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Eben Horsford's Nordic Nostalgia

Peter Drummey 00:00

I know I'm keeping you, but let me tell you just one more thing.

Cassie Cloutier 00:03

[Intro music fades in] I am Cassie Cloutier and this is a bonus episode for The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society. We recommend that you first take a listen to the seventh episode from our third season titled, "Events that did not happen." That episode dealt with several items from the MHS collections that marked events that did not actually take place. In this bonus episode, we sit down with library assistant Hannah Goeselt to learn more about Boston's statue of Leif Erikson and Eben Horsford's efforts to commemorate Norse discoverers of America.

Hannah Goeselt 00:48

My name is Hannah Goeselt and I work downstairs in the library at circulation desk, sometimes getting objects and materials for our patrons and researchers, among various other tasks, such as answering some of our remote reference questions, blog writing and many other background tasks. The story of the Leif Erikson statue starts back in 1876 and this is during a reception for a Norwegian violinist at the time named Ole Bull, who was basically the rock star of the city at the time, making multiple tours across the country. During this time, we have Edward Everett Hale, who gets up and says, 'We are so excited to have Ole Bull here we should show our appreciation by commemorating his ancestors, essentially discovery of America.' Ole Bull was a big proponent of ravenous theories of a Viking discovery of America.

Cassie Cloutier 01:56

Do we have any items that are related to this reception in Boston with Ole Bull?

Hannah Goeselt 02:03

We do. This is a little bit later, but we have a pamphlet that discusses the official assembly of the Committee for the Norseman Memorial. We have here, which discusses the fact that at ‘The complimentary reception given to Ole Bull in the music hall Boston on the eighth of December 1876 the undersigned were elected to the assemblage as a permanent committee for New England, first to take measure to erect a monument in honor of the Norsemen who first discovered the continent of America about AD 1000. Second, for the protection of the Dighton Rock now in ‘Taunton River’ and on the back side, we have a list of all the members of the Memorial Committee at this time, which includes several prominent members of Boston as well as we have here, E. N. Horsford, which we know is Eben Norton [Horsford], who, for reasons unknown, becomes basically the sole benefactor of the statue by its unveiling in 1887.

Cassie Cloutier 03:06

So, we have this committee that’s really interested in erecting monuments to commemorate this Scandinavian discovery of America. Do we know why Horsford was so interested in this project? How does he go about conducting this project?

Hannah Goeselt 03:26

So reasons, I, who can say at this point, but beyond his funding of the statue, what’s very interesting about Horsford is that he spends a very large amount of time in the 1880s and ‘90s, publishing multiple monographs on his findings because during this period, he is out in the field, if you will, doing very much an amateur archeological search for different Viking settlements, essentially and what he believes, at one point is he has discovered the lost city of Nurembega, which he reinterprets as a permanent Viking settlement here on the Charles River, here in Boston. And much of his monographs are dedicated to the landfall of Vikings, specifically of Leif Erikson and the various evidence that he finds along the river, either in Cambridge or out further from the city, specifically in Weston, Watertown, Waltham and later Newton.

Cassie Cloutier 04:31

How does the MHS react to this or how does the local historical community react?

Hannah Goeselt 04:39

Right, so I will say that in many ways, you can kind of follow along Horsford's various spats with different prominent historians of American history during this period through his publications as well as the MHS proceedings, because all of these American historians are members of the MHS. And one thing that I did find interesting is that he will often air some of these grievances in the prefaces to his publications. Here we have the 1889 publication around the period he was building his second monument, which we'll talk about in a second, the problem of the Northman a letter to judge [Charles P.] Daly, the president of the American Geographical Society. It mentions here some of the reasons why Horsford was the only person at the end to fund the Leif Erikson statue, which in part might have something to do with funds, because it says here, 'It is quite true that members of the Massachusetts Historical Society discouraged the efforts of the immediate friends of Ole Bull here and the two millions of Scandinavians of the West and East who sympathize with him in his patriotic wish to recognize in a monument to be set up in Boston the services of Leif Erikson in the discovery of America. It is also true that they virtually caused the rejection by the city government of Boston of the offer by the late Mr. Thomas Appleton of \$40,000 for the erection of a memorial in Scollay square to the discovery America by Northmen.' Now it would be very nice if I could find further evidence of what happened with all that money and how exactly the MHS is responsible for discouraging the city government. But I don't have that right at the moment.

Cassie Cloutier 04:40

So, it sounds like these monuments were projected to cost a lot of money, so it's a good thing that Horsford was independently wealthy.

Hannah Goeselt 06:41

Oh, he was. Strangely enough, inventing the modern recipe for our baking powder that we use today because of initially, he is a chemistry professor at Harvard around the period that the

committee is being formed patents various recipes in this vein, and becomes rather independently wealthy,

Cassie Cloutier 07:02

Lucky for him that he had the funds for his pet project here.

Hannah Goeselt 07:07

So, I mentioned previously about what exactly Horsford getting up to in '89 which is the basically physical embodiment of his theories that he has found Nurembega, which result in a random stone tower now on the banks of the Charles in Weston, and you can visit that tower today, in fact, and go all the way up to the top. But out here, I have a sketch of it by the architects Brunner and Tryon, as well as the sketch for the engraving that goes on the stone tablet that is affixed to the front of the tower. And here we have Horsford laying out his reasoning behind why exactly he's built this tower and how exactly it fits into the narrative of Vikings discovering New England. So, it says, 'Nurembega equals Nor'mbega indian utterance of Norbega, the ancient form of Norvega, Norway, to which the region of Vinland was subject, city at and near Watertown, where remain today, docks, wharves, walls, dams and basins.' And I will mention that he means that he found evidence for this Viking city all the way out into Watertown, where you can see various remains of older stone walls and whatnot, but certainly not Viking.

Cassie Cloutier 08:35

Do we have an idea of what those remnants might have been instead?

Hannah Goeselt 08:39

He also mentions 'Fort at base of tower and region about was occupied by the Breton French in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries.' And this is very much what Justin Windsor is talking about when he and Horsford actually go out to look at some of the evidence of that was just sort of abandoned at some point. But Horsford decides it's much, much older.

Cassie Cloutier 09:01

It fits his bias, I guess.

Hannah Goeselt 09:04

Yeah, definitely.

Cassie Cloutier 09:06

So, we have all of these publications and items related to these monuments. How does the MHS acquire them?

Hannah Goeselt 09:14

The MHS has all of these publications because during the period that Horsford is writing these he is also gifting them to the MHS pretty much within the same year that he publishes them. And one of my favorites is 'The Landfall of Leif Erikson AD 1000' which was published technically it says the publication is 1892 but it must have been printed ever so slightly earlier, because it is inscribed by Horsford himself at the beginning in which he very lovingly writes, 'Massachusetts Historical Society, with the compliments of the author, Cambridge, December 25th 1891.' So I think that's a very nice Christmas present.

Cassie Cloutier 09:59

So even in between the MHS criticizing his project, he's sending them gifts of this sort.

Hannah Goeselt 10:07

Basically. I do wonder if it's in a little bit in a way, in reaction, in some cases where it says, you may not like my theories, but I'm still publishing them. So here you go.

Cassie Cloutier 10:17

He definitely made his mark despite criticism.

Hannah Goeselt 10:21

So, I will mention that there is a third monument that's much smaller. It's basically just a stone marker that Horsford puts up out on the banks of Cambridge. He is basically marking the site of Leif Erikson's house in what was then known as Gerry's landing, and this is one of his final historic digs that he actually does not live to see the publication of. His daughter cowrites a book on the archeological site of Leif Erikson's home, which she publishes after his death later that year.

Cassie Cloutier 10:56

It seems like he must have had some supporters.

Hannah Goeselt 11:00

I do think, you know, obviously it wasn't completely rejected outright. I think his theories were rather popular during the time that he's writing them. But around the turn of the 20th century, when we see the statue moved from the beginning of the mall to Charlesgate, is when most of his theories are falling out of fashion. So, you can kind of see the shift and change by the time the statue gets demoted almost. But I do think there's a very nice kind of book ending of the Leif Erikson statue and Fort Norumbega because they sit on basically opposite ends of Comm Ave. The Leif Erikson statue goes up in '87 two years later the tower is constructed. So that's '89 and in '95 is when the rail line for Comm Ave gets installed and essentially you have people starting at one end, going through past the Leif Erikson statue and all the way out to Fort Norumbega, and that is why a park was constructed out there around the same time as Comm Ave, which is named after the tower, actually, which is very interesting.

Cassie Cloutier 12:11

The park is?

Hannah Goeselt 12:12

The park is.

Cassie Cloutier 12:12

Interesting.

Hannah Goeselt 12:14

I do want to just mention that plenty of people have written about this, and there are tons of blogs and book chapters out there that go much further detail into this than I have in what I've covered. So, if people are interested, they should definitely check out what has been written out there, because it's very good stuff. So, I will say that I have a more personal interest in the study of Medievalisms, which I think very broadly defined as just the Middle Ages after the Middle Ages, and that really just means the interpretation and affectation of the medieval period, loosely, although largely the European medieval period, by eras after. And this can go into large movements of Romantic Revivalism, the Pre-Raphaelites, really any kind of Neo-Gothicism and one of the reasons I bring this up is because Medievalism is also very much employed in the service of nationalism, in that there is a very heavy precedent of people looking to an ancient past in order to legitimize their present in some cases, and America is no exception even though we don't really, technically have a medieval past, we're very good at linking to it, regardless. The Leif Erikson statue very much does employ that in a way because we are looking during this period, at a time in which America is searching for a founding myth, essentially. And we see that multiple candidates are brought forward in order to provide a foundation myth. And we see most prominently Christopher Columbus. And there is very much a reason why Christopher Columbus Day is on the same day as Leif Erikson Day and Indigenous Peoples Day, because we see this like clash of an American foundation, because also then John Cabot is brought forward as a candidate, and then later in the 20th century, we also see John Winthrop and the Puritans brought forward as founding America, but Leif Erickson is then brought forward in the service, I think of finding a so called Anglo-Saxon, founder of America, and that also really opens up a whole new avenue of what exactly people mean when they say like Anglo-Saxon, there is very much a kind of myth of a white, Scandinavian America founding that did have a lot of supporters.

Cassie Cloutier 14:48

We've definitely covered a lot, and we've definitely gone over, like Horsford's contributions to Boston itself and it's a very complicated story. Seems like he picks up a lot of enemies.

Hannah Goeselt 14:58

You know, it is a very complicated story, and I think I've only really just given you a small, tiny snippet of some of the odd little side quests that happen throughout this story. It really is just so many different avenues that go into this period in the later 19th century. We haven't even gotten into the part where the Norseman Memorial Committee attempts to become the preservers and keepers of Dighton Rock out in Taunton, and even briefly gifting the rock to the King of Denmark for a time. The king does give it back, but I think that's only a name only.

Cassie Cloutier 15:35

I guess this committee, or this project had a lot of activity during this period, and they were really trying to connect with their history in Denmark or Scandinavia in general.

Hannah Goeselt 15:46

I think so. Yeah, you know, it is interesting. If you go to the statue now, you'll see a little plaque and say that there is a Norseman Memorial Committee in the 1980s that funded the conservation of the statue. So about 100 years later, suddenly there's another Norse Memorial Committee that is making sure that the statue is looking in tip top shape.

Cassie Cloutier 16:07

So even though the theory of Leif Erikson landing in the Boston area is been confirmed as probably not true.

Hannah Goeselt 16:20

Definitely not true. There's still, I think at this point, a kind of nostalgia for such an odd little bit of history, and obviously also there's a pull, because the statue is done by a prominent artist Anne

Whitney. So, it's worth, in some cases, just preserving as a piece of art, even if the ideologies behind it are no longer there.

Cassie Cloutier 16:41

[Outro music fades in] To look at the items discussed in today's episode. Visit our show website at www.massist.org/podcast. The Object of History was produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Hannah Goeselt, library assistant at the MHS, and Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer at the MHS. Music in this episode is by Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and Chad Crouch. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening.