

WHEN IS A ROCK NOT JUST A ROCK?

By Marie Coady

Question:

When is a rock not just a rock?

Answer:

When it's Step Rock.

Local folk lore describes a very distinctive rock in the vicinity of North Maple and Merrimac Streets here in Woburn as being the rock where the devil stepped down with a thud while searching for a scoundrel who, by his misdeeds, had sold his soul to the great Lucifer thereby enticing him to come collect what was owed him. The legend continues that Satan stepped down with such force that he left behind a visible footprint on the rock that has lent credibility to the tale for centuries. The story of Step Rock, or Devil's Rock as some locals called it back in the 1600s, evolved into the tale spun by local story teller Parker L. Converse.

In Converse's book, Legends of Woburn, he relates the tale this way: "The story goes that once upon a time, the Devil, the great Chief of Police of Creation, in pursuit of some very high offender, jumped from Step Rock in Saugus, to Step Rock in North Woburn near the brook by the Merrimac Chemical works, from there to Mount Mianomo (Rag Rock), and thence to Mount Towanda (Horn Pond Mountain), where he made his final spring, having his guilty captive in his grasp, leaving where ever he stepped, his footmark to prove:

**"That Satan came to town one day.
 But could not stay
 Because it was winter time;
 Had it been summer,
 Many a bummer,
 Could not get out of his way in time."**

Most likely the tale of Step Rock is based on an old Indian legend usurped by local residents and transformed into a cautionary tale to remind the residents not to succumb to the Devil's enticements or they too will pay the price for their misdeeds with eternal damnation. A lesson we could all take heed of even today.

Not only was Step Rock used as a cautionary tale, it also became a landmark that for years determined property lines in deeds registered with the county. Bartholomew Richardson, a civil engineer, used Step Rock in many instances when he fixed the location of estates listed in his "Richardson's 1831 List of Houses in Woburn".

According to Richardson's records, North Maple Street was called Step Rock Road in 1831. He notes also that Step Rock Road is "North of the Canal Bridge" and a road running "Easterly of Main Street" that leads to Reading. He also describes the houses of Jacob Eames, Randolph Wyman, Benjamin Wood and Samuel Leathe, as being "On the Road by Step Rock" where "Step Rock Brook", now Halls Brook, runs.

In fact, in the 1830s when Alfred A. Newhall wrote many of his historical articles, that were subsequently reprinted in the Woburn Advertiser (1871-72) and again in the Woburn Times (1932), Newhall reaffirmed Richardson's findings noting the remains of "an old cellar where once stood a road near what is called 'step rock'".

A note inserted at that point in the document even more recently by Charles W. Smith reads: "About a quarter of a mile farther, on the right, we come to a large boulder strangely marked with veins of quartz. The neighbors say that some call this "Devil's Rock".

Newhall's article continues, "The road is, undoubtedly, a part of an old thoroughfare, which came out on to Main Street near Mr. Rule Carter's where was an old tavern was kept by William Tay . . .", the site of the present North Maple Street.

Once again the document is interrupted by one of Smith's notes that reads: "Mr. Newhall, when he wrote this number for the Woburn Advertiser, says this road at one time must have been a thoroughfare. He was right. In a plan and list of Woburn roads made by Bartholomew Richardson, the surveyor in 1831, he states "'Step Rock' Road begins at William Tay's Tavern on Main Street near the Wilmington line and ends at Robert Eames' house at Ames Corner."

According to recent research, today Step Rock lies just about 50 yards to the left of the road leading to the Woburn Landfill and within a few hundred yards of the Industriplex site. All of which is an appropriate setting, although not a safe one, for the Devil's footprint.

Now, even if you choose to argue at this point that the rock some have recently determined to be Step Rock, is not the original Step Rock of legend, you should also consider that because of its unique markings and its "strangely marked veins of quartz", it has been estimated to be between 10,000 and 15, 000 years old, which should give it some right to continue to exist.

But since I have seen the rock in question, I am convinced by the stunningly colorful veins of quartz running through it, and the clearly discernible imprint of a cloven footprint, on its summit, as described in Newhall's and Smith's notes, that the rock now being excavated on land belonging to C. N. Wood is the very rock referred to as Step Rock in all the historic documents I've read and outlined for you in this column.

Sad to say Step Rock has been literally turned upside down. The once dignified and legendary Step Rock lies like an upside-down ice cream cone in a field belonging to C. N. Wood that is slated to be turned into a parking lot. And unless something is done immediately, Step Rock is in danger of becoming gravel in that planned parking lot.

It is with that in mind that I appeal to the owners of the property where Step Rock now lies and to the City of Woburn to come to some agreement to move Step Rock to a safe place on public property where the Woburn Historical Commission can then place a plaque on it so that no one ever again mistakes Step Rock for just another rock.

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