

The ruins of Viking Boston

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ABSTRACT

In the same spirit, he did some digging near his house in Cambridge, located stone foundations filled with colonial-era artifacts, concluded that the artifacts were trash from a later period cluttering the site of Leif Erikson's riverside manse, and caused the marker to be placed where it stands today.

FULL TEXT

TO LIVE in a city is to live in other people's worlds. The residue of what others did and thought coheres in layers that add up over time, giving urban experience its signature thickness. Boston is old and dense with such layers, especially for an American city, and it has specialized in a certain kind of strong-minded character - intelligent, resourceful, inspired, sometimes deluded - capable of leaving a lasting mark.

Take, for instance, Ebenezer Norton Horsford, the chemist, entrepreneur, and amateur archeologist who's responsible for many of the Viking-themed touches on view in the city today. The 192nd anniversary of his birth passed without general notice last week, but he's a local figure worth considering.

At Memorial Drive and Fresh Pond Parkway in Cambridge, behind Mount Auburn Hospital, there's an official-looking granite historical marker inscribed with a claim so wishful that it probably qualifies as a lie: "On this spot in the year 1000 Leif Erikson built his house in Vineland."

Horsford, who was responsible for that marker, was not your average crackpot. An accomplished scientist, he held a chair at Harvard and made a fortune from the manufacture of Prof. Horsford's Phosphatic Baking Powder, condensed milk, and other important new conveniences for women in the kitchen and armies on the march.

He met Ole Bull, the Norwegian violinist and booster of Norse culture, when Bull visited Boston in 1870. Bull was an advocate of the theory that Vinland, the New World colony described in the Norse sagas, was not up north in Canada (where it was eventually proven to have been) but down south in New England. Meeting Bull set Horsford abuzz with visions of a secret Viking history that supercharged the city around him with portent, launching him on an archaeological crusade.

Horsford, who had retired from the university and sold off his share of the chemical works, had plenty of time and money to devote to Viking Boston. His creative rereadings of the sagas and his rambles in search of interesting stones led him to believe that 10,000 Norse colonists had occupied a city on the Charles called Norumbega, with the last ship returning to Iceland in 1347. He was not daunted by the lack of hard evidence.

"Here is an Indian arrow-point," he wrote, "picked up on the field of the battle between Thorfinn and the Skraelings [Indians], in which a man of distinction, Snorri Thorbrandson, fell. His body was found, so the Sagas say, with a

sharp stone sticking in his head. If the `sharp stone' may not have been a flint arrow-point, but a stone tomahawk, here is a sharp stone that may bear that name, which was found on the same battlefield." He was willing to take any pointed stone found anywhere near the Charles as proof that the sagas told the factual story of his lost Viking city.

In the same spirit, he did some digging near his house in Cambridge, located stone foundations filled with colonial-era artifacts, concluded that the artifacts were trash from a later period cluttering the site of Leif Erikson's riverside manse, and caused the marker to be placed where it stands today.

He also caused a stone "Viking tower" to be built by the Charles in Weston, and led the push to commission Anne Whitney's statue of Leif Erikson that peers out at ramp traffic, palm shading brow, from the grassy median of Commonwealth Avenue at the edge of Back Bay. He cranked out books and pamphlets, rallying to his cause a number of believers.

He died in 1893, but he played a major part in inspiring a turn-of-the-century architectural fad for Viking motifs that produced, for instance, the longship-themed decorations in stone on Harvard's Weld Boat House, the bridge named for Horsford's friend and neighbor Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and the old Boston Board of Trade building.

Horsford's beliefs struck a chord in the culture of the time. As the local historian Gloria Polizotti Greis has pointed out, a lot of Bostonians, especially those who shared Horsford's background and class status, liked the notion of Northern European proto-WASPs discovering America five centuries ahead of Christopher Columbus. Horsford's alternate European-American history, dramatically extended back to the year 1000, recentered the emphasis on the encounter between Northern Europeans and Indians, pushing to the margins not just Columbus but the whole contemporary rush of immigrants, including Catholics from Italy and Ireland, who were remaking and claiming as their own the history of Boston, New England, and the nation.

When you consider that Horsford dreamed up Viking Boston from thin evidence if not thin air, it's impressive that he proceeded as far as he did in making it real. The false historical marker, the theme-park Norumbega tower, the statue, and all the rest are not just memorials of Viking Boston; they are Viking Boston. That city, or that layer of our city, rose in the late 19th century, built by Horsford and fellow enthusiasts. It fell in the early 20th century, when it became impossible to sustain the fantasy that the story of Europeans in the Americas was a fundamentally Northern European affair.

We live among the romantic ruins of Viking Boston. Horsford, full of passion and with the words of the sagas ringing in his head, founded that imaginary city and lived in it, and so we live in it, too, even if Leif Erikson never did.

Carlo Rotella is director of American Studies at Boston College. His column appears regularly in the Globe.

rotella.ART

Illustration

Caption: wesley bedrosian for the globe

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