

'BOOKS OF THE EARTH' Virginia's Soapstone Legacy

The versatile, utilitarian rock is found at Schuyler, Virginia, and mined there by the nation's oldest and largest producer of American soapstone.

By **ANGELA MINOR**

TOP RIGHT: *The children and grandchildren of former Alberene workers come in to look at old photos such as this one.*

BOTTOM RIGHT: *Ancient soapstone artifacts are on display at Great Smoky Mountains Heritage Center in Townsend, Tennessee.*

It is said that rocks are the history books of the Earth. If so, the Blue Ridge region has a geo-library of favorite reading material for humans—soapstone. This metamorphic rock with a “soapy” soft feel has recorded our practical lives, spiritual pursuits, artistic endeavors and technological innovations from the Stone Age to this day.

Once early humans realized this amazing rock would not burn at wood-fire temperatures, absorbed and radiated heat and was nonporous and easy to carve, they started making pots, cooking slabs, hearth liners, and then created molds for casting all manner of metal goods. For example, First Nations in

the region carved bowls, effigies and smoking pipes out of soapstone from 6000-1000 BCE. Specifically, all manner of soapstone cookware dating back to 2000 BCE has been unearthed from Virginia to Georgia.

During the late 1800s, a fellow with a sharp eye spotted an outcropping in the Blue Ridge. In Nelson County, Virginia...or rather under it...he found a vein of soapstone that eventually measured as one of the largest in the world.

Known as the Albemarle-Nelson Belt, this “massive deposit of soapstone...between Lynchburg and Charlottesville, with an exposed section near Schuyler, [had] a greater

percentage of workable stone than any other known deposit in the world” (Paper of the Albemarle Soapstone Company, Special Collections, UVA Library). Founded in 1883, the Alberene Soapstone Company (a combination of Albemarle and Serene for one of the three founders) began mining on the eastern side of the Blue Ridge.

From a Scientific American article dated June 6, 1896: “The Alberene soapstone is exported all over the world...its smooth texture and hardness...time-defying in their durability. Four car loads are in the laboratory at Yale; at Tiffany's there are acid tanks; the Hahnemann Hospital, at Chicago, and the Vanderbilt Clinic, of New York, by their use testify to its merits” (Vol. LXXIV, No. 23).

At peak in the 1920s, the company employed over 2,000 people and was a self-sustaining community called Alberene—complete with a school, post office, store, churches, and electricity.

“I have some old photos in the office,” says Candice Clark, current sales manager of Alberene Soapstone Company, Polycor, Inc., “and the children and grandchildren come in, tell stories and write names on the backs of the pictures.”

In the 21st Century, Alberene claims the lowest carbon footprint while creating natural soapstone products that do not need (and should not have) chemical sealants or stains. This Schuyler, Virginia company with deep roots and a long history continues to be the oldest and largest producer of American soapstone.

Follow-up note: In spring of 2017 The Quarry Gardens at Schuyler opened amongst six retired soapstone quarries offering trails, 34 Native Flora Galleries, 14 ecozones and seven conservation areas, a visitor center, and a dedicated repository for Virginia's soapstone history. Individual visits and group tours available by appointment only. ▲▲



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALBERENE SOAPSTONE POLYCOR VIRGINIA INC



BRIAN STANSBERRY

'MONA LISA OF THE MOUNTAINS?' The Stone Face of the New River Gorge

The enigmatic face was likely carved into soapstone in the 1950s by a coal miner.

by **SU CLAUSON WICKER** | Photo by **DAVID SIBRAY, WV EXPLORER**

Visitors to West Virginia's New River Gorge are hunting for a mysterious carving highlighted recently in the West Virginia Explorer tourism guide. Hiding in the mossy rock along a narrow path below the Canyon Rim Visitor Center, the life-sized stone face can



The mysterious carving is on National Park Service land near the New River Gorge.

easily be missed.

But then again, some visitors just might sense its presence. Referred to as the “benevolent spirit of the forest” by Gene Kistler, who first encountered it 35 years ago when he began climbing nearby cliffs, the carving has a calm, if stony countenance. The sandstone face gazes up at hikers and rock climbers picking their way along the path to access an outcropping known as Ambassador Buttress.

Kistler and his wife, Maura, are now co-owners of Water Stone Outdoors in Fayetteville, the region's go-to shop for rock climbers. They can give directions to the stone face, which they regard as a minor attraction and a noteworthy piece of folk art. They have compared its enigmatic quality to the Mona Lisa; it's impossible to tell if the face is happy or sad.

Though the origins of the stone face are sometimes regarded as a mystery, the bas-

relief countenance was likely carved in the 1950s by a coal miner who lived nearby, says David Sibray, editor/writer for the West Virginia Explorer. The foundation of the miner's house is still visible among the ferns a little farther down the path. The miner also carved his surname, Johnson, into a stone that hikers use to cross a little run that cascades into the New River Gorge.

“He was a coal miner who liked to carve as a hobby,” Sibray says. “In the 1950s, coal mining went into decline in this area, and he probably had some spare time. I think he carved this face for the pure joy of expression.”

The stone face is located in National Park Service land off Fayette Station Road near the New River Gorge Canyon Rim Visitor Center. For specific information on how to view it, visit Water Stone Outdoors, 101 E. Wiseman St. in Fayetteville. ▲▲

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