



Oak Leaves

*Newsletter of the Warren County Historical & Genealogical Society
Founded 1931 to preserve the history of Warren County, New Jersey*

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Remember the Mastodons

 by Brian Duke

TEN thousand years ago, a family of five mastodons perished together in a wetlands west of Hackettstown. What happened to them? This is the question J.B. Maxwell posed in a letter to the American Philosophical Society dated October 17th, 1844.

Earlier that year a monumental discovery was made. The Great Antediluvian Monster, thus called in a Hackett's Town lithograph, was found in Warren County. Not one, but five. These giants were hairy like the mammoth, yet smaller than the elephant. 23 million years ago, mastodons and mammoths migrated from Asia to North America via the Bering Strait. They encountered man until their extinction at the end of the Ice Age.

Mr. Maxwell, a trustee of Princeton University, had sent out to meet Abraham Ayers, the farmer who unearthed the five skeletons. Mr. Ayers was a lifelong resident of the area. He remembered the hilltop pond he swam in as a boy, not far from his home. During the drought that summer of 1844, he returned to the dried pond to dig up its rich soil for fertilizer.

At the shallow rim of the basin, Mr. Ayers uncovered the largest of the skeletons and a calf. Both of these skeletons were decayed and disintegrated to pieces upon exposure to the air. In the middle of the basin, four to six-feet deep within the peat, three more mastodons were found. These three were evidently younger, based on their small size and milk teeth. Their skulls and most of their bones were in excellent preservation.

Mr. Ayers revisited the site with Mr. Maxwell. Now seeing it for himself, Mr. Maxwell did not believe the family died mired in the bog. Most of the skeletons were found in a standing position, and the basin was shallow with a hard rock bottom. "Questions more easily asked than answered," the Philosophical Society shared his puzzlement. Mr. Maxwell supposed a sudden catastrophe had overwhelmed the creatures.

In the 1962 book *They Took to the Waters*, on New Jersey and Pennsylvania's mineral spring resorts, there is a

News

Donations Needed

WCHGS needs your help obtaining a new air conditioner to preserve our Museum's unique collection and provide a comfortable environment for our visitors.

Please send your donations to Warren County Historical Society, Inc. PO Box 313, Belvidere, NJ 07823.

Warren County Farmers' Fair

The Society will be at this year's 87th Annual Warren County Farmers' Fair, July 26th to Aug. 2nd. Our table will purvey books by local historians, reproductions of antique maps and postcards, *Oak Leaves* newsletters, and the *In Search of Lime Kilns* pamphlet. Look for our table inside the tent.

brief section relating to mastodons. The authors had corresponded with John Harold Nunn, former president of the Warren County Historical Society. We learn that in 1845, one of the Hackettstown mastodons was exhibited at the the Young Men's Christian Association in Saratoga Springs, New York. The famous bones caught the attention of two professors at Harvard Medical School, Dr. John C. Warren and John Webster. The professors raised funds from some of Boston's eminent men to purchase the skeleton for Harvard's collection. But there was a problem.



Shade rests over the contemplative waters of Mastodon Pond.

Webster was a known spendthrift for artifacts he could not afford. His old friend he met in Harvard Medical School, George Parkman, was his creditor. Apparently the funds for the skeleton were not enough – an incident referred to as the “mastodon debacle,” and once again, Webster fell back on Parkman. This may be one of the many debts the two men argued over before Webster killed Parkman and dismembered him in his private laboratory. Webster was convicted then hung on August 30th, 1850.

At any rate, the Hackettstown mastodon, now “Harvard Mastodon,” was purchased for \$3,000. Today the Hackettstown mastodon is displayed in the Harvard Museum of Natural History, alongside a copy of the Hacket's Town lithograph. The rest of the Hackettstown skeletons, we learn from the Newark Daily Advertiser, were auctioned off in Newark by Mr. Ayers in January 1847. Somewhere in the world these bones sit in a private collection.

The first mastodon discovery in Warren County seems to have taken place in 1827. A mastodon jaw, teeth, vertebrae, and leg bones were exhumed during excavation of the Morris Canal in Rockport, Mansfield Twp. Dr. Thos. P. Stewart of Hackettstown reported the discovery to the *American Journal of Science and Arts*. In the report, it is mentioned that Peter C. Bowne purchased the skeleton. Mr. Bowne was a proprietor for the Belmont Hall resort in Schooley's Mountain. “I intend to send it to Europe shortly,” Bowne wrote to Poulson's Daily Advertiser, a Philadelphia newspaper, “and in the mean time those who visit Belmont Hall, can be gratified with a view of it.”

The latest finding in Warren County is the Bojak Mastodon, discovered October 1971. On Lake Just-It Road,

Stanley Bojak was building a pond in his yard when young relatives of his discovered giant bones. Representatives of the New Jersey State Museum identified the bones as belonging to a mastodon. An excavation commenced to find the rest of the skeleton. Over the following months, the bones of a young female mastodon were unearthed and carbon-dated to be 10,995 years old. The skeleton was put on display in 1974 at the New Jersey State Museum in Trenton, but due to issues with its preservation, it was moved into storage in 2004.

Other discoveries were made too. It seems though that no accounts are available on the Web, besides what we find in the *Garden State Mastodons* report: In 1868, part of a skeleton was found in Hope Twp. In 1941, teeth were found in Allamuchy Twp. In 1969, a major part of a skeleton was found on Paul Nehr's property on Kerrs Corner Road, Blainstown Twp.



The Hackettstown mastodon at the Harvard Museum of Natural History. (Photo by Mathilde Piton.)



The Hacket's Town lithograph is displayed at the Sussex County Historical Society's Hill Memorial Museum. Drawn by J.W. Hill (not related), it depicts the excavation on Ayers' farm with the Delaware Water Gap in the distance.

References: *Garden State Mastodons* by Ted Pallis for NJ Geological and Water Survey (2018). *They Took to the Waters* by Harry B. Weiss and Howard R. Kemble (1962). *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. IV, No. 28, pp. 118-121 (1847). *The Rarest of the Rare: Stories Behind the Treasures at the Harvard Museum of Natural History* by Nancy Pick (2004). Harvard Museum of Natural History photo by Mathilde Piton (Source: <https://www.maathildee.com/deux-musees-des-sciences-a-harvard-university/>, licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 3.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/deed.en>)