

The Newark Holy Stones

Touchstones for The Truth

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ABSTRACT: The Center for the Future of Museums, in its *TrendsWatch 2019* report, identified “Truth, Trust, and Fake News” as key issues for museums to address. Fraudulent artifacts bearing Hebrew inscriptions were planted in Ohio mounds in the 1800s as fake news to promote a combined political, scientific, and religious agenda. Two of these so-called Newark “Holy Stones” are among the most celebrated objects in the collections of the Johnson-Humrickhouse Museum in Coshocton, Ohio. They have been interpreted in various ways over the years, but a recent opportunity to renovate exhibits allowed the staff to develop interpretation in alignment with the recommendations of the Center for the Future of Museums. This is therefore a case study for how contentious objects can be used as “touchstones for the truth.”

KEY WORDS: Newark Holy Stones, fake news, forgeries, history of archaeology, American Civil War

The Center for the Future of Museums, in its *TrendsWatch 2019* report, identified “Trust, Truth, and Fake News” as among the most important issues facing museums in the coming years.¹ The report observed that “museums are among the most trusted sources of information” in our society, but “wielding that influence may, paradoxically, erode the public’s trust in museums.”² On the other hand, “trust confers a power that positions museums to influence the world”;³ and, as Spider-Man has taught us, “with great power there must also come great responsibility.” We think museums have the responsibility not only to tell true stories, but also to call out knowledge claims based on inadequate or even made-up evidence.

The *TrendsWatch 2019* report concludes with a number of suggestions for ways that museums could serve as “fact checkers” for a society bewildered by partisan

¹ Center for the Future of Museums, “Truth, Trust and Fake News,” *TrendsWatch 2019* (April 2019), <https://www.aam-us.org/2019/04/17/trendswatch-2019-truth-trust-and-fake-news/>.

² Center for the Future of Museums, “Truth, Trust and Fake News,” 6, 12.

³ Center for the Future of Museums, “Truth, Trust and Fake News,” 12.

misinformation and so-called alternative facts. These include educating the public about museums' standards for research, fostering critical thinking, teaching people to value evidence-based decision making, acknowledging the role museums have played, inadvertently or sometimes deliberately, in perpetuating untruths, and carefully considering when and how to take a stand on important issues.⁴

Beginning in the winter of 2019, the Johnson-Humrickhouse Museum (JHM) in Coshocton, Ohio, embarked on a cosmetic renovation, which allowed the staff to evaluate its exhibitions and programs—especially how the museum interpreted the Newark Holy Stones, one of the museum's most well-known and controversial attractions. In this paper we review the history of the Holy Stones from their discovery immediately prior to the outbreak of the American Civil War to the modern determination that they are deliberate forgeries inextricably linked to the nineteenth-century debate over the principal cause of that war: slavery. We discuss how the Holy Stones became part of the collections of the JHM and how they have been interpreted over the years. Finally, we consider how these contentious objects can become “touchstones for the truth” by following the recommendations of the Center for the Future of Museums in their display and interpretation.⁵

History Of an Archaeological Tragedy

The Newark Holy Stones refer to five stone artifacts inscribed with Hebrew letters said to have been found in association with various ancient mounds in and around Newark, Ohio, between 1860 and 1865. The so-called Keystone and the Decalogue Stone (figure 1) were the first to be uncovered and are curated by the JHM. They were among the most celebrated and hotly debated archaeological discoveries of this era and remain the focus of ongoing debate regarding their authenticity.⁶ The other three inscribed stones never made it into a museum collection and are not publicly accessible, but based on an examination of existing photographs and drawings, two of them are known to be crude hoaxes.⁷

The Newark Holy Stones appeared at a time when the discipline of archaeology was in its infancy and when some serious scholars still entertained the possibility that the remarkable earthworks of the Ohio Valley might have been built by a people other than the ancestors of the North American Indians. It was not until the 1894

4 Center for the Future of Museums, “Truth, Trust and Fake News,” 13.

5 Center for the Future of Museums, “Truth, Trust and Fake News,” 12.

6 Robert Altutz, “The Newark Holy Stones: The History of an Archaeological Tragedy,” *Journal of the Scientific Laboratories, Denison University* 57 (1980): 1–57; Bradley Lepper, “Newark’s ‘Holy Stones’: The Resurrection of a Controversy,” in *Newark ‘Holy Stones’: Context for Controversy*, ed. P. Malenke (Coshocton, OH: Johnson-Humrickhouse Museum, 1999); Bradley Lepper and Jeff Gill, “The Newark ‘Holy Stones,’” *Timeline* 17, no. 3 (May/June 2000): 16–25; Bradley T. Lepper, Kenneth L. Feder, Terry A. Barnhart, and Deborah A. Bolnick, “Civilizations Lost and Found: Fabricating History. Part Two: False Messages in Stone,” *Skeptical Inquirer* 35, no. 6 (November/December 2011): 48–54; J. Huston McCulloch, “The Newark Holy Stones,” in Malenke, *Newark ‘Holy Stones,’* 22–29.

7 Bradley T. Lepper, “Holy Stones’ of Newark, Ohio, Not So Holy After All,” *Skeptical Inquirer* 15, no. 2 (1991): 17–19.



Figure 1. The two principal Newark Holy Stones and associated objects. From left to right: two halves of the carved box that contained the Decalogue Stone when it was first discovered; a small stone bowl found with the Decalogue Stone and made from the same material as the box; the Decalogue Stone; the Keystone. (Photo by Ben Croghan, Johnson-Humrickhouse Museum)

publication of Cyrus Thomas’s report on the mound explorations by the Bureau of Ethnology, the “chief object” of which was “to determine if possible whether or not the Indians were the authors,” that the earthworks definitively were established to be the work of the people indigenous to this region.⁸ One surprising aspect of the Newark Holy Stones controversy is that more than a century after Thomas and his colleagues made this determination, there were academics (although no historians or archaeologists), who argued that the Keystone and Decalogue Stone might well be authentic.⁹

Discovering the Holy Stones

David Wyrick, the Licking County surveyor and a dedicated local antiquarian, discovered the Keystone on June 29, 1860. He had been conducting excavations at various sites in the area, including among the remnants of the Newark Earthworks (figure 2), an extraordinary set of ancient geometric enclosures created by Indigenous people.¹⁰ Within one of the smaller circular earthworks he dug up

⁸ Cyrus Thomas, “Report on the Mound Explorations of the Bureau of Ethnology,” in *Twelfth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*, ed. J. W. Powell (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1894).

⁹ Alritz, “Newark Holy Stones”; McCulloch, “Newark Holy Stones.”

¹⁰ Bradley Lepper, “The Newark Earthworks: Monumental Geometry and Astronomy at a Hopewellian Pilgrimage Center,” in *Hero, Hawk and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient*

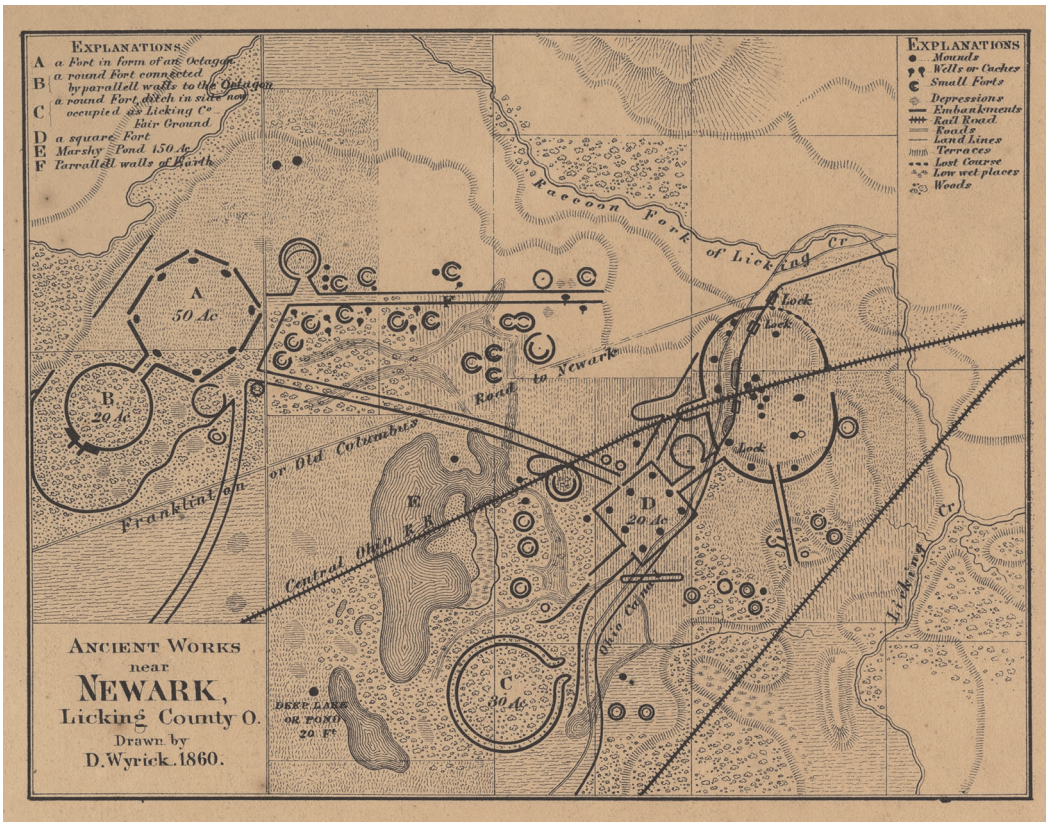


Figure 2. The Newark Earthworks as surveyed and mapped by David Wyrick. Although much of the site was obliterated by the growth of the city of Newark, two of the major earthworks survive as historic sites managed by the Ohio History Connection: the Octagon Earthworks (the circular earthwork connected to the octagonal enclosure at the upper left) and the Great Circle (at the lower right). (Photo courtesy of Ohio History Connection)

a four-sided, plumb-bob-shaped stone (figure 1) with Hebrew letters engraved on each of its faces. The local Episcopal minister John W. McCarty translated the four inscriptions as “Law of the Lord,” “Word of the Lord,” “Holy of Holies,” and “King of the Earth.” Charles Whittlesey, one of the foremost archaeologists then working in Ohio, pronounced the stone to be authentic, but since it had been found at a relatively shallow depth below the surface, was engraved with thoroughly modern Hebrew letters, and had been declared to be a Masonic Keystone by a local authority on Masonic symbolism, Whittlesey considered it to be a historic artifact unrelated to the builders of the ancient mounds.

Regardless of Whittlesey’s findings, some considered the Keystone to be definitive proof that ancient Israelites had built the Newark Earthworks, whereas others, such as William Bickham, writing in the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial* on July 10,

Midwest and South, ed. Richard V. Townsend and Robert V. Sharp (New Haven: The Art Institute of Chicago and Yale University Press, 2004) 72–81.

suggested that it was “quite possible and even probable that the stone may have been expressly prepared, inscribed and deposited by some facetious fellow to furnish sport for him at public expense.”

Wyrick continued his explorations in the region and, just four months later on November 1, 1860, five days prior to the election of Abraham Lincoln, he made another sensational discovery at a different site located just over seven miles south of Newark.

The Reservoir Stone Mound was the largest ancient stone structure north of Mexico, but sadly most of it was hauled away to provide stone to stabilize the banks of the Licking County Reservoir—now Buckeye Lake.¹¹ In removing the stones, a number of small earthen mounds had been revealed. A local man digging in one of these found a wooden burial platform with fragmentary human remains associated with several copper bracelets. Much later, Wyrick re-excavated this mound in order to retrieve a portion of the wooden burial platform which the previous excavator had left behind, as well as to see if additional artifacts might be found. His November expedition was at least the second time he had come there to dig and on this occasion his efforts met with remarkable success.

Excavating in the clay beneath where the wooden burial platform had been removed, Wyrick uncovered a small stone box that was found to contain an intricately carved slab of black limestone covered with archaic-looking Hebrew letters along with a representation of a man in flowing robes (figure 1). When translated, once again by the Rev. McCarty, the inscription was found to include the entire Ten Commandments, and the robed figure was identified as Moses. Naturally enough, it became known as the Decalogue Stone.

The most remarkable thing about this discovery was that it answered every one of Whittlesey’s criticisms of the Keystone. Rather than being found beneath only a foot or two of soil, the Decalogue Stone was claimed to have been buried beneath a forty-foot-tall stone mound. Instead of modern Hebrew typography, the characters on the stone were blocky and appeared to be an ancient form of the Hebrew alphabet. Finally, the stone bore no resemblance to any modern Masonic artifact. Given the fact that the Decalogue Stone was uncovered so hard upon the discovery and subsequent rejection of the Keystone, it doesn’t take a suspicious mind to suppose that some clever forger had used Whittlesey’s assessment of the first Holy Stone to craft a more convincing forgery. In 1870, Whittlesey declared finally that the Holy Stones and other similar artifacts were “Archaeological Frauds.” He noted wryly that “experienced archaeologists had never much faith in the Holy stone [meaning the Keystone]. When Moses and the ten commandments appeared, Wyrick’s character as an imposter was soon established.”¹²

11 Bradley Lepper, “A Radiocarbon Date for a Wooden Burial Platform from the Reservoir Stone Mound (33L120), Licking County, Ohio,” *Journal of Ohio Archaeology* 4 (2016): 1–11.

12 Charles Whittlesey, “Archaeological Frauds,” *Western Reserve Historical Society, Historical and Archaeological Tracts* 9 (1870): 4.

What Whittlesey should have said was that the imposture, not the imposter, had been established. There was no smoking gun to prove that Wyrick was the guilty party. In fact, by the spring of 1863, Wyrick was having his own doubts about the Holy Stones. On April 13, exactly a year before his death from an overdose of laudanum, Wyrick wrote to Joseph Henry, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, expressing his devout wish that “some one else had found them—than myself.”¹³ Moreover, he told Henry that he had begun to suspect that “some one has been trying to hoax me.”¹⁴ Who that person, or persons, might have been is still a mystery, but a key suspect is the Rev. McCarty, the only person in the community known to have had the knowledge of Hebrew needed to perpetrate the fraud. A local dentist, John Nicol, also may have been involved. He was part of the group of men who assisted Wyrick in the excavation of the Decalogue Stone and so would have had the opportunity to plant it where Wyrick would be sure to find it. It is suggestive in this regard that in Wyrick’s earliest published account of the excavation he states that it was Nicol who proposed that they continue digging to determine the thickness of the clay layer on which the wooden burial platform had been placed.¹⁵

Bickham, in a Letter from Newark published in the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial* on July 9, 1860, wrote that:

whether this remarkable stone is a relic of “times whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary,” or some other Joe Smith, or other humbugeous prophet, or some practical joker at some comparatively recent period, buried this curiosity in the bowels of the earth for the purpose of setting the religious or archaeological world “by the ears,” is a mystery which time alone can dissipate.

Unfortunately, time alone did nothing to dissipate the mystery. After the nineteenth century equivalent of fifteen minutes of fame, the Holy Stones were largely forgotten. And yet, 120 years later, they acquired a surprising new relevance.

Rediscovering the Holy Stones

Our histories should give only what is known to be the truth, and falsehood should always be cried down whenever it is known to exist.

David Wyrick¹⁶

¹³ David Wyrick, Letter to Joseph Henry, 1863, number 20186, folder 10, box 14, Incoming Correspondence, 1863-1879, Office of the Secretary (Joseph Henry), Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.

¹⁴ David Wyrick, Letter to Joseph Henry.

¹⁵ David Wyrick, “The Recent Mound Exhumations,” *Saturday Evening Post*, September 8, 1860, 6.

¹⁶ Wyrick, “The Recent Mound Exhumations,” 6.

In 1980, Robert Alruz, then a professor of biology at Denison University, re-kindled the debate over the Newark Holy Stones with his “history of an archaeological tragedy” published in Denison University’s *Journal of the Scientific Laboratories*. Alruz argued that Wyrick was no imposter and that Whittlesey had unjustifiably maligned him. Further, based on that opinion, he believed that the Newark Holy Stones might be authentic relics after all. We do not disagree with the premise of Alruz’s argument, but Wyrick’s presumed innocence does nothing to guarantee the authenticity of the Holy Stones. Indeed, an analysis of the inscription on the Decalogue Stone has shown it to be a nineteenth-century forgery.

Jeff Gill, a Newark area minister and avocational archaeologist, noticed that mistakes in the Hebrew inscription indicated the antique-looking alphabet actually was a nineteenth century invention.¹⁷ The engraver had made several mistakes as he evidently worked back and forth from a modern Hebrew text and a table of the modern letters matched with the made-up archaic-looking equivalents. No less an authority than the late Frank Moore Cross, formerly the Hancock Professor of Hebrew and Other Oriental Languages Emeritus at Harvard University, confirmed that Gill’s interpretation was the only plausible explanation for the gaffes.¹⁸

Having established unequivocally that the Decalogue Stone was a fraud, Lepper and Gill sought to gain insight into the motives of the perpetrators by immersing themselves in the historical context from which the Holy Stones emerged. After years of archival research, they concluded that the stones were scientific forgeries crafted to resolve the most contentious and consequential scientific, religious, and political debate of the first half of the nineteenth century: the question of the Unity of Man.¹⁹

The debate was between the proponents of monogenesis, who believed that all of the so-called human “races” were sons and daughters of Adam and Eve and therefore entitled to basic human rights; and the proponents of polygenesis, who believed that Sub-Saharan Africans and American Indians were not fully human and so could be justifiably, even righteously, displaced from their homelands, enslaved, or even exterminated. This debate has its roots in the fifteenth century, but according to the anthropologist Marvin Harris, it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that “the polygenist cause became entwined with the slavery question”;²⁰ and between 1800 and 1859 “almost every major anthropological volume written in Europe and the United States . . . concerned itself with this controversy.”²¹

The Newark Holy Stones, if genuine, would provide support for monogenesis, since they would establish that American Indians could be encompassed within Biblical history. Among the reasons Josiah Nott, an Alabama physician and one of

17 Lepper and Gill, “The Newark ‘Holy Stones.’”

18 Lepper and Gill, “The Newark ‘Holy Stones.’”

19 Lepper and Gill, “The Newark ‘Holy Stones.’”

20 Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1968), 89.

21 Harris, *Rise of Anthropological Theory*, 93.

the principal proponents of polygenesis, gave for dismissing the Biblical account of Adam and Eve was that the mounds of America were not just older than Moses, but older even than Adam. Moreover, he declared that the builders of America's mounds couldn't be ancient Hebrews, because the Hebrews at that time were as ignorant of the world on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean "as we are of the geography of the moon."²² So Hebrew artifacts found in ancient Ohio mounds would prove Nott wrong on all counts; and American Indians and, by extension, enslaved African Americans, would then have to be acknowledged as fully human. If this was, indeed, their purpose, then the timing of the discovery of the Decalogue Stone, less than a week before Lincoln's controversial and consequential election, was no coincidence. Moreover, it explains why an Episcopal minister might have participated in such a deception.

In 1839, Charles McIlvaine, the Episcopal bishop of Ohio, asked in his preface to John Delafield's *Inquiry into the Origin of the Antiquities of America*, "what connection has the Bible with American Antiquities?"²³ He proposed that "the Antiquities of this continent . . . may prove of very great value" in answering the question as to "whether all the races of men have descended from one common stock."²⁴ More than twenty years later, no such evidence had been forthcoming. And now the country was on the brink of a great civil war. The Rev. McCarty, therefore, might well have felt justified in helping the truth along by supplying his bishop with antiquities that could "prove of very great value" in answering this vexed question. It is certainly relevant in this regard that McCarty's translations of the Holy Stones appeared in the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, where they would be sure to be seen by the Cincinnati-based McIlvaine, and not in the local Newark paper.

Thomas Wallbridge, a member of the Canadian Institute (now the Royal Canadian Institute for Science), disputed the authenticity of the Holy Stones; and, in a defense of polygenesis published in 1861, noted that "the announcement of the Newark discoveries had given a momentary exultation to those theorists who count the aborigines of America so many descendants from the rebellious Isrealites [sic]."²⁵ He argued instead that the evidence clearly showed that "the Indian is an original type . . . Like the plants and animals of the new world, differing in species from those of the old."²⁶

The interwoven debates over monogenesis, polygenesis, and the Holy Stones continued until they were overtaken by historical events. The American Civil War ended slavery in America; and Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859, rendered the debate between polygenesis and monogenesis irrelevant,

22 Josiah Nott, *Two Lectures on the Connection Between the Biblical and Physical History of Man* (New York: Bartlett and Welford, 1849), 57.

23 Charles MacIlvaine, "Preface," in John Delafield, Jr., *An Inquiry into the Origin of the Antiquities of America* (New York: J. C. Colt, 1839), 8.

24 MacIlvaine, "Preface," 11.

25 Thomas C. Wallbridge, *Notes upon the Mound Structures of Southern Illinois and Ohio, in the Vicinity of St. Louis, Cincinnati and Newark* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1861), 10–11.

26 Wallbridge, *Notes upon the Mound Structures*, 12.

which is not to say that the debate did not continue in one form or another.²⁷ But the most important aspect of the argument for proponents of monogenesis, our common humanity, no longer needed the Holy Stones to provide support for it. As a consequence, these no longer “holy,” but now potentially embarrassing, forgeries were allowed to lapse into obscurity, until that is Alrutz came along and breathed new life into the controversy.

Alrutz, a Young Earth creationist, appears to have found the Holy Stones appealing for the same reason the nineteenth-century proponents of monogenesis did—because they allowed American prehistory to be encompassed within a fundamentalist Biblical framework. To some extent therefore, his efforts followed in the misguided footsteps of the original creators of the Holy Stones. Since the publication of Alrutz’s research, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in these and similar fraudulent artifacts among people who, paradoxically, are more in sympathy with the champions of polygenesis.²⁸ They think the American Indians were savages, incapable of designing and building architectural wonders such as the Newark Earthworks and the Reservoir Stone Mound. They see the Holy Stones as proof that some “lost race” of white people were the actual first Americans, and that the ancestors of American Indians were barbarian hordes newly arrived from Asia that overran this great civilization.²⁹ These claims would rob American Indians of their heritage and cast them in the role of genocidal conquerors. Further, legal scholar Walter Echo-Hawk has shown that “the immense harm caused by this work was not limited to Native America”:

The pseudoscientific theories provided support and ideological justifications that were endorsed by governments, institutions, and individuals to justify mistreatment of racial and religious groups around the world. Science was thus enlisted to uphold slavery and quell moral doubts about that institution, to anesthetize the mass removal of American Indians from their homelands, to clothe colonialism in the mantle of the white man’s burden, to numb the mind to systematic Nazi persecution and destruction of the Jews, to sustain unjust apartheid governments, and to underpin judicial doctrines that supported the foregoing activities and, in the United States, to legitimize slavery, racial segregation, and dispossession of American Indians in the courts of the conquerors.³⁰

Ironically, the evidence offered in support of claims for a lost race of Mound-builders included these remarkable nineteenth-century forgeries originally intended to show that American Indians were equal members of the human

²⁷ Harris, *Rise of Anthropological Theory*, 93–94.

²⁸ Lepper et al., “Civilizations.”

²⁹ Jason Colavito, *The Mound Builder Myth: Fake History and the Hunt for a “Lost White Race”* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2020).

³⁰ Walter Echo-Hawk, *In the Courts of the Conqueror* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 2010), 249.

family and even possibly to avert a civil war by undermining the supposedly scientific justification for the enslavement of other humans.³¹

Out Of the Desk Drawer

The Newark Holy Stones are one of the most popular exhibits at the JHM. People from all over the country travel to see them, although this was not always the case. Until 1991, the Holy Stones were kept hidden away in a desk drawer like a shameful secret. The Newark Holy Stones came to the JHM with the rest of the Johnson collection in 1931. The founders of the museum, David and John Johnson, were avid collectors, with over fifteen thousand artifacts acquired from around the world. The exact details of how the Holy Stones ended up in David Johnson's possession are a little fuzzy, but we do know that he owned them by 1862. The JHM has correspondence between David Wyrick and Theodore Dwight from May 1861 discussing Wyrick's plans to sell them.

The Holy Stones remained in obscurity for nearly one-hundred years until they came to the attention of Alrutz in 1974. He brought about a resurgence in their popularity with the 1980 publication of his report and in subsequent lectures to which he would often bring the actual artifacts (borrowed from the museum) to share with the public. All that while, the Holy Stones largely remained in that drawer in museum director Mary Shaw's office, only making an appearance when visiting Latter Day Saints arrived and specifically asked to see them. When Midge Derby became director in 1989, she asked Lepper, who was actively studying the stones, if he thought they should be displayed. Since he believed in their importance for the history of archaeology, Lepper thought they should be, and Derby set to work on a display. She decided to also consult the Midwestern Epigraphic Society (MES) for help in creating the display. MES, which is still active today, promotes claims for Pre-Columbian migrations of Old World peoples to the Americas. They were extremely interested in the Holy Stones and agreed to consult.

In the beginning, MES created a two-panel display interpreting the stones as authentic, and Lepper created a panel of text presenting the argument that the Holy Stones were frauds. At some point in the 1990s, the exhibit morphed into what was intended to be a neutral display and has stayed relatively the same until mid-2020. The supposedly neutral display consisted of a four-sided acrylic case displaying the Keystone, the Decalogue Stone and its carved stone box, and a stone cup thought to have been found with the Decalogue Stone. Behind the artifacts was a large panel of text with a general description of where they were found and with translations of the inscriptions. Next to this display was a corresponding flat case with photocopies of original documents taken from illustrations in Alrutz's book, correspondence from David Johnson, and a map of the mounds, none of which were labeled

³¹ Bradley Lepper and Jeff Gill, "The Newark 'Holy Stones': The Social Context of an Enduring Scientific Forgery," *Current Research in Ohio Archaeology* (2008).

or explained. The neutral approach settled on and retained by previous directors was intended to allow guests to make up their own minds about the authenticity of the stones; there were no facts presented outside of “these were found at the Newark Earthworks by David Wyrick in 1860” and “there is a controversy.” The details of the controversy, however, were barely mentioned.

When Patti Malenke became director in 1999, she kept the neutral display, but she saw a need to educate the public about the controversy surrounding the stones. She organized three symposia, one on November 6, 1999, called “Newark ‘Holy Stones’: Context for Controversy,” one on April 25, 2009, called “Old Questions, New Science: Reinterpreting Native American Origins in Light of Modern Methods and Technology,” and the last one on May 13, 2017, called “‘Fake News’ from the Past: Archaeological Mysteries and the Psychology of Deception.” All of these programs examined the ways in which people misconstrued American Indian origins, why people believed these mistruths, and what the archaeological evidence actually tells us.

In 2020, the JHM made the decision to transform the Holy Stones display into an evidence-based exhibit. We accept that we may not be able to change what visitors believe, but we can provide them with the evidence to make an informed decision. We began the transformation process by doing research and consulting with Holy Stone experts Lepper and Gill. After synthesizing information and identifying what we felt was most important for the visitors to know, we took information from primary sources and trusted secondary sources both to put the discovery of the stones into historical context and to provide the essential archaeological and historical data. We show how these data lead inexorably to the conclusion that the stones were not made in antiquity by a Lost Tribe of Israel, but were instead a clever scientific forgery made specifically to address the nineteenth-century debate over the Unity of Man.

The new display uses the original case built for the Holy Stones, but we removed the back panel, allowing the visitor to view the objects from all four sides. On the wall behind the stones we added big, easy-to-read panels with short descriptions intended to pique the visitor’s interest. Next to the panel is a kiosk with an iPad that is loaded with relevant information, including close-up photos of each stone to allow for a detailed examination, Google Earth images of the locations where the stones were said to have been found, basic facts surrounding the discovery of the stones, and their connection to the other exhibitions in the same gallery, which covers socio-economic changes in the United States, specifically in Ohio, during the late nineteenth century.

Time for a change?

So, why this change? After reading the *TrendsWatch 2019* report referred to in the introductory paragraphs, we decided that we needed to update our exhibit. The report recommended creating displays and exhibits that foster critical thinking,

teach people to value evidence-based decision making, acknowledge the role museums have played in perpetuating untruths, and carefully consider when and how to take a stand on important issues. We felt it was time to accept these responsibilities.

Since such a large number of guests come to the museum specifically to see the Holy Stones, particularly since the History Channel has been showing reruns of an episode of the popular program *America Unearthed* from 2013 featuring the Newark Holy Stones (figure 3), we felt a duty, as museum professionals, to present accurate historical information in an easy-to-understand and factual way. Museums have an important role to play in public education, because the objects we curate and display and the stories they can tell have ramifications in the world today. In the case of the Holy Stones, the questions of human equality and American Indian heritage still resonate today in the Black Lives Matter and Indigenous rights movements.

Earning Trust with Evidence-Based Interpretation

The JHM decided to update the Holy Stones display because we feel it is our responsibility to tell true stories and foster critical thinking. With this display especially, we are presenting information to aid the public in understanding aspects of American history that are not widely known. People generally do not realize that American Indian heritage is routinely denied or erased, or why understanding Indigenous history is so important to understanding American history. By showing that the Newark Holy Stones are scientific forgeries crafted within a particular historical context we shed light on the social history of the nineteenth-century US and help to discredit the pernicious modern myth that American Indians could not have created something as complex as the Newark Earthworks.

Our new and improved Holy Stones exhibition provides primary and secondary source information that not only allows visitors to make informed decisions, but also to understand why people in the past believed what they did. As a part of our mission, we want the public to learn about and to respect other cultures, and we want to do this in a meaningful way. Being aware of how information is presented and changing misleading information is the first step. Only then can we foster trust with our guests.

Adopting this new evidence-based approach to the Holy Stones exhibition has forced us to look at the museum as a whole and how we want to be perceived. As we worked through a cosmetic remodeling, we also took a look at all of our other current displays. We were missing key moments in the history of our region, glossing over them with a short sentence or offering no information at all. With our new commitment to evidence-based displays, we decided to do the hard research and tell the complicated stories of our region so our visitors can get the entire picture—the good, the bad, and the ugly. It is important for museums to be a trusted source of fact-based education in a world with so much untruth:



Figure 3. Image of Scott Wolter, on the right examining the Keystone, with Huston McCulloch looking on at the JHM during the filming of Episode 1, Season 2 of *America Unearthed*, November 30, 2013. (Photo courtesy of the Johnson-Humrickhouse Museum)

Rebuilding Trust may turn out to be a multigenerational effort, beginning with significant changes to how we teach children. The Voice-of-God narration in traditional textbooks is often used to bury unpleasant issues and avoid controversy. It is more important than ever that we prioritize critical thinking, rather than memorization across all subject areas.³²

Much of the popularity of the Newark Holy Stones lies in what the nineteenth-century archaeologist Gerard Fowke referred to as people's more or less innocent "love of the marvelous."³³ What makes the Holy Stones marvelous, however, is fundamentally not innocent at all. Knowing what we now know about Ohio's ancient history as well as what we know about the history of the Newark Holy Stones means that to accept them as authentic ancient relics is to accept the notion that ancient Hebrews had something to do with creating some of the greatest architecture in ancient America.³⁴ It means accepting that the ancestors of American Indians did not, with the further implication that they could not, create this monumental earthen geometry on their own. This appropriation of Indigenous

³² Center for the Future of Museums, "Truth, Trust and Fake News," 9.

³³ Gerard Fowke, "Some Popular Errors in Regard to Mound Builders and Indians," *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly* 2 (1888): 382.

³⁴ Bradley Lepper, *Ohio Archaeology: An illustrated Chronicle of Ohio's Ancient American Indian Cultures* (Wilmington: Orange Frazer Press, 2005); Lepper and Gill, "Newark Holy Stones."

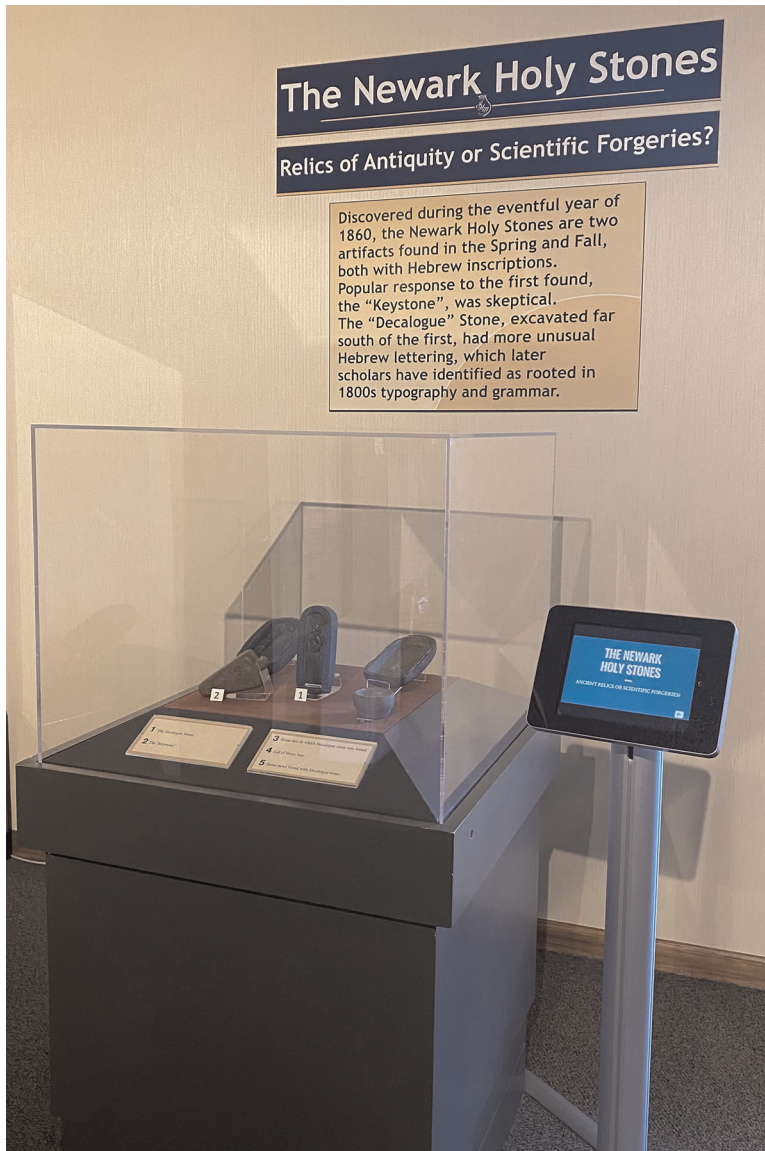


Figure 4. The new Newark Holy Stones display at the JHM providing evidence-based interpretation about the Newark Holy Stones. (Photo Courtesy of the Johnson-Humrickhouse Museum)

heritage based on alternative facts has been used to support a white supremacist agenda.³⁵ Ironically, the Holy Stones actually represent alternative facts intended to support an entirely opposite agenda.

The true history of the Holy Stones sheds light on nineteenth-century efforts to acknowledge the humanity of enslaved Sub-Saharan Africans as well as American

35 Colavito, *The Mound Builder Myth*.

Indians. Moreover, it situates these fascinating archaeological forgeries in the context of the American Civil War providing an opportunity to highlight the scientific, religious, and social factors that contributed to the seeming inevitability of this terrible conflict. The Holy Stones are a prism through which we can gain a clearer view of Ohio in 1860 CE, not 100 CE. Yet they also shed a bright light on ongoing efforts to rob American Indians of their rightful heritage and the modern legacy of the nineteenth-century science that sought to deny African Americans their most basic human rights.

The JHM now recognizes that it cannot be neutral with regard to the Holy Stones because what we say and even what we do not say has social and political consequences in the world. As David Fleming argued in his 2014 keynote address to the International Committee on Museum Management and the Federation of International Human Rights Museums, “no museum is actually ‘neutral,’ ever.”³⁶ Our efforts to interpret the Holy Stones through an evidence-based approach reflects the museum’s commitment to “inspire creativity, the love of learning and an appreciation of diverse cultures and local heritage.”

If you are a museum curator or an education specialist, you might consider identifying contentious objects in your institution’s collections that have interesting stories associated with them. Don’t be embarrassed by them; own them and use them as teachable moments and “touchstones for the truth.” Show how examples of fake news from the past can be uncovered and debunked. This can teach critical thinking skills without engaging directly in current partisan political debates that might alienate some visitors.

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Jennifer Bush has been the director of the Johnson-Humrickhouse Museum since 2018; prior to that she was the Collections Manager and Exhibit Coordinator. She has developed several programs while at JHM including a children’s summer program, Then and Now, which brought five members of the Shawnee Tribe to Coshocton to speak about their ancestors’ lives and about their own personal lives. In 2020 Jennifer envisioned, planned, and completed a total museum remodel and exhibition updates to tell the stories of Coshocton’s history.

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³⁶ David Fleming, “Do Museums Change Lives?,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 59 (2016): 74.

anthropology, cultural anthropology, and sociology for Denison University and the Ohio State University, mostly at the Newark campus. He has published numerous scholarly papers as well as articles intended for a general audience on the pre-contact history of eastern North America and is the principal author of *Ohio Archaeology: An Illustrated Chronicle of Ohio's Ancient American Indian Cultures*, published in 2005 by Orange Frazer Press, which received the Society for American Archaeology's Public Audience Book Award.

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