

Dighton Rock Retain

Any history of the Fall River area must include Dighton Rock.

Whatever the ancient origins of the intricate and superimposed markings on the 40-ton boulder, they indicate visitors of an early civilization were here, making the sandstone rock probably America's oldest petroglyph.

There are dozens of theories about the messages or records on the stone which for centuries, until the last decade, lay in sand on the eastern bank of the Taunton River, two thirds of it most of the time below the low water mark.

Today the rock monument sits high and dry in a modern museum at As-

sonet Neck in Berkley, just yards from its initial location and available for all to study.

Several countries and cultures have set claim to the inscriptions. All will agree, some of them are Indian in character.

But the Lebanese, modern day counterparts of the Phoenician adventurers from Carthage; and the Nordic races, representative now of the Vikings, contend some of the markings were made by pre-colonial era explorers from those civilizations.

As early as 1680, Harvard University graduate John Danforth heard about the rock and came to Dighton to copy the inscriptions. He said the

New World hieroglyphics of the Indians told of a ship sailing up the river and of men who came ashore and killed their sachem.

Another important visitor was Cotton Mather, who in a 1690 sermon commented upon the "unaccountable engravings."

However, John Smibert, an American portrait painter, visited the rock in 1729 and said the marks came from "casual corrosion by waves of the sea."

Probably the greatest inroads into whatever secrets the rock holds came from the extensive studies of the late Professor Edmund B. Delabarre of Brown Universi-

ty, who summered near the site.

He began his work in 1913, trying to weave a solid inscription through the superimposed mass of figures and carvings on the flat, or river-facing side of the stone. He came up with a key set of characters, he contended read: "1511. V. Dei Hic Dux Ind." Its translation, the latter part from the Latin abbreviations, Delabarre said meant: "By the will of God, here I became leader of the Indians."

The 1511, which Delabarre took as the date of the cryptic markings, was the key. He worked through 600 volumes of early 16th century ex-

is Its Aura of Mystery

plorers before coming up with his theory.

It was that the inscriptions answered the unexpected failure of the return to Portugal in 1502 from Newfoundland of one of its greatest explorers.

On May 12, 1500, King Dom Manuel of Portugal granted to famed explorer Gaspar Corte Real lands and island, he had discovered in prior voyages. The Portuguese writers of the time, Antonio Galvao, Henry Harrise, Admiral Gago Coutinho and other historians, say that Gaspar made several trips to North America before the end of the 15th century.

They offer topographical names of Gaspe and Montreal in Canada to back up their opinions.

In his last voyage, made in May 1501, Gaspar's ship did not return to Portugal with the other two that carried 57 American Indians.

In May 1502, Gaspar's brother, Miguel Corte-Real left Lisbon in command of three ships also carrying a King's grant.

The ships arrived at Newfoundland in June of that year. The explorers began to look in different directions for Gaspar's ship.

On Aug. 1502, two of Miguel's ships assembled at a designated place in order to return to Portugal. Miguel's ship failed to show up. After waiting two days the captains of the other ships left without their commander's caravel. Miguel never returned and an expedition the following year failed to show any sign of him or his ship.

Time had eroded the face of the rock. Delabarre used a series of compounds and methods to trace the many inscrip-

tions, some superimposed over the others.

Finally, using a flashlight at night, he recorded the faint shadowy impressions with a camera. Delabarre found the name "Miguel Corte Real" just in front of the 1511 date.

Delabarre's theory is that Miguel came here after his disappearance from Newfoundland, and was adopted by an Indian tribe.

The theory in recent years was added to by Professor Joseph D. Fragoso of New Bedford, a moving force in the preservation and realization of the modern museum for the rock.

In 1959 Fragoso, and his protege, Dr. Manuel Luciano da Silva of Bristol, chalked in three key areas of the rock.

They said the marking to the left was the Portuguese Royal Coat of Arms with the five Quinas or "U" shaped scutcheons, each one containing five dots. These are the characteristic unit of the Portuguese national emblem.

The middle marking, as chalked in, was identified as the Cross of the Order of Christ, the symbol of all Portuguese Christianized discoveries, and displayed on the sails of the few remaining Portuguese sailing ships even to this day.

To the far left, Fragoso opined, is a shield which Delabarre had discovered and which is representative of the Portuguese Royal Coat of Arms.

The 1511 date, Fragoso says, is in keeping with Miguel's departure dates and area of probe, and that he and his brother Gaspar, with their respective crews, were the first civilized settlers of the New World, some 109 years before the Pilgrim's

Mayflower landed in Plymouth.

To further the theory, the undisputed findings on Yelala Rock on the African West Coast were cited. There, as on Dighton Rock, was the name of the captain, Diogo Cao and the date of the discovery, 1483. Also there is a similar Portuguese Royal Coat of Arms and also the Cross of the Order of Christ.

The amazing similarity of both inscriptions gives weight to the Miguel Corte Real theory, in that both were made by men, similar training and principles following the king's grant rule of land marking for new discoveries.

Fragoso, a former foreign language instructor at Hunter College, N.Y., turned out numerous historical pamphlets on the rock to support the Corte-Real theory. He founded the Miguel Corte-Real Society to preserve the rock.

Subsequently Edmund Dinis of New Bedford, as a state senator and prior to becoming district attorney and later county treasurer, filed a bill that led to state acquisition and development of 50 acres of the site as Dighton Rock State Park.

The rock was initially claimed by the Old Colony Historical Society in Taunton. In 1859 or 1860 ownership passed to the Royal Society of Copenhagen, at which time the rock was considered to hold a record of the attempt to colonize Vinland by Thorfinn in 1007.

While intentions were to transport the rock to Denmark, the plan was subsequently ruled impractical.

The Boston (Scandinavian) Memorial Club obtained title to the land in February 1877. But after

its members had died without any site development the land was taken in hand by the Old Colony Society once more.

Fragoso led an unsuccessful fight to defeat the Dinis bill, contending the Miguel Corte-Real Society was the real owner. Da Silva encouraged the state to expand the park and build the museum.

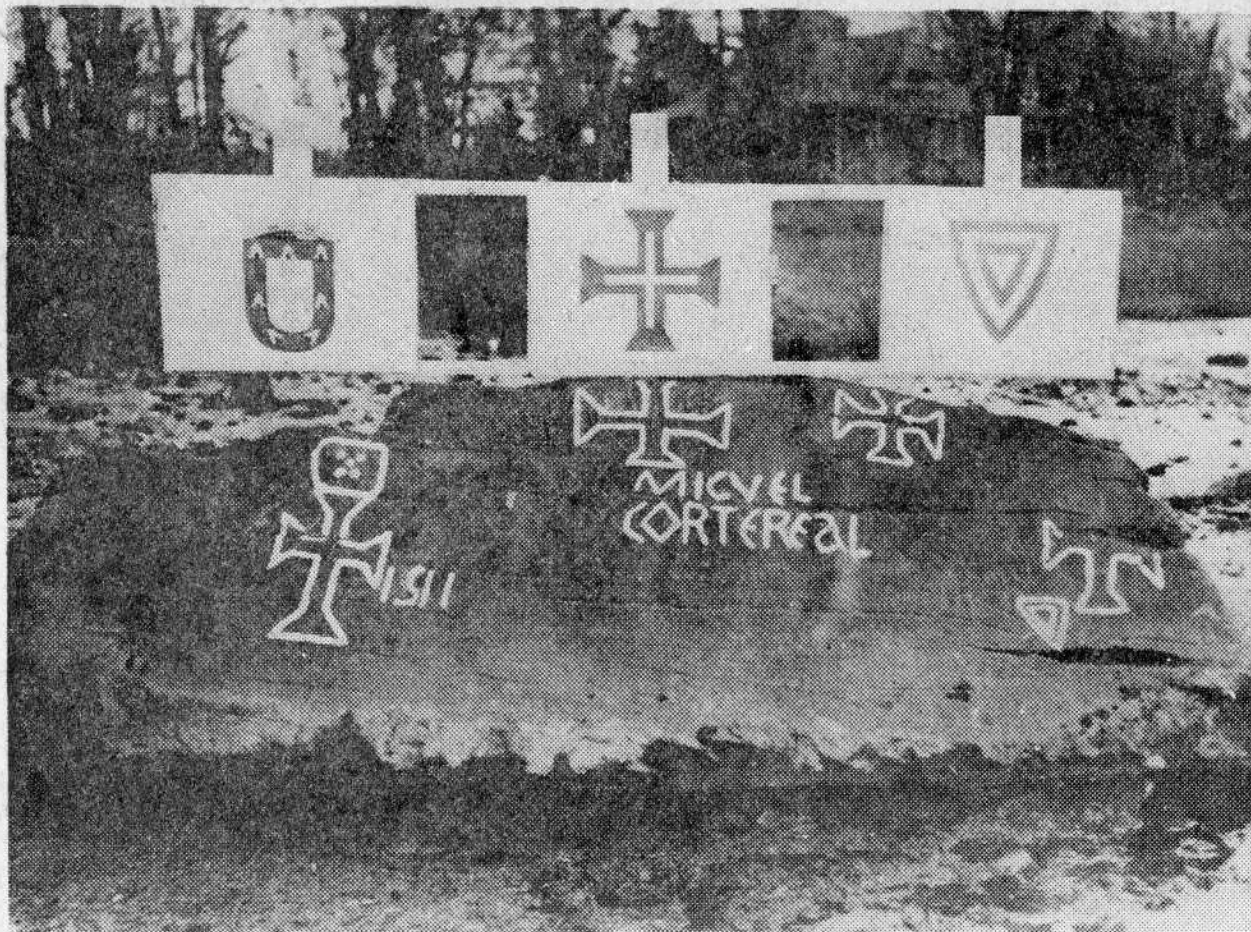
In 1958 a Superior Court jury awarded the society \$8,800 for a tract, adjacent to the rock, which Fragoso and others said they purchased in 1953 for \$5,000 but had developed to a state that it had become worth up to \$50,000.

On May 14, 1977, with much pomp and ceremony, with representatives not only of the Portuguese, but Lebanese, Indian and Viking cultures present, the state-built, two-building complex was dedicated.

Even then, speakers told of 35 theories of the markings, which include proposed visits of Egyptians in 2700 B.C. and the Norse in A.D. 1008.

To the music and dancing of various cultures, the octagonal building was dedicated to the centuries. Inside, the 11 by five foot, by seven foot deep rock is on lighted display, along with a replica of Vasco da Gama's ship Sao Gabriel; an Indian mosaic; a model of Fernand Magellan's ship Victoria; and a 1,600 pound marble padrao or marker used by Portuguese explorers in staking out their new territorial claims.

Until a more sophisticated method of cryptic analysis is found, Dighton Rock will retain its aura of mystery as perhaps the first landing site of civilized man in the new world.



Whitened areas on Dighton Rock, shown before it was placed in the museum, represent the three symbols above them, according to the Miguel CorteReals visit theory. Left is the Portuguese Royal Coat of Arms; center the Cross of the Order of Christ carried on sails of all vessels; and at right a shield within a shield also representative of the royal arms.



Most popular theory of the inscriptions on Dighton Rock is that they carry the name of famed Portuguese explorer Miguel CorteReal; the 1511 date, which fits history; and the territorial markings mandated to be used in marking the new world lands. Whitened areas show inscriptions pointing up the markings which are included in those allegedly of Indians, Phoenicians, Egyptians and Norsemen.



Dedicated in May 1977, the museum houses historic Dighton Rock from the sand and tides which have eroded much of its inscriptions; as well as models of Portuguese ships, land markers and artifacts of Indians unearthed at the site.