

The Story of The Ontonagon Copper Boulder*

by Hope Pantell
Editor, Smithsonian Press
Washington, D.C.

*originally published by the
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION PRESS
Washington, D.C. 1971

Reprinted from:
The Mineralogical Record,
September-October, 1976

Indians worshipped this copper boulder; many white men wanted it; and in 1843 the War Department seized the 3,000-pound mass from the man who had finally succeeded in moving it from its site along the Ontonagon River. This is the story of the legendary Ontonagon Copper Boulder, which will be on display at the Detroit International Gem & Mineral Show, (October 15-17), on loan from the Smithsonian Institution.

Much of the history presented here was derived from an 1895 report of the U.S. National Museum by Charles Moore, *The Ontonagon Copper Boulder (Boulder) in the U.S. National Museum*.

Copper, a metallic element found widely in nature in many parts of the world, was known and used even in prehistoric times for ornaments, tools, weapons, and utensils. Before the arrival of Columbus, North American Indians valued copper as a symbol of wealth and position, as well as for what they believed were its supernatural powers.

When the first white men reached the wilderness around Lake Superior about the middle of the Seventeenth century, they found pieces of copper weighing from ten to twenty pounds among the Indians' most cherished possessions, passed down from generation to generation and often regarded as household gods.

Those early French explorers and Jesuit missionaries had come across evidence of what was to become one of the world's great copper-producing regions — located on Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Indian tradition told of great masses of copper there, weighing hundreds of pounds, which were worshipped as manitou (spirits or deities dominating the forces of nature).

In 1669 the French government sent Louis Joliet to search for copper deposits in the area, but Joliet instead went on to discover the Mississippi River together with Father Marquette.

Apparently, it was not until almost a century later that the first white man actually saw the Ontonagon Boulder. He was Alexander Henry, an English adventurer and fur trader, who made two trips up the Ontonagon River — in 1765 and 1771. Although Henry and his associates visited the boulder — located on the west bank of the west fork of the river — they failed to find extensive copper deposits. It is now known that the boulder had

been transported by glaciers for some distance from the copper veins.

Writing in 1809 of his travels, Henry was unimpressed with the region's copper potential, "The copper ores of Lake Superior can never be profitably sought for but for local consumption...." Henry was no geologist — and he was entirely wrong in this estimate, for the great Michigan copper district has produced 5,400,000 tons of copper having a value of \$5,724,000,000 (as of July 1971).

It was not until 1819 that the first exploration of the Lake Superior region was undertaken by the United States Government under the direction of Gen. Lewis Cass, then governor of Michigan Territory.

After inspecting the Ontonagon Boulder, Cass wrote to Secretary of War John C. Calhoun:

Common report has greatly magnified the quantity, though enough remains...to render it a mineralogical curiosity....It was impossible to procure any specimens, for such is its hardness that our chisels broke like glass. I intend to send some Indians in the spring to procure the necessary specimens. As I understand the nature of the substance, we can now furnish them with such tools as will effect the object. I shall, on their return, send you such specimens as you may wish to retain for the Government or to distribute as cabinet specimens to the various literary institutions of the country.

According to Dr. Henry R. Schoolcraft, a mineralogist who was a member of the Cass expedition and who realized that there must be large copper deposits in the vicinity, "the quantity [of the boulder] may... have been much diminished since its first discovery, and the marks of chisels and axes upon it, with the broken tools lying around, prove that portions have been cut off and carried away." Evidence of such attempts can be seen on the boulder today.

Though diminished, enough of the giant copper mass remained to defeat the Cass party's efforts to move it very far from the river bank. About thirty cords of wood were cut, placed around the boulder, and set on fire. When the copper was hot, water was thrown on it. The vain hope had been that if the copper was heated and then quickly cooled, it would fracture. All that happened was that pieces of rock were detached from the main body of copper.

Discouraged, the Cass expedition left the site after having moved the boulder only about four or five feet from the river bank. Another expedition, starting from Sault Ste. Marie two years later, also failed to budge it.

However, Julius Eldred, a Detroit hardware merchant, heard about the seemingly immovable rock from a member of the Cass expedition. Eldred determined that he would succeed where others had failed, and for sixteen years he planned his strategy. He wasn't interested in the boulder for its value as ingot copper —it probably wasn't worth more than \$600 at the time —but,

as an enterprising businessman, he saw that it might be exhibited profitably for a fee as a curiosity.

In 1841, then, Eldred and an interpreter set out to buy the boulder from the Chippewa Indians on whose land it stood. He agreed to pay \$150 for it; \$45 in cash at once and the rest to be paid in goods two years later.

The first two expeditions led by Eldred were unable to do more than raise the boulder on skids. Then in 1843 Eldred tried again. He left his home in Detroit with wheels and castings for a portable railway and car and also — in order to protect his property rights — obtained a permit from Gen. Walter Cunningham, the U.S. mineral agent, to mine the section of land on which the boulder rested.

Much to his surprise and considerable chagrin, Eldred discovered that the copper rock he had bought from the Indians now apparently belonged instead to a party of Wisconsin miners who had located the land under a permit issued directly by the Secretary of War. Thus, Eldred did the only thing left for him to do under the circumstances: he bought the rock again. This time he had to pay \$1,365.

It took Eldred's party of twenty-one men a week to haul the boulder up a 50-foot hill by the river, whose west fork was impassable because of rapids. They made a railway track from timbers, placed the copper rock on a car they fashioned, and moved it with capstan and chains. To quote from the U.S. National Museum report of 1895:

For four miles and a half, over hills 600 feet high, through valleys and deep ravines; through thick forests where the path had to be cut; through tangled underbrush, the home of pestiferous mosquitoes, this railway was laid and the copper boulder (sic) was transported; and when at last the rock was lowered to the main stream, nature smiled on the labors of the workmen by sending a freshet to carry their heavily laden boat over the lower rapids and down to the lake.

At this long-awaited, triumphant point, Eldred was confronted by an order from the Secretary of War to General Cunningham, directing that the copper boulder be seized for transportation to Washington.

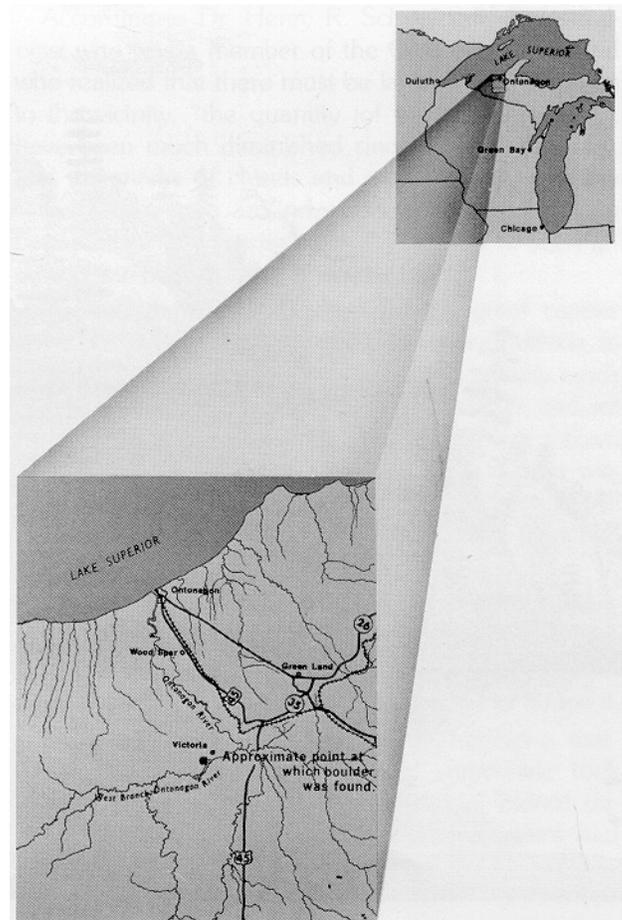
"The persons [Eldred and his sons] claiming the rock have no right to it," the Secretary decreed, "but justice and equity would require that they be amply compensated for the trouble and expense of its removal from its position on the Ontonagon to the lake; and for this purpose General C. will examine their accounts and allow them the costs, compensating them fully and fairly therefore, the sum, however, not to exceed \$700...."

It will be recalled that —aside from the years of planning and the backbreaking work that had gone into the project thus far—Eldred had paid \$150 the first time plus \$1,365 the second time for the Ontonagon Boulder. This total of \$1,515 was more than double the Secretary's top offer of "full and fair" compensation.

In view of this, General Cunningham agreed to allow Eldred to transport the boulder to Detroit, and on October 11, 1843, it was placed on public exhibition there for a fee of twenty-five cents.

Eldred had been exhibiting his rock for less than a month, however, when the U.S. District Attorney informed him that the revenue cutter Erie was waiting at the dock to carry it to Washington. So on November the boulder started its long journey by way of Buffalo, the Erie Canal, and New York City.

Understandably, Eldred wasted little time in appealing to Congress for redress. An exhaustive report on the Ontonagon Boulder and Eldred was made at the first session of the Twenty-Eighth Congress, and three years later, by an act of January 26, 1847, the Secretary of War was authorized "to allow and settle upon just and equitable terms the accounts of Julius Eldred and sons for their time and expense in purchasing and removing the mass of native copper commonly called the copper rock." In the final settlement, Eldred received \$5,664.98. (This is considerably more than its value as ingot copper today —about \$1,590 in July 1971.)

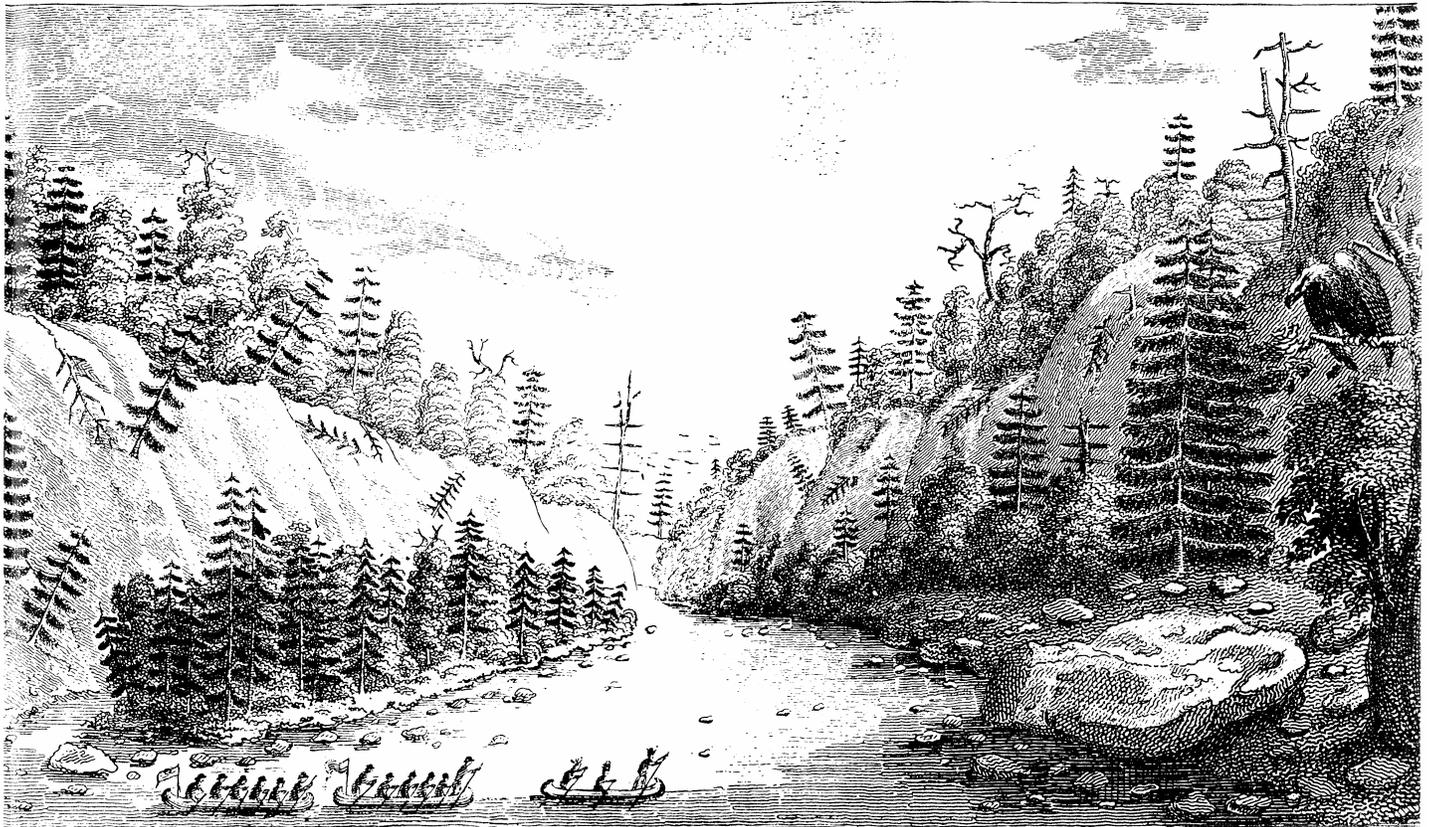


The boulder was found on the West Branch of the Ontonagon, near its junction with the main river, in what is now Ontonagon County, Michigan.

The Ontonagon Boulder remained in the yard of the Quartermaster's Bureau of the War Department until 1855 when it was transferred first to the Patent Office and then, in 1858, to the U.S. National Museum. It was placed in its present position in November 1971. And there it rests after many adventures and many years.

Such large masses of native copper are no longer found, and its like is not to be seen elsewhere. The Ontonagon

Copper Boulder is a unique specimen of its kind.



The Ontonagon Boulder in 1819.