

Fire Didn't Destroy

Longfellow's "fearful guest," the once-famed "Skeleton in Armor," rests in oblivion, a victim of the fire which destroyed the Fall River Athenaeum in 1843.

A bronze tablet on the old Gas Works Building on Fifth Street, just around the corner from Hartwell Street, marks the site of its discovery in May, 1831, by housewife Hannah Borden Cook, who was digging for some sand, used in those days for household scouring.

A section of the sand-bank suddenly gave way, and Mrs. Cook stared at the eye-sockets of a human skull.

With assistance from her husband, William Cook, and clockmaker John Orswell, the skull and its attached bones, comprising nearly an entire skeleton, were unearthed.

An early account by S.V. D'Unger attests that "the skeleton was found in a sitting posture, the leg doubled upon the thigh bones, and the thighs brought up nearly parallel to the body."

"It was quite perfect, and stood remarkably well the test of exposure," D'Unger wrote.

"Covering the esternum" (sic) — he means breastbone — was a triangular plate of brass somewhat corroded by time, and around the body was a laced belt made of small brass tubes, all about the size of a pipe stem, placed parallel and close to each other. The tubes were four of five inches long."

In 1837, John Stark wrote in the American Magazine that "the head was about one foot below what had been for many years the surface of the ground. . . the body was enveloped in a covering of coarse bark of a dark color. Within this envelope were found the remains of another of coarse cloth, made of fine bark and about the texture of a Manila coffee bag."

Stark describes the breastplate as "made of brass, 13 inches long, six broad at the upper end and five at the lower. This plate appears to have been cast, and is from one-eighth to three thirty-seconds of an inch in

thickness." He cannot determine whether it might have a surface engraving. He describes it as "oval in form, and much corroded," with irregular edges.

Near the right knee, a quiver of arrows was found. The bark casing fell apart when exposed to the air. Stark's description of the arrows is such as to raise questions about a common assumption of latter days, i.e., that the skeleton was that of an Indian.

"The arrows are of brass; thin, flat, and triangular in shape, with a round hole cut through near the base. The shaft was fastened to the head by inserting the latter in an opening at the end of the wood, and then tying it with a sinew through the round hole — a mode of construction never practiced by the Indians, not even with their arrows of thin shell," Stark observed.

Other documented statements, in which contemporary authorities mainly agree, indicate that the skeleton was that of a young man (the skull was much decayed, but the teeth were sound); he was five feet, six inches tall; some skin and flesh were intact, indicating either a rude embalming process or preservation by chemical contact with the metal armor.

For public view, the only remnants of the puzzling discovery are two tiny rings of metal enclosed with a sheaf of documents in a safe at the Fall River Historical Society.

One hopes to find four-inch tubes, but must be content with a fractional fragment of one, about one-fourth inch in length; and another segment which forms the ferule of a small irregular file.

The society's records note that John Orswell "used the brass as a ferule for the wooden handle of a file which was used by him in construction the clock in the tower of the old First Congregational Church, at the corner of North Main and Elm streets."

Orswell later gave the file to William Cook, who kept it many years. In 1901, it was presented by Miss Hannah B. Cook,

daughter of the skeleton's discoverer, to Susan H. Wixon, a school committeewoman and president of the Women's Educational and Industrial Society. Miss Wixon's nephew, Walter J. Wixon, inherited it and donated it to the Historical Society in 1925.

Miss Wixon's account of various theories on the skeleton's identity is admirable in the unaffected clarity of its style, which rings out refreshingly among the turgid, perfunctory or laboriously pedantic accounts which preceded and followed it.

From her we learn that the buried form faced the east, and that another skeleton was found near the same spot. Since no armor, arrows nor other artifacts accompanied this secondary find, no historical significance was deduced at the time.

"The actual facts concerning the skeleton have never been known, and at this late day, it is not likely that they ever will be," Miss Wixon concluded in 1903.

The ensuing 75 years have not been enlightening, in terms of local research. Generalized views have been conditioned by Longfellow's poetic license ("I was a Viking old!") to the attempt of Alvaro Gil de Almeida of Boston in 1932 to identify the lost bones as those of Miguel Corte-Real, the Portuguese navigator who explored Mount Hope Bay in 1502 and reportedly became chief of an Indian tribe. This theory was based on Brown University Professor Edmund Burke Delabarre's deciphering of the Dighton Rock inscriptions, in 1931.

More recent statements have tended to revert to the Indian theory. In 1962, Alice Brayton, in her booklet, "Life on the Stream," stated categorically that "the skeleton, with copper trinkets hung about his middle, had been buried in the left bank of the stream not earlier than the 17th century." She added that "the skeleton has proved to be a Fall River native," but she failed to state on what evidence that "proof" was based.

The late Mrs. Mary B. Gifford, in her many years as curator of the Historical Society, answered letters from inquiring school children.

Mrs. Gifford also seemed to feel that the skeleton was that of an Indian, wearing reinforcements supplied by English colonists. The armor, she wrote, was "probably of English origin, rather than Viking, for other Indians are known to have had the same things."

The paucity of direct evidence leaves the field open for all sorts of speculations, based on whim, hearsay or heritage, but hardly on scientific data. As time goes on, even the legend fades.

If the significance of the skeleton in armor is to be revived, it will depend on the discoveries of new ar-



y Skeleton's Legend

chaeologists, who may find evidence that would put it in a new perspective.

Last spring, an archaeological team found artifacts dating prior to 1,000 B.C. on the west bank of the Taunton, and the city's harbor dredging project was temporarily postponed. The land reserved for dumping of the dredged deposits was the site of the discoveries indicating the presence of "an early civilization," not to be confused with the Indian tribes who met the pilgrims in the 17th century.

The Historical Society has an undated editorial, brown with age, quoting Charles C. Willoughby of the Peabody Museum in Cambridge.

The editor, taking issue with the Indian attribution, notes that when city

visitors surveyed the actual phenomenon in the old Athenaeum, they didn't classify it as a skeletal Indian. "It was never so regarded by the thousands who saw and scrutinized it closely during the 11 years it was open to the observation of people in our town hall.... Fall River people were too familiar with Indian life to be impressed with the theory that any Indian chief wore real metal armor...."

The writer concludes that the origin of the armor "goes farther back — perhaps to the Norsemen, Portuguese or other explorers," and that the skeleton is that of "a man of European origin."

Returning to Stark's account, which is now preserved in a couple of yellowed typewritten transcripts in The Herald

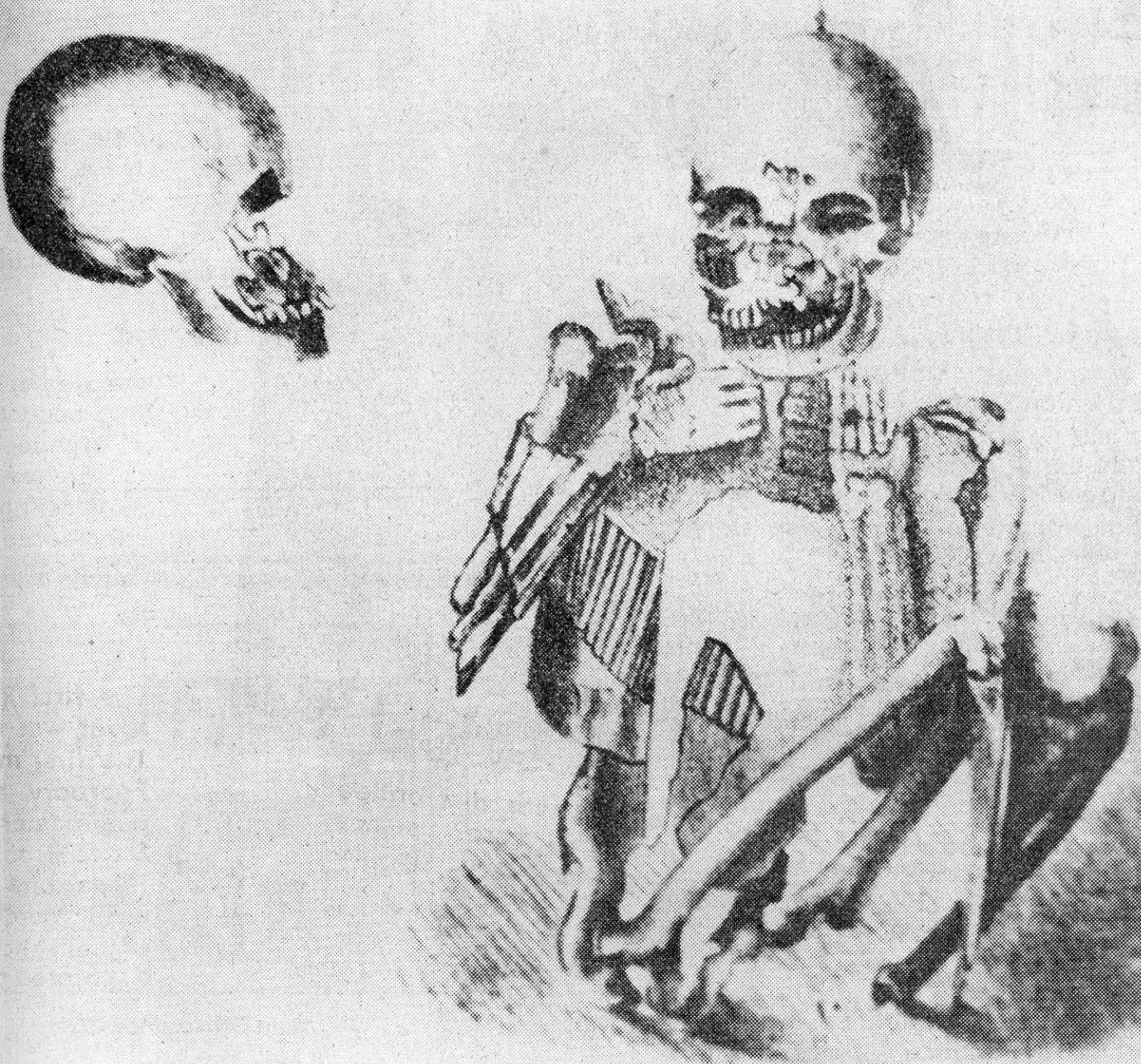
News files, another unexpected conclusion follows a peroration which likens the armor to that of Hector, as described by Homer; alluding vaguely to "the Asiatic race, who transiently settled in central North America, and afterward went to Mexico and founded those cities, in the exploring of the ruins of which such astonishing discoveries have recently been made.

"But we rather incline to the belief that the remains found at Fall River belonged to one of the crew of a Phoenician vessel," Stark concludes, in a summation which allows anyone, underterred by demonstrable facts, to follow his or her own rampant inclination.

Mrs. Florence Brigham, curator of the Historical Society, muses as she tucks the file, and

the tube fragment back into the safe. "Where did all the rest of the armor go? Was the breastplate consumed in the fire of 1843, or did souvenir hunters remove it?"

Perhaps the brass tubes that comprised the belt became children's playthings; and now are buried in some obscure sandpit. Perhaps the dismantled armor is distributed among old desk drawers, or mouldering in some local attic, where curio-seekers tucked their souvenirs away 150 years ago. Carbonating processes don't work on metal, Mrs. Brigham said. Therefore, since the bones were destroyed in the fire, there's no hope of determining the age of the tiny fragments of metal that remain.



The Skeleton in Armor was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1843, but during the previous decade, an anonymous drawing was made, showing its

sitting position and fragments of its belt and breastplate. The drawing is in the Fall River Historical Society.

The Story Behind the Poem

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow visited this city in the summer of 1840. His brother was the Rev. Samuel Longfellow, minister of the Unitarian Church. His companion was Julia Ward, who wrote to her father Samuel Ward that she had visited factories and seen the famous Skeleton in Armor.

The poet was vacationing in Newport. As he recalled in the notes to his "Complete Poetical Works," while riding on the seashore, in sight of the Round Tower which was then known as the Old Windmill, he felt a ballad coming on. He was 33 years old; he had taught at Beadoin College, traveled to Europe and suffered the death of his first wife, Mary Potter.

Longfellow was beginning to learn the healing power of consistent work, and to enjoy social life. He was on the verge of a career that would make his name a household word, and would inculcate in the average American some dim sense of the poetic consciousness.

That was before modern criticism made the art an elitist exercise, and, pushing better poets, helped create a general public that never reads any poetry.

"A year or two previous,

a skeleton had been dug up at Fall River, clad in broken and corroded armor; and the idea occurred to me of connecting it with the Round Tower, . . . now claimed by the Danes as a work of their early ancestors," Longfellow noted.

He refers to a memoir by a certain Professor Rafn, which claims that the original structure of the Round Tower was pre-Gothic, or Norman, and could be traced to "a period decidedly not later than the 12th century."

Longfellow was not as naive as some of his works suggest; he admitted he might be called Quixotic for seeing a Norman tower in what was getting to be generally accepted as a colonial windmill, built on an English model by Gov. Benedict Arnold, c. 1675. The Viking theory was, he said, "sufficient for a ballad."

Nowadays, the ballad is in as deep an oblivion as the skeleton itself. For the sake of countless students who have never read it, and never intend to, a brief summary is offered:

The poet, haunted by the sight of the "hollow breast and fleshless palms," asks for a direct statement. The skeleton declares "I was a Viking old," and warns the poet to get his story straight or

he (the poet) will be cursed. Fair warning.

The Viking's childhood diversions in the far north were gerfalcon training, skating on thin ice, tracking the grizzly bear and the werewolf. These qualified him for the wild life of the sea marauder, flying over the sea, dispatching many souls, and drinking buckets of ale while telling tales of the Berserk (an ancient, invulnerable Scandinavian warrior).

On shore leave he met a blue-eyed maid who was not only susceptible to sea stories, but rather well in the world, in fact, the daughter of old Prince Hildebrand. The ruler quaffed and laughed at the thought of letting an upstart Viking make away with his daughter, but injudiciously left "her nest unguarded," and the hero carried her off, putting out to sea, scuttling her father's pursuing ship and ploughing through a hurricane.

After a three-week voyage, the fugitives landed in Newport, where the Viking promptly built the stone tower as a bower for his bride. An idyllic period ensued. Mrs. Viking (in the poem, she has no name) adjusted to her new environment and had an undisclosed number of children, before she died

and was buried beneath the tower.

"Still grew my bosom then, still as a stagnant fen! Hateful to me were men, the sunlight hateful!" In desperation, the bereaved Viking wandered through the forests to the site of the future Fall River, still deeply wooded. There, he found it some relief to commit suicide by falling on his spear.

His soul, however, ascended to the stars, and to that great wassail bowl in the sky where all great warriors converge in the afterlife. "Skool to the Northland, Skool!" the tale ends.

Preposterous as it sounds, the juxtaposing of relics and places and dim legends didn't bother Longfellow in the least. He was a modest and unpretentious man, content to grind out the simple, metrical, heartfelt verse which made him America's poet laureate.

After dashing off "The Skeleton in Armor," he taught at Harvard, wrote and flourished for over 40 years, dying quietly in 1882, with no recorded enemies, not even Walt Whitman, who may have envied his comfortable life style.

Skool to you too, dear Henry Wadsworth Longfellow!