COMMENTARY

Jailhouse Rock

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Most of us have heard of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. But has anyone ever heard of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Rocks? That may be just what's needed in order to liberate Plymouth Rock from its ornate prison.

Contemporary pilgrims come from all over the world to see this memorial to our national beginnings. They come to see this glacier-dropped boulder that—legend has it—marks the spot where the first New Englanders stepped ashore in 1620. When they arrive, however, many are disappointed. This is partly because the boulder is dull gray in color and has the shape of a stepped-on potato. But the more important reason—at least the one identified by my unscientific opinion survey—is that the object of their pilgrimage lies in a pit, 10–20 feet below street level, a position that invites disrespect. Cigarette butts, bus ticket stubs, wads of chewing gum, and coins—most of them pennies—litter this low-down object.

Nearly 400 years ago, however, Plymouth Rock invited respect. To those who sailed in on the *Mayflower*, this sun-bleached granite boulder would have shone like a beacon on an otherwise low shore. To those who had just spent months on the storm-tossed Atlantic, it would have conveyed a genuine sense of hard-rock stability in an otherwise shifting world of rolling seas, swashing sand, and flooded marsh—something even more firm than the English soil they had left behind.

I imagine a boatload of Pilgrims, rowing and wading ashore. I imagine them touching, patting, and rubbing the rock, as if testing to make sure the North American continent was solid enough for their new home.

Eventually, they built homes, survived, gave thanks, and went on to create the oldest English colony in the Northeast. As it grew, other objects began to dot the shoreline, diminishing the singularity of the boulder. The shore above high tide became a commercial street for merchant ships. Storms called Nor'easters pounded the bank. Sea level crept slowly higher. Development encroached. The street was widened then raised. A new wharf was built over the rock in 1741, but the large boulder still stood in the way of progress. In 1774, a committee decided to save it for the future, something we can all be thankful for.

Heavy chains were threaded around the boulder. Oxen teams were called from nearby farms. A crowd gathered. Four-footed "tractors" strained to nudge the boulder out of its wet, sandy cradle. Instead of sliding forward, however, the boulder fell and was decapitated, its rounded top split away from its buried bottom along a preexisting fracture.

After considerable consternation, the top half was hauled to the town center, where it was installed as a monument to colonial success. Meanwhile, the bottom half was buried by progress. Over time, the top half of the boulder began to disappear. At first, chunks were quarried off for museum exhibits and souvenirs for civic leaders. Then it seemed as if everyone wanted a piece of the rock, which could be had simply by whacking its edge with a hammer.

After who-knows-how-many whacks, the village had no choice but to guard the monument behind iron bars. But the bars only slowed the rate of stone thievery. So, to ensure greater protection, the beaten-up half-boulder was loaded into a strong cart in 1834 and hauled to a more secure site fronting the Pilgrim Museum. Unfortunately, it slid off the cart and broke apart once again.

Imagine the consternation. Eventually, a decision was made to unite what the glacier had brought to Plymouth in one piece. Back at the wharf, its bottom half was re-exposed by peeling away the boardwalk above it. Meanwhile, the two remaining fragments (both smaller due to the taking of souvenirs) were hauled back to the original site. Then, in 1880, Plymouth Rock was reassembled, its pieces cemented back to the mother stone. Across the top was chiseled the date of 1620.

One irksome problem remained. The united icon of freedom still lay below street level in a pit resembling a bomb crater. The solution was to fence off the pit with another set of bars, then to build an ornate, open-air, stone building above the whole thing. I think this edifice looks abysmally bad, rather like an elegant mausoleum designed to exhibit the battered corpse of a stone potato.

Every Thanksgiving, I express gratitude for the good intentions of Plymouth's town fathers. After all, they did save the rock. But I am not thankful for what strikes me as cruel treatment: decapitation by chains; hammering and chiseling; careless transportation; lousy patch job; deep inscription. Worst of all was imprisoning the stone in a permanent state of lowliness.

Four centuries later, I want to reach out and touch Plymouth Rock. I want to close my eyes and feel with my fingers what the Pilgrims must have felt. But the modern-day keepers of the stone—the National Park Service—won't let us. Nor will they raise America's most famous boulder to the position of respect it deserves.

Until that day comes, I console myself by occasionally touching my own little piece of the rock, one that I didn't obtain by defacing this American shrine. You see, though the original Plymouth Rock is priceless as an artifact, as a material it's practically worthless, being a Plain Jane, ho-hum, Billy-Bob, knock-about fragment of the Dedham Granite (the technical name for the bedrock south of Boston).

In other words, my piece of the rock is the "little sister" of the famous boulder, a chip off the same parent block. To get it, all I had to do was pick up a pebble from the shore of Cape Cod Bay. I keep my piece of the rock up high, on the mantle above the fireplace. Each Thanksgiving, I take it down reverently and put it on the table, right between the turkey and the cranberry sauce. Then, before I give thanks for everything, I pray that its big sister be set free.

Robert M. Thorson's book Stone by Stone *recently won the Connecticut Book Award in the nonfiction category.*

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