

Michigan *TimeTraveler*

An educational supplement produced by Lansing Newspapers In Education, Inc. and the Michigan Historical Center.

Fakes and a Fraud

The longest-running hoax in American archaeology started right here in Michigan. Today's Time Traveler examines the fake artifacts that stirred up quite a controversy.

The Michigan Relics

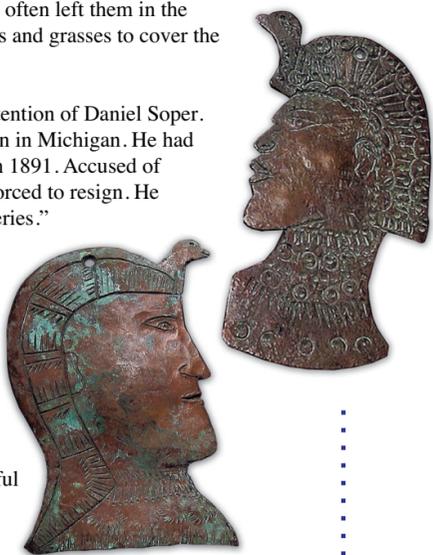
Decorated with unknown writing and images somewhat like those found in Middle Eastern cultures, the Michigan Relics were clay, stone and copper objects "discovered" in central and southeast lower Michigan between 1890 and 1920. The people who dug them from the ground said that they were real. Scholars said they were forgeries. Because of the controversy, Michigan was called "the storm center of American archaeology."



James Scotford "discovered" the first object—a clay cup—while digging postholes near Wyman in Montcalm County. Over the years he, his sons and his son-in-law made hundreds of clay, copper, slate and stone objects, including pipes and tablets. They buried them and often left them in the ground long enough for weeds and grasses to cover the spot.

These "finds" attracted the attention of Daniel Soper. Soper was already well-known in Michigan. He had served as Secretary of State in 1891. Accused of embezzlement, he had been forced to resign. He began promoting the "discoveries."

Soper and Scotford would invite important people in a community to attend "digs." Soper or Scotford and the guests would watch while a digger worked until he hit something. Then the guest of honor was asked to uncover the object. The grateful "discoverer" almost always willingly signed a statement declaring the "artifact" to be genuine. Mayors, postmasters, clergymen and some experienced archaeologists were fooled.



These pendants were made from commercially available sheet copper.

KID'S History



James Scotford took this photograph of Daniel Soper (right) and Alpheus D. Soby in 1907. They had just unearthed the objects spread out on the white cloth in front of them at Soper's first dig.



Their makers probably used steel tools to inscribe the slate tablets and a straightedge (ruler) to draw straight lines. Some tablets have marks from a steel saw on their edges.

Why Did They Make Michigan Relics?

Money is usually the reason that people make fakes and try to pass them off as real. Scotford, a laborer and sign painter, planned to make money by selling photographs of the finds. Walter Wyman reported that Scotford offered to sell him a stone casket with hieroglyphic markings for \$100.

The Michigan Relics attracted a lot of attention because of interests at the time. Wars against Indians such as the Battle of the Little Big Horn (1876) and the Wounded Knee Massacre (1890) were still recent history. Archaeology was a relatively new field of study. People wondered where the Native Americans came from and how they got here. There was evidence of advanced Indian cultures known as the Mound Builders. But some Americans thought that the Indians they saw—impoverished and beaten by disease and war—could not have been related to the sophisticated Mound Builders. So they created stories that explained the Mound Builders as peoples who came from the Middle East.

How Do We Know They Are Fakes?

Different types of evidence tell us that the Michigan Relics are fakes. Archaeologists and anthropologists give us these reasons:

- Archaeologists usually find other evidence of the life or death of people with the objects. None was found with these.
- Michigan has no remains of the temples and other buildings depicted on some of the objects.
- Native American oral traditions include no stories of the makers of the Michigan Relics.

These reasons are related to how the objects were made and the materials that were used:

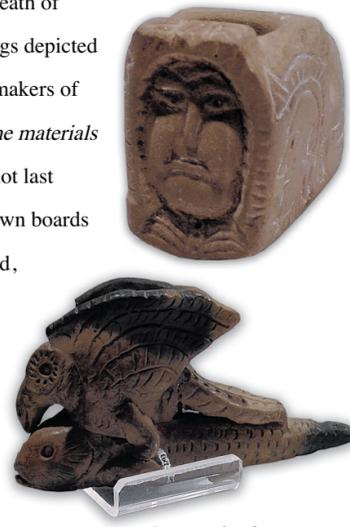
- The early clay objects were not fired. (Unbaked clay cannot last through many rain storms and Michigan winters.)
- Many clay objects have marks from sitting on machine sawn boards as they dried.
- Metallurgical analysis shows that the copper is a hot-rolled, smelted commercial product, not the pure copper early peoples used in Michigan.
- The slate came from well-known slate quarries in New England and has modern saw, planer and other tool marks.

These reasons came from people who knew Scotford:

- Scotford's stepdaughter named him as the person who made the objects.
- The woman who owned the rooming house where Scotford's sons lived witnessed them making objects.
- Walter C. Wyman, a collector of archaeological artifacts, described seeing objects at various stages of manufacture when he visited Scotford.

Other reasons we know they are fakes include:

- Before Scotford's "discovery," no similar objects had ever been reported as being seen in mound excavations in Michigan.
- None of these objects were discovered without Soper or Scotford's help.



A stone pipe features an eagle and a fish. A face decorates the clay pipe bowl. None of the pipes have been smoked.



Valiant, a student at Harrison Middle School, and Kierstin and Michaela, students at Hillside Elementary School in Harrison, visited the *Digging Up Controversy* exhibit during their spring break. Here they see the photo that includes some of the artifacts on exhibit in the display case below it.



A display of pipes and artifacts made from different types of materials includes this clay pot.

Things to Do

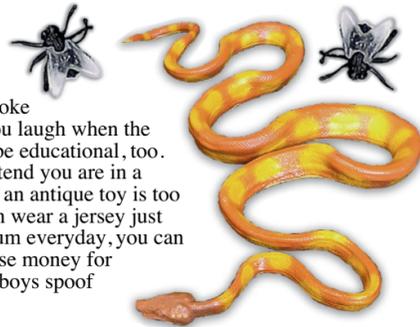
- Learn more about the Michigan Relics in the *Digging Up Controversy* online exhibit minitour at www.sos.state.mi.us/history/michrelics/.
- Find articles about hoaxes, frauds and fakes in the newspaper. Identify who was been hurt in each instance.
- Find an article or advertisement in the newspaper about something that is a reproduction, replica or copy that does not try to deceive anyone.
- Look up the meanings of these words: bogus, counterfeit, fake, fictitious, flummery, forgery, gyp, hoax, humbug, look-alike, phony, replica, reproduction, sham, simulated, spoof. Which words imply fraud?
- Comments or suggestions? Write to TimeTraveler@michigan.gov.

Fakes: Fun or Fraud?

Fakes can be fun. Did anyone ever play an April Fools' Day joke on you with play money, fake bugs or a rubber snake? Did you laugh when the joke was revealed? Some fakes—called reproductions—can be educational, too. Museums and theme parks create fake scenes that let you pretend you are in a wigwam, a one-room school or on a street in Paris, France. If an antique toy is too fragile to handle, you can play with a copy of the toy. You can wear a jersey just like your favorite sports star's. If you can't go to an art museum everyday, you can buy an inexpensive print of your favorite painting. To raise money for charity, the *Lansing State Journal* prints the Old Newsboys spoof newspaper once a year.



When is a fake a fraud? The person who commits fraud does not reveal a joke or anything true about the fake. A fraud in Iowa, the Davenport Conspiracy, began as a cruel joke. In 1877 some amateur archaeologists made and hid tablets and pipes in a Native American burial mound. They hoped to embarrass the Reverend Jacob Gass, another amateur archaeologist. They thought that experts would easily recognize the forgeries. However, the experts, who did not have the scientific tools we have today, sincerely studied and debated whether the artifacts were real. The people who made them became too afraid or embarrassed to admit what they had done. Finally, the Smithsonian declared the Davenport artifacts to be frauds in an 1894 report. Most importantly, a fake becomes a fraud when a person represents it as real and tricks someone else into giving money or something else of value to obtain it.



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If you are interested in sponsoring classroom papers or using the newspaper in your classroom, please contact Patricia O'Hearn, NIE Manager at (517) 377-1242.

At the Michigan Historical Museum

- Visit the *Digging Up Controversy: The Michigan Relics* exhibit in the first-floor Special Exhibits Gallery through August 15.
- Learn more about Native American heritage in the archaeological time line and exhibits on the museum's second floor.
- Hear "How Do We Know It Is Real?" about Bigfoot and other American Legends at the museum on Saturday, April 17. Kids and families: 11 a.m.; adults: 1:30 p.m.

The Michigan Historical Museum, 702 W. Kalamazoo Street, is located two blocks west of the Capitol in downtown Lansing. Museum admission is free. Hours: Monday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; Saturday, 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.; Sunday, 1:00 to 5:00 p.m. The museum telephone hotline: (517) 373-3559. The museum is part of the Michigan Historical Center, Department of History, Arts and Libraries. Visit us on the Web at www.michiganhistory.org.