hebrew, and Roman, and sat down to draw a few far-fetched conclusions."

But before he began struggling with these ancient texts, he happened to glance at the picture of the inscription which lay on a chair some feet away. From that angle, he thought he could read the last line, "Oct 14 1838."

"As that was the year the tablet was discovered, I put the alphabets back in the bookcase and tried to read it in good old West Virginian," says this astute printer.

Long experience at puzzling over badly written manuscripts kept him at the job, and with his valuable clue that the letters extended over more than one line, he picked out the entire message, recognizing at once its connection with Dickens' satire.

The statement of Mr. Price's solution of the mystery has been received at the U. S. National Museum, by Dr. Walter Hough, curator of archaeology.

"The inscription from the Grave Creek Mound is one of the most famous tablets in American archaeological annals," Dr. Hough stated, in commenting on the new turn that the situation has taken. "The inscription has been a mark for linguists to shoot at for almost a hundred years. There is no doubt that Mr. Price has solved the problem, aided by his knowledge of letter forms."

Jubilant at his success, Mr. Price has added his own satirical fling at the antiquarian who once solemnly asserted that science would continue to ask how the stone came to be in the mound but the question would never be answered.

"Fiddlededee!" chuckles Mr. Price, "Never be answered? The Dickens it won't! The man to answer it is a man who has read Dickens' books at least twenty times; who set type from illegible manuscripts for years; and who is an unworthy member of the Academy of Science. Hooray for Bill Stumps' stone!"

Science News-Letter, May 24, 1930