

PIPESTONE, MINNESOTA

a sacred native american quarry

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Joe's Quarry, Pipestone; photo, Cetta Kenney

Stone pipes were long treasured by the prehistoric peoples of North America. Pipes from two thousand years ago have, for example, been discovered in present day Ohio.

Since 1200 CE (and even as early as 900 CE) American Indians quarried the beds of red colored claystone and shale in the general vicinity of what is today Pipestone National Monument in Minnesota. The clay stone – a mass of compressed limestone found in a clay deposit – is soft and easily carved, due to its peculiar composition. Native Americans have long used it in the making of ceremonial pipes, an integral part of their religious and civic ceremonies. As a consequence, the rock is commonly called “pipestone” Its color ranges from mottled pink to brick red.

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The story of this red stone and the pipes made from it spans four centuries of Plains Indian life. Pipes figured prominently in the ways of the village and inter-tribal relations, inseparable from the traditions that structured village and tribal life and the engagement with the spirit world.

At an ancient time the Great Spirit, in the form of a large bird, stood upon the wall of rock and called all the tribes around him, and breaking out a piece of the red stone formed it into a pipe and smoked it, the smoke rolling over the multitude. He then told his red children that the red stone was their flesh, that they were made from it, that they must all smoke to him through it, that they must use it for nothing but pipes: and as it belonged to all the tribes, the ground was sacred, and no weapons must be used or brought upon it.

Sioux account of the origin of the pipestone, as recorded by George Catlin in 1836

This is one of many variations on the story of how pipestone came to the tribes of the Great Plains Indians—Sioux, Crow, Blackfeet, Arapahoe, Pawnee, Kiowa, and many others. Pipes sculpted from the quarries were sacred. Countless tales highlight the cultural sacredness of the pipestone region to American Indians and illustrate the geographical extent to which the red stone and the pipes were traded.

All the meanings of moral duty, ethics, religious and spiritual conceptions were symbolized in the pipe. It signified brotherhood, peace, and the perfection of Wakan Tanka, and to the Lakota the pipe stood for that which the Bible, church, state, and flag, all combined, represented to the mind of the white man.

Land of the Spotted Eagle, 1933 Chief Standing Bear

Ceremonial smoking was a vital ritual in many of the activities of the Plains peoples. It sacralized warfare, trading goods and hostages, ritual dances, and medicine ceremonies. Bowls, stems and tobacco were stored in animal-skin pouches or in bundles with other sacred objects. Ashes were disposed of only in preordained sacred places. Ornamental pipes were often among the valued possessions buried with the





Tracy insert Calumets; photo, courtesy, University of Missouri



Pipe workshop; photo, Cetta Kenney

dead. There were as many variations in pipe design as there were makers. By the time George Catlin arrived at Pipestone quarry in 1836, the simple tubes of earlier times had evolved into human and animal effigies. Perhaps the most popular pipe form was the T-shaped calumet. Calumets became widely known as “peace pipes” as they were the varieties whites usually encountered at treaty ceremonies.

Digging at the Minnesota Pipestone quarry probably began in the 1600s, coinciding with the acquisition of metal tools from European traders. By all accounts this location came to be the preferred source of pipestone among the Plains tribes. By about 1700 the Dakota Sioux controlled the quarries and distributed the stone only through trade.

By tradition, the quarries were peaceful, neutral ground. The legends of the region inspired Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to write (in 1855) his famous poem “The Song of Hiawatha”, an American retelling of the Sioux legend of the creation of the peace pipe.

*On the Mountains of the Prairie,
On the great Red Pipe-stone Quarry,
Gitche Manito, the mighty,
He the Master of Life, descending,
On the red crags of the quarry
Stood erect, and called the nations,
Called the tribes together.*

*And in silence all the warriors
Broke the stone of the quarry
Smoothed and formed it into Peace-Pipes...*

As America expanded westward in the 1800s, pipes found their way into white society. They became a source of income for their makers. Pipes made for sale lost

their religious significance. Settlers arrived and started to quarry the rock. In 1858 a treaty was signed with the Yankton Dakota Sioux to protect the quarry area and reserve its use for the Indians. American settlers ignored the treaty and tried to claim the lucrative spot for themselves. They dug the sacred stone for the construction of buildings in St. Paul, Minneapolis, Duluth, and many other cities of the West. Ownership issues involving the Pipestone quarry were in the courts for years. In 1928 the Yankton Sioux, now resettled on a reservation 150 miles away, sold their claim to the federal government. In 1937 Pipestone National monument was signed into existence and opened to the public with quarrying privileges restricted to Indians. Today, a government-administered lottery system apportions tribal access to the quarry. It's an ironic turn of events: federal protection for a native sacred site. Tragically, Pipestone is one of far too few examples of such beneficence.

Near the quarry's entrance, three huge boulders known as the Three Sisters are revered as the guardians of the sacred quarry.

