

INYAN BOSDATA

ROCK-STANDING-ON-END

by the Farmington Area
Historical Society

While traveling by stagecoach from St. Paul to Northfield in March of 1860, noted lecturer Jane Gray



Castle Rock, in its most pristine condition in the early 1860s. Photographer Joel Emmons Whitney, courtesy Minnesota Historical Society.

Swisshelm viewed from her carriage the sandstone rock formation of Castle Rock, located a few miles south of the small settlement of Poplar Grove. “We passed about four miles from it,” she wrote, “and saw it jut out of the smooth prairie, looking just like a medium-sized church with a tall spire.”¹ Her description of Castle Rock as

a place of worship was appropriate. For centuries prior to white settlement of the area, the Dakota had venerated the sandstone formation as a place of reverence and a place to gather.

INYAN, the Dakota word for “stone” was referred to in their sacred language as TUNKAN, meaning “The Rock” which was a superior god in the Dakota religion, the greatest force and power in the land, the ancestor of all things, the patron of the arts, the advocate of authority and vengeance, construction and destruction.² Joseph Nicollet wrote in his field notes that one of the Dakota’s perceptions of their world was that everything on earth perished

except stone. Everything in nature eventually died, decayed, and ultimately vanished – the hardest bone, the heart of the oaks – everything except stone. To the Dakota, the oldest objects on earth were stone boulders and rock formations. According to Nicollet, the Dakota believed “that the oldest objects merit their veneration, having a spirit.”³ Stephen R. Riggs, a protestant missionary who translated the Bible into Dakota and edited the *Grammar and Dictionary of the Dakota Language*, wrote, “the INYAN or Rock is the symbol of the greatest force of power in the land. These became to be the most common object of worship. Large boulders were selected and adorned with red and green paint. Smaller stones were often found set up on end and properly painted, around which lay eagle feathers, tobacco and red cloth.”⁴ INYANSA or “red



Little Crow, leader of the Kaposia band of Dakota Indians, who worshiped at Red Rock, near present day Newport.

stone” was a boulder often visited by tribal members of Little Crow’s village. According to Reverend Horace C. Hovey, the boulder was painted twice a year and embellished with flowers. Before sunrise, the Dakota danced about the stone with chants and prayers.⁵ INYAN BOSDATA, or “Rock-standing-on-end,” better known as Castle Rock by the early white settlers, was such a place of worship for the Dakota.

INYAN BOSDATA, or *Le Grand Gres* as the early wandering and adventurous French fur traders and trappers knew it, was, for them, a familiar landmark.⁶ To the early nineteenth century American, English and French scientific explorers who were commissioned by the government to explore and map the area, the location of the sandstone formation of Castle Rock and its significance was mostly unknown.

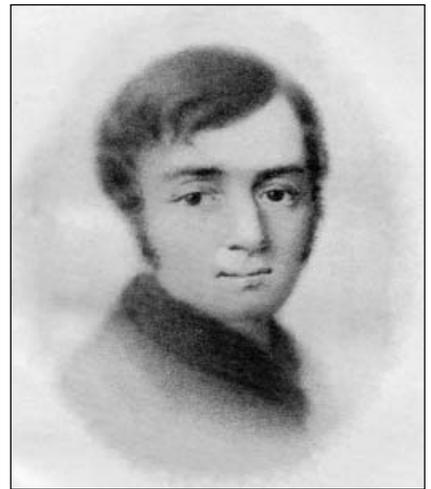
In 1823, Major Stephen H. Long, an experienced topographical engineer, along with his party of Thomas Say, an entomologist, William H. Keating, a mineralogical chemist, Samuel Seymour, a landscape painter, James E. Colhoun,



A graduate of Dartmouth College in 1809, Stephen H. Long entered the army as a lieutenant of engineers in 1814. He taught mathematics at West Point before he was advanced to the rank of major. He retired from the army in 1863 after serving as the chief of topographical engineers with the rank of colonel. He died a year later at the age of 80.

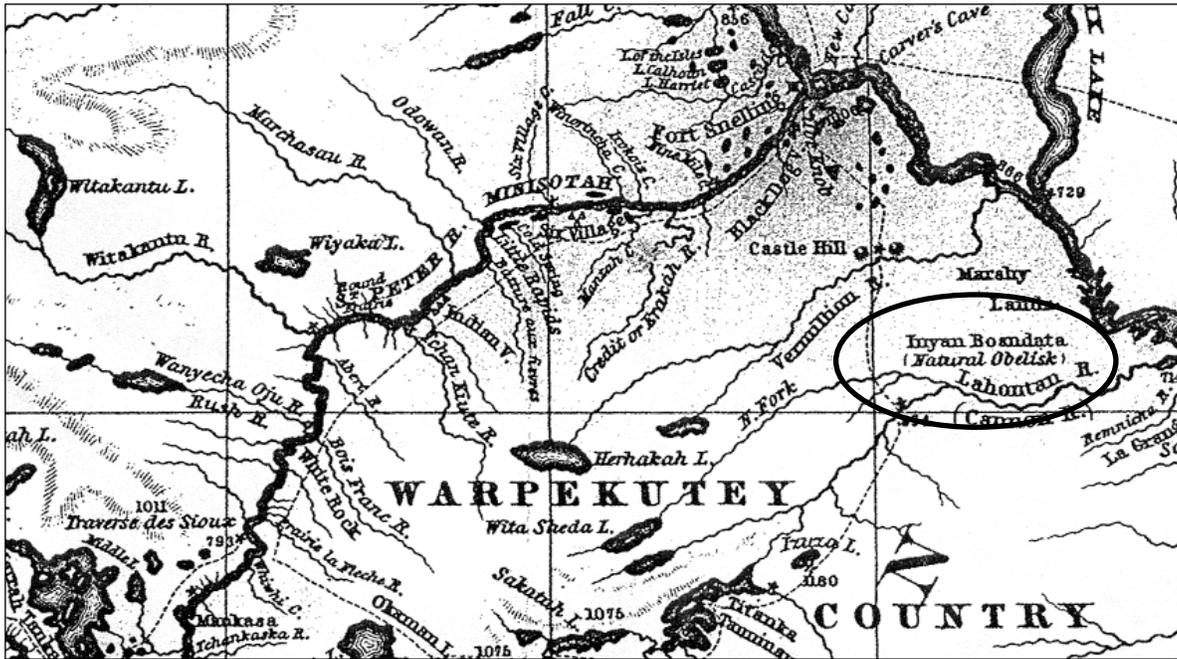
an astronomer, and an escort of soldiers, virtually circumnavigated what would become the state of Minnesota. This was Long’s second expedition to the region. Traveling up the Mississippi River to Fort St. Anthony (Fort Snelling), the most northwestern military post on the edge of the wilderness, the expedition made its way to the Minnesota River, some traveling by boat, others by

land. The purpose of the expedition was to gather scientific information concerning geographic features, geology, zoology, and botany as well as information regarding the native inhabitants, the trade in furs, and border relationships. The expedition was one of a series, beginning with the 1805 military expedition of Lieutenant Z e b u l o n M o n t g o m e r y P i k e, followed by the first military



Financially ruined by the French Revolution of 1830, Nicollet came to the United States in 1832 and traveled throughout the unsettled areas of the American South and West. His talent for geographic work came to the attention of the government. Under the aid and direction of the Department of War and Bureau of Engineers, he made extensive exploring trips in the Northwest, mapping areas of Minnesota in 1836 and 1838.

expedition of Major Stephen H. Long in 1817.⁷ Those of the 1823 expedition traveling on foot, which included Major Long, passed near Castle Rock but were unable to locate it. William H. Keating, chronicler of the expedition, (who traveled by boat) described the missed opportunity as well as their Dakota guide, Tommo, who joined the expedition at Prairie du Chien. “A stream about thirteen yards wide [the Cannon River] which they crossed ... is called by the Indians Eamozindata (High rock) from a white pyramidal rock which rises to considerable height near this stream, a few miles above the place where they crossed it. Being aware of its existence, and knowing that it would not lengthen the journey much, they were anxious to pass near it; but whether from superstition motives or not, Tommo seemed unwilling to guide them in that direction. This man was not one of the pleasantest that the party could have accompany them; although he was selected as one of the best in the vicinity of Prairie du Chien, he was not agreeable. He was a listless, indifferent kind of man; an



Nicollet's great map was described as the most accurate map of the upper Mississippi and Missouri River basins at the time. Published in 1843, the map shows the location of Castle Rock and its Dakota name. Castle Hill was the early name for Lone Rock in Empire Township.

Territory to establish new homes and towns, businesses and industries. Dakota County was one of the territory's nine original counties. The 1851 Treaties of Traverse des Sioux and Mendota opened larger areas of the territory for settlement and the Dakota people slowly left to settle on land set

incessant smoker; his pipe, which was connected to his tomahawk, was in constant use; it was made in the form of a shingling hatchet.”⁸

In September 1838, Dakota guides took Joseph Nicollet to the venerated rock formation. Nicollet, a gifted French mathematician, astronomer, and scientific cartographer, was commissioned by the government to survey and map the upper regions of the Missouri and Mississippi River basins. In 1843, the United States Senate published Nicollet's official report. It took the form of a large map with a brief narrative supporting and illustrating it. The map contained detailed explanations of geographical features and names. Many of the names of the lakes, rivers, and rock formations were given in the Dakota and translated into French. Nicollet translated WASESA WAKPA or “red paint river,” and added it to the map as the Vermillion River, *vermillion* being a French word for red. The location of INYAN BOSDATA is clearly drawn on the map and is also given the name *La Roche du Bout*, the literal French translation from Dakota – “Rock-standing-on-end” – in his journal.

Nicollet's great map was the fundamental map of the West. It was used by the government and, later, by early pioneers who ventured in 1849 to the nine newly created counties in the Minnesota

aside for them along the Minnesota River in the western part of the state. They left their villages, hunting grounds and sacred sites.

The names INYAN BOSDATA, *Le Grand Gres*, and *La Roche du Bout*, would disappear from ensuing maps of Dakota County. “Rock-standing-on-end” would be forever known as Castle Rock. White settlement of the Castle Rock area had occurred in 1854 with the arrival of the T.P. Brown, Benjamin Harriman, B.R. Morrison, J.B. Stevens, and Leonard Aldrich families. Population of the area grew rapidly in 1855 and a year later the small settlement of Poplar Grove was granted a post office by the federal government. The little town also featured a hotel that served as a stagecoach stop. In the autumn of 1857 a meeting was held at the home of Leonard Aldrich to discuss organizing a township and a township government. At subsequent meetings, which led to a precinct election, local residents debated as to what the name of the yet-to-be organized township should be. Peter Ayotte suggested the name of Castle Rock, the American name of the nearby rock formation, as the name of the township. In April 1858, the Dakota County Board of Commissioners formed Castle Rock Township as the township leaders had been elected a year earlier.

After the 1868 publication of William H.



The beauty and sturdiness of Castle Rock was not only eroded by nature, but also by visitors who carved their names and initials into the soft stone or who picked away at loose sections of the landmark. DCHS Collections.

Mitchell's book, *Dakota County, Its Past and Present, Geographical, Statistical and Historical, Together with a General View of the State*, which included an engraving of Castle Rock, tourism to the rock formation increased. Following a brief description of the "rock of curious construction," Mitchell wrote, "There are some Indian legends connected with this rock, but we have not been able to get any [corrected] version of any of them."

Access to the rock formation was easy, as a nearby field road led local families and inquisitive tourists and groups to the site. Sunday picnics and group meetings were popular at the rock. Its rough sandstone was easy to climb and soft enough to carve names into. Common diversions included specimen taking, particularly of the red lower bands of the rock formation, and the breaking off of large hunks of rock and watching them roll down the side into an adjoining marsh. Photographs of family members and friends sitting or climbing on the rock

were numerous. Nothing was done to protect the site, especially the 19-foot white sandstone spire that had been chipped away and eroded by the wind and rain.

The state's geologist, Newton H. Winchell, voiced concern regarding the stability of the spire in Minnesota's 1883 geological survey. Stating that the rock formation "had not noticeably changed," since its last survey a decade earlier, it was an "apparent certainty of its [the spire] falling with the first blast of wind..."⁹

Winchell's foretelling of the fall of the spire was fulfilled 12 years later. C.P. Carpenter, founder of the *Dakota County Tribune* and publisher of the *Northfield Independent*, expressed in writing the thoughts and feelings of many when the spire fell on a stormy night in September 1895:

The practical destruction of that picturesque and historical landmark known as Castle Rock, as reported in our correspondence, which has stood as the greatest and the most interesting natural curiosity of this section ever since the state was settled, will be universally and sincerely regretted by all, and especially by the old settlers. To them it will be like the sudden and sad departure of an old friend.

Ever since the first white settler passed through Poplar Grove and beheld with wonder its rocky spire pointing toward heaven, it has stood there through storm and shine, through summer heat and winter cold, a guide to the traveler, the object of innumerable pleasure parties, a wonder to the passerby, of interest of all. Tourists have visited it from all parts of the nation, the thoughtless and careless have carved their names upon it, thus assisting in its ultimate destruction; the thoughtful have gazed upon it with wondering awe, as their minds vainly sought to follow its history back through the ages of the past – back to the time when the swirling floods swept around it, carrying away from its base the loose soil, and wearing the furrows in its sandy sides – down through the years since that time, when the fierce winds have beaten upon it and the rains have

helped to almost imperceptibly undermine its picturesque spire. With grim fortitude it stood there, helpless to stay the ravages of time, helpless to resent the injuries done it by wanton hands. Like a grim sentry upon the battlements of time, it ever held aloft its spire, doing its duty well to the last minute, until Saturday, September 28, 1895, unable longer to withstand the mad fury of the elements which beat pitilessly upon it, having done its full duty in its day and generation, it fell, and was crushed and destroyed, while the cold winds gave a shriek of victory. To the old settlers the destruction of this historic landmark will be like the loss of a valued friend; to the lover of the historic, the picturesque, the beautiful and the things of olden times, its fall will carry a feeling of sadness and sorrow.

Tourists by thousands have visited it, picnic and pleasure parties almost without number have made it their destination, great celebrations have rallied around it, voices long since hushed in death echoed from its sides, memories of both pleasure and sorrow were entwined about it. But it is gone! No more shall we look upon its graceful spire. It has become but an unsightly sand rock, which will continue to be worn away by time until crops shall grow where it once stood, and ages hence, if the world lasts, some one may wonder why that part of the field is filled with such fine and beautiful sand.

Good bye, old Castle Rock, good bye; thou wilt still live in history and the traditions of the people.¹⁰

Castle Rock did become the “unsightly sand rock” as Carpenter declared. Although having lost its distinctiveness, the site continued to be a popular picnicking place. As cans, bottles and picnic rubbish began to accumulate, and continued vandalism decreased the size of the sandstone foundation and its attractiveness, concerned individuals endeavored to maintain Castle Rock.

In 1938, the Geological Society of Minnesota proposed a plan to protect the site. Suggesting that the property be purchased from its owner, the land

would be fenced in and cleared of rubbish. It also proposed that the surrounding swampy land east of the rock formation be made into a game preserve. A Sunday caretaker would be hired to monitor the site during picnics, and shelter, toilet facilities, and “a good outdoor meeting place for farmers, visitors, school children, historians, and geologists” be provided. It was also suggested that the property be placed under the protection of Minnesota’s Department of Conservation, State Parks Division.¹¹

Nothing became of the Geological Society’s suggestions. By the 1950s the upper portions of rock were gone, and the slow disintegration of the remaining stone structure began rapidly. By that time, teenagers used the site as a “hang out” and were accused of “destroying the rock and littering the area with refuse.”¹² A second attempt to preserve the site failed despite Governor Karl Rolvaag’s interest in the proposal. In 1963, Rolvaag asked the state’s commissioner of conservation to “investigate the site to see whether it can contribute anything to our state park system.”¹³ The conclusion of the investigation was that the site was damaged beyond repair as an historical landmark and had little to offer. The state was not interested in Castle Rock as a tourist attraction.

However, the site continued to attract visitors. In the spring of 1972, Al B. Smeby, curator of the Dakota County Historical Society, along with South St. Paul photographer Reinhold Werner and their guide, Gordon Sayers of Farmington, who was one



*The loss of the spire significantly changed the appearance and character of the rock formation.
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society.*



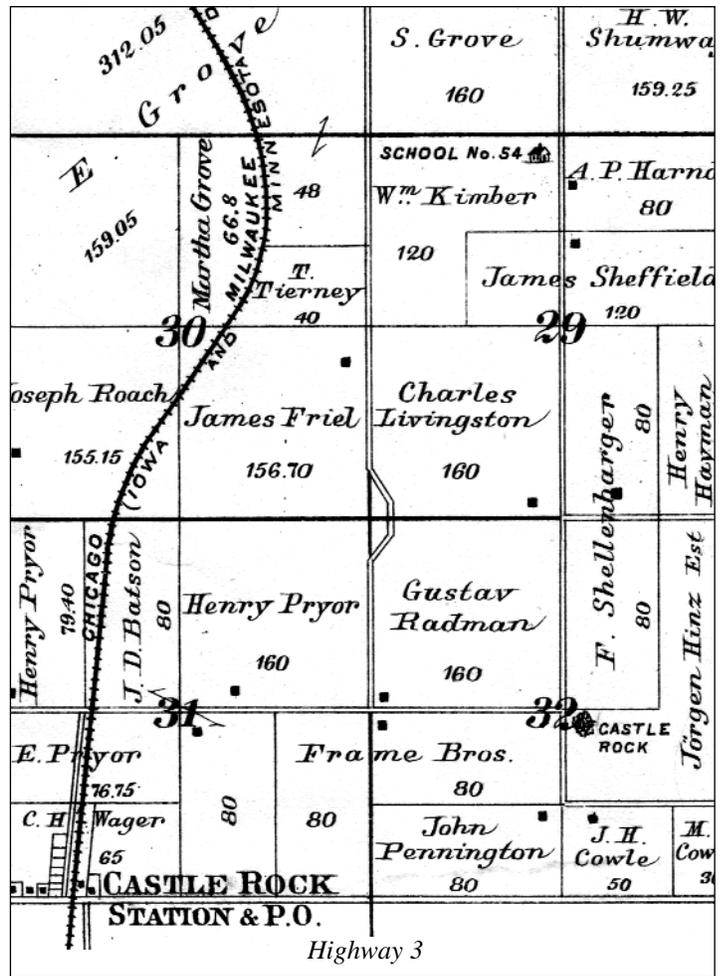
DCHS President Gordon Sayers and Curator Al Smeby pay a visit to Castle Rock in 1972.

of the founders of the historical society in 1939, visited the remains of the famed landmark. “What we found was a bit disappointing,” wrote Smeby, “however, since those of you who have seen it recently know, there is no longer much of anything left resembling a ‘castle.’ The elements have taken their toll, leaving only a large sprawling base of sandstone and a small portion of the original ‘castle.’”¹⁴

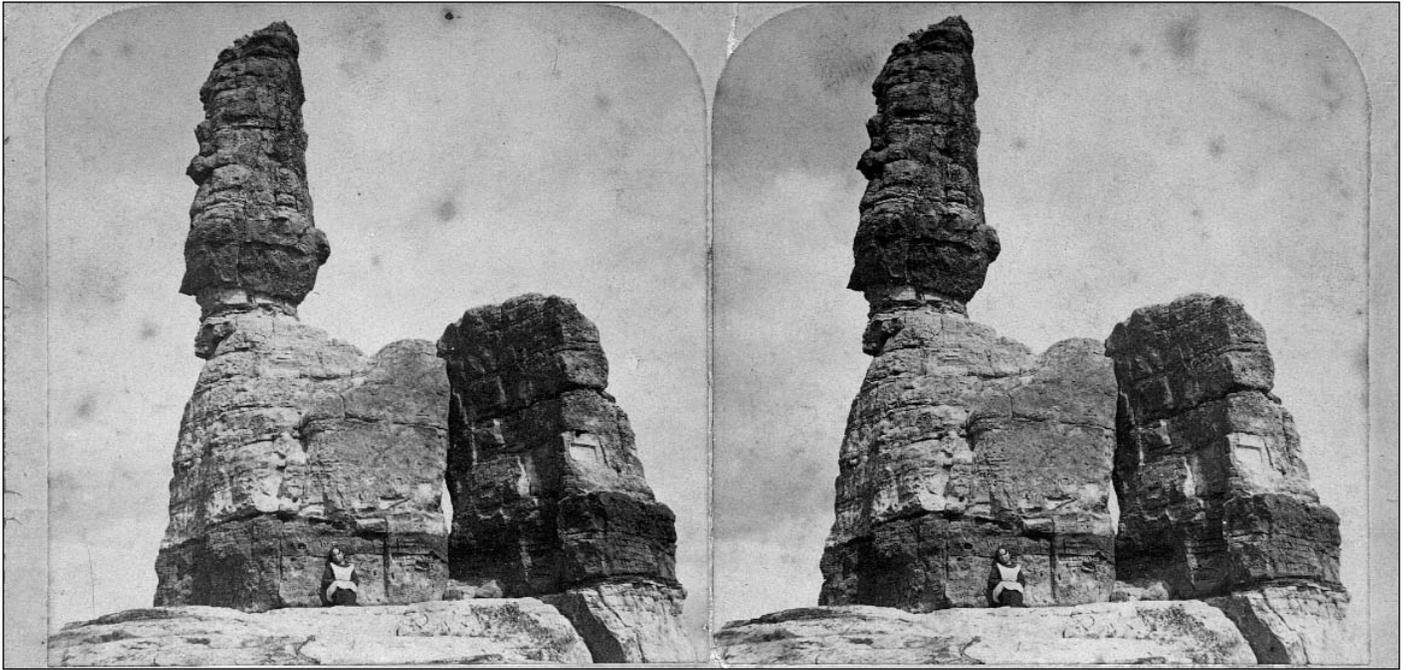
As the years passed, the owner of the property blocked access to the rock formation. Despite thousands of people passing nearby the rock not far from Highway 3 north of Castle Gardens, no signage was erected directing the curious to its location. Only those having a longing to see what remained and the occasional hunter and trapper ventured to the remnant of the once venerated site. Most people agreed that vandalism, neglect, and the elements destroyed the rock formation. There were some, however, that believed that the Dakota god INYAN, the source of all things and the ancestor of all gods, destroyed Castle Rock. The people who worshiped INYAN no longer lived and hunted on the land to venerate the ancient site. The new inhabitants of the land showed no reverence to his creation. Few took notice of the sound of the thunder, the voice of the Thunder Beings in the sky the night of Saturday, September 28, 1895. INYAN, with his companion god, WAKINYAN, the Thunder Bird, joined together and with their thunder voice beckoned TATE TOPA, the four winds,

controllers of the weather, directions, and messengers of the gods, to do their bidding – to release the spirit of INYAN BOSDATA, the white rock-standing-on-end, and return it to the earth from which it came.

Carpenter may have been incorrect in his belief that when the white sandstone spire fell, was crushed, and destroyed, “the cold winds gave a shriek of victory.” The shriek of victory was merely the wailing of the four winds. He was correct in believing that Castle Rock would become “an unsightly sand rock, which will continue to be worn away by time ... and ages hence, if the world lasts, some one may wonder why that part of the field is filled with such fine and beautiful sand.” For those of our generation who wonder, the sand, once ancient stone having a spirit, was one time previously a symbol of the greatest force of power in the land.



Castle Rock in section 32, was easily seen from the railroad and from what would become Highway 3.

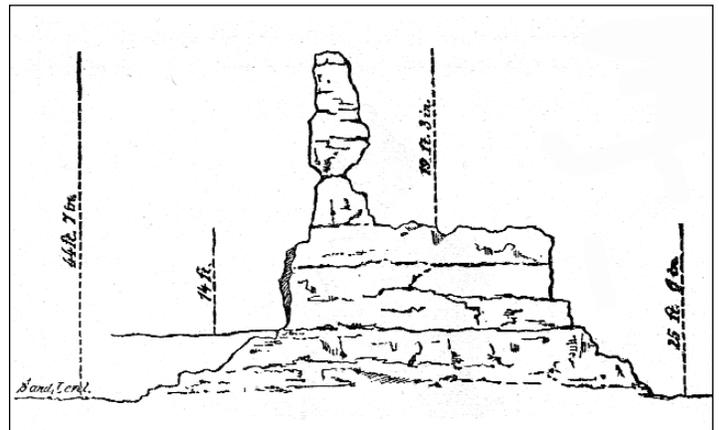


What was INYAN BOSDATA made of?

Since its exploration by Joseph Nicollet in 1838, the St. Peter sandstone formation became an item of scientific research and study. St. Peter sandstone consists of fine quartz grains cemented together by calcite and limonite. Calcite is a crystalline form of natural calcium carbonate, which is the basic component of limestone, marble, and chalk. Limonite is a yellowish-brown natural iron oxide.

In 1873, a geologist drew three figures of Castle Rock from three different directions with height dimensions at various levels. According to the 1883 survey, the color of the rock formation, known as the “castle,” was yellowish-rusty, however, the pinnacle or spire was white. A narrow streak of amethystine red sandstone crossed the “castle” horizontally on the northwest side. Below the amethystine red sandstone was a three-foot layer of yellowish white sand with iron-rust. The base was composed of a red-brick amethystine layered between whitish and rusty sand. Castle Rock was indeed composed of “fine and beautiful sand.”

The geologists noticed that on the weathered surfaces there appeared to be fucoidal markings – fossilized impressions resembling seaweed – and “a porous, worm-eaten structure which has often been named *Scolithus*.” The worm-eaten structure,



This view from the west shows the rock formation forty-four feet and nine inches from the ground level. The irregularly ascending base on the right is eleven feet six inches high. The vertical sides or ‘castle’ are fourteen feet high, and the spire is nineteen feet three inches.

described as “tubes,” were one-eighth to one-fourth inch in diameter, and seen in nearly all parts of the rock especially on the northeast side. The “tubes” were fossil burrows of the marine worm *Scolithus linearis* which was characteristic of the Cambrian period.

The spire was described as “bedded sandstone about four feet in diameter which rises above the general mass nineteen feet and three inches.” The rock formation was the result of the two glacial periods that covered Dakota County.¹⁵



What Does INYAN BOSDATA Appear Like Today?

Visitors have unrestricted access to the rock formation. For the first-time visitor, what remains of Castle Rock is still impressive. The last piece of the “castle” is continuing to be vandalized. Modern graffiti is cut deeper into the rock formation compared to the defacement of the past. Holes of various sizes have been dug into the yellowish-rusty sand on the west side of the castle and there is a large hole in the white sandstone of the base on the east side. Rivulets of white, yellow, and deep red sand, mixed with broken pieces of clear and colored glass cascade down the base. The area is littered with garbage, spent shotgun shells, broken clay targets, and shattered beer bottles. A fire pit chars the light gray sand near the base and tire tracks of an all-terrain vehicle are seen all about.

The forest also encroaches. Young oak trees grow within feet of the rock formation. Acorns abound and wild turkey, red squirrel, and deer tracks are clearly seen in the soft sand. Lichens cover the graffiti on the north face of the “castle” and moss, shaded by the “castle,” blankets the cool rock outcropping of the lower base on the east side.

Endnotes

1. *Northfield Independent* November 20, 1930.
2. Paul Durand, *Where the Waters Gather and the Rivers Meet, An Atlas of the Eastern Sioux*, 1994, p. 94.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
5. *Ibid.*
6. The “half-breed” employee of Henry Sibley named Milor served as the guide for the British trained geologist George W. Featherstonhaugh’s 1835 expedition that was commissioned by the federal government. Milor would know the name INYAN BOSDATA as *Le Grand Gres*. Featherstonhaugh never saw the rock formation, however a traveler made a sketch of Castle Rock that was included in Featherstonhaugh’s 1847 book *A Canoe Voyage up the Minnay Sotor*. The sketch and Milor’s name for Castle Rock is found on page 290 of the book.
7. Stephen H. Long’s 1817 expedition was a voyage of reconnaissance to determine the merits of the location of the future sites of what would become Fort St. Anthony, later renamed Fort Snelling. The War of 1812 had prevented the government from sponsoring military expeditions to the Northwest. In 1819, Lieutenant Colonel Henry Leavenworth arrived with a detachment of men to begin the construction of the fort.
8. *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peters River, Lake Winnepeek, Lake of the Woods, etc., Performed in the Year 1823, by order of the Hon. J. C. Calhoun, Secretary of War, Under the Command of Stephen H. Long, U.S.T.E*; Compiled from the notes of Major Long, Messers. Say, Keating, & Colhoun. pp. 271-272
9. Newton H. Winchell, *The Geology of Minnesota Vol. II* 882 - 1885, p. 77.
10. *Northfield Independent*, October 3, 1895
11. *Dakota County Tribune*, December 2, 1938.
12. *Dakota County Tribune*, August 8, 1963
13. *Ibid.*
14. Dakota County Historical Society, *Over the Years*, April 1974, p. 291.
15. A brief but interesting description of the creation of Castle Rock is given in the *History of Dakota and Goodhue Counties Vol. I*, pages 8 and 9.