

LEIF ERIKSON OF THE SAGAS

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III. Leif Erikson's Vinland

WHEN men of New England came to realize vividly that Leif Erikson had discovered their country, had built a house on their soil and spent a winter there, followed by members of his family immediately and by members of his race for centuries, that he was ours as Columbus was, they were deeply moved and proceeded to express their enthusiasm for this heroic past in such a way that the world and future generations might know. Their first interest had been enlisted some forty years before and had died down for lack of nourishing, but in 1876 it was revived and brought to fruition in the Monument which they erected to Leif Erikson in Boston, on Commonwealth Avenue, by public subscription. At just that time the enthusiasm for Ole Bull, the great Norwegian violinist, was at its height, and the two enthusiasms were so closely united and related that it would be hard to decide whether the great Discoverer or the great Violinist of the North were the more honored in that observance. Even in the heroic statue which crowns the shaft this question rises, for the sculptor used Ole Bull as the model of the statue of Leif Erikson.

Be the answer what it may to these questions, that relation between the two is another story, a very beautiful story in which Boston, and New England, are revealed in one of the highest and happiest moods and a circle of their distinguished men are seen to great advantage—Longfellow, more than any other in the locality, had opened the way for the adventure, and Edward Everett Hale had moved the formation of the Committee, the Norsemen Memorial Committee of New England, to take the raising of funds in charge for the erection of a fit Monument.

It was a very distinguished Committee, but that, also, belongs

to the other story, except the fact that one of its members was Professor Eben Norton Horsford, who is the hero of this particular story because he undertook the search for Leif Erikson's Vinland and made some most interesting discoveries, which will be recounted here.

When Professor Horsford served on the Norsemen Memorial Committee in 1876, he became so thoroughly interested in evidences that the Norsemen had been in New England that he took up this subject as a Quest and spared no effort or expense in following trails in his study to the end. A chemist by profession, the Professor of Chemistry in Harvard University, he became expert in the history of the Norsemen both before and after they discovered America, and in his search for Leif Erikson's Vinland he developed into a keen archaeologist.

In preparation for his investigations, Professor Horsford studied the Sagas and all other literature that he could obtain bearing on the subject of the Northmen, their history, their habits, their customs, their architecture, and the like, as well as what pertained to the American past, including accounts of the French Voyageurs who used to visit the New England Coast. Nothing that might have a bearing on the subject was foreign to him, and he even went to the length of engaging a scholar from Iceland to come to this country and assist him in translations and in covering the whole ground. Then he applied this knowledge in his search for the spot where Leif Erikson and his men made their landing, built their house, had spent the winter of 1000-1001, taking the whole field into consideration.

In addition to this expert knowledge of the Norse facts relating to his subject, Professor Horsford had for his equipment an uncommon knowledge of the Indian language, life, and affairs, for his father had been a missionary among the Indians and had known their language so well that he translated a part of the Bible into the Indian tongue. It was his knowledge of the Indian language which enabled him, as will be seen, to solve incidentally one of the questions that had long vexed historians, the question of Norumbega, which had been considered previously only in connection with the Voyageurs but now proved to be related to the Norsemen also. As used by the French Voyageurs in the 16th Century, the name *Norumbega* applied to a place that they visited at the head waters of a river, which river they also called the Norumbega. Early his-

torians had been agreed that the Norumbega was the Penobscot River, in Maine, and later historians had come to believe that it was the Hudson River.

Professor Horsford proceeded to investigate the head waters of all of the larger rivers that enter the Atlantic Ocean, trying to identify the physical features that were mentioned in the Saga, where it is told that Leif Erikson (1) sailed into a Bay, (2) then entered a River, (3) crossed a Lake, (4) again entered the River above, and navigated it as far as it would float his ship, to its head waters. At that spot he beached his boat and built his house, to shelter his thirty-five men for the winter.

Going over the ground very carefully, Professor Horsford concluded that all of these physical features, (1) Bay, (2) River, (3) Lake, (4) River to head waters, were not found in any of the other rivers entering the Atlantic, but were found in the Charles River, which showed exactly the physical features mentioned, these being identified as (1) Boston Bay, (2) the Charles River between Boston and Cambridge, (3) the Back Bay, (4) and the Charles River up to Gerry's Landing. These were many and distinctive points which corresponded, and there was not one point which failed to correspond with those mentioned in the Saga, therefore the location of Vinland seemed to have been discovered.

But could this be verified by any other process, making assurance doubly sure? Professor Horsford proceeded to investigate a piece of land that he knew of, which lies at the junction of Stony Brook with the Charles River near Waltham, a few miles above Cambridge. At this point there had been, from time immemorial, and before the arrival of the English settlers, a cobblestone pavement of considerable extent, and, on the upper bank of Stony Brook, a stone wall which extended up the stream for a considerable distance. From the first, it had been supposed that these were of Indian origin.

But Professor Horsford knew that Indians had never been known to do such work as this cobblestone pavement and this stone wall showed, and he knew that the Norse people made stone pavements like this to dry their fish on and also that they built stone walls. The Norsemen had valued Vinland for its timber, and this wall was such as they would need in lumbering, to keep the debries from filling Stony Brook when logs were being floated down it into the Charles River, after which there would be no difficulty in float-

ing them. Here, then, were two excellent pieces of objective evidence locating Leif Erikson's Vinland, and here was the very spot where the Norsemen had dried their fish and obtained their supplies of timber.

And now he could unlock the mystery of Norumbega, also, which place had lain at the head waters of a river, as had Leif Erikson's camp. His knowledge of the old Norse language of the Saga and his knowledge of the Indian language enabled him to see that *Norumbega* was an Indian rendering of the name, derived from the Norse form, *Norvegr*, which was the name of *Norway* as spelled in the ancient Sagas. He also saw that this change in form had occurred because the Indians had no *v* in their language and could not pronounce that letter, but would have to substitute a *b* for it. Introducing this *b* with their characteristic mumbling sound, *um*, they would make the name of their visitors *Norumbegr*, the name of the camp and the river becoming *Norumbega*.

Professor Horsford might well have exclaimed, "Eureka!", "I have found it!", for he had solved the double problem of the location of the camp of the Northmen and the stopping place of the Voyageurs, while the name *Norumbega*, as the Voyageurs used it, supplied added proof that the Norsemen's camp had been at this spot. It also supplied an additional fact, that so late as the 16th Century it had been known among the French by the Norsemen's name.

The large tract of land at the mouth of Stony Brook, including the pavement and the stone wall, were now purchased by Professor Horsford and presented as a Park to the people of the State of Massachusetts, the most significant spot being marked with a lofty stone tower, which bears an elaborate inscription telling of the relation of the Norsemen to this place from 1000 to 1347. Inside the tower, a winding stairway leads to the top, where visitors may climb up and look out upon the Vinland of Leif Erikson.

Could any further proof be found, to put seal of finality upon these theories and conclusions? Could the spot where Leif Erikson's house had stood be located? With the instinct of a Schliemann locating a buried Troy, Professor Horsford turned to Gerry's Landing, where there was a treeless Commons that had been used as a Commons in that condition from the arrival of the first English settlers. The spot had never had trees, and no house had

ever been built on it within the memory of living men. It was a very significant fact that it had had no trees *though in a wooded country*; that no house had ever been built on it had not been fully proved.

Here was a case for a Sherlock Holmes, and a Sherlock Holmes Professor Horsford now proved himself to be. First, he engaged experts to examine all records of the locality, to find out whether a house had ever been built on this land since English colonists had settled there. The result was negative. Now he was certain that if investigation brought the foundation of a house to light, it would be that of Leif Erikson, for Indians did not build houses with foundations. He made the investigation. In the sod which overgrew the place he found a raised ridge of land, rectangular in shape, and large enough to provide floorspace for the thirty-five men in Leif Erikson's company. Again, he must have exclaimed, "Eureka!"

Could any other possible test be applied, of an objective nature, to put seal upon seal to his conclusions? Yes; one. From his study of ancient Norse houses, Professor Horsford knew that Leif Erikson's house would have no chimney and no windows, but that it would have an opening in the center of the roof to let in the air and let out the smoke, and that the place for the fire would be located just under this opening, in the central spot of the floor, where diagonal lines from the corners crossed. He therefore reasoned that excavation at this central spot within the raised ridges which marked the foundation wall would bring to light the fireplace built by Leif Erikson for his house, and possibly even traces of his fires. He made ready to excavate.

Professor Horsford was a man of sentiment and deep feeling as well as of penetration and logic, and he decided that the moment of this final test should be heightened by a fitting ceremony. His daughter, Miss Cornelia Horsford, had given him tireless assistance and the keenest sympathy in his former investigations, so he chose her to preside at this discovery, for he had no doubt that it would be a crowning discovery. Accordingly, Miss Cornelia Horsford occupied the seat of honor on the appointed day and directed the workmen where to put in their picks and shovels. In the central spot in the floor, where diagonals crossed, placed in such a way as to hold a fire, they unearthed a cluster of stones. And, among the stones there were still traces of the fires that had been built there . . .

It will be observed that Professor Horsford's discoveries presented a perfect sequence:

(1) The physical features of the Charles River, including Boston Bay, Charles River, Back Bay, and Gerry's Landing satisfied the features mentioned in the Saga exactly, as the features of no other locality did;

(2) The stone pavement and wall at Stony Brook, at a spot that corresponded to that which the Saga told of, were evidence that fish and timber had been cared for in the Norwegian way in that place;

(3) The name *Norumbega*, derived from *Norvegr*, gave evidence from the Indian and the French language of what race had been there;

(4) The raised ridge of sod surrounded by the treeless Commons presented exactly such conditions as would have been shown by the foundation of Leif Erikson's house and the clearing around it, the floorspace being large enough to accommodate Leif Erikson's men;

(5) The fireplace was found in the center of the floorspace and the stones were arranged as the ancient Norsemen would have arranged them, but as later settlers would not.

Professor Horsford wrote out an account of what he had discovered and presented copies of his book to libraries in this country and abroad, thus contributing a worthy chapter to the story of the Norsemen in America. His work was finished about 1890, and to him it had been a great joy.

One of Professor Horsford's days that was particularly happy may serve as an end to this story of his achievements, a day spent in company with a kindred spirit, a day that brought a new confirmation of his conclusion as to the location of Leif Erikson's house. It was that on which Professor Rasmus B. Anderson, of Madison, Wisconsin, visited him, the author of the book *America Not Discovered by Columbus*, in which Leif Erikson was shown as the earlier Discoverer, a fact that had been known, but was not appreciated. This book had aroused great interest in the Seventies, following a course of lectures which Professor Anderson had given in the Sixties, when he had had the great success of winning Ole Bull to an enthusiasm for Leif Erikson. This was an en-

thusiasm which was soon to be awakened in Longfellow, a reverent friend of Ole Bull's, and in the other members of the New England Memorial Committee of 1876, including Professor Horsford, who was to take upon himself the work that has been recounted.

It was Professor Anderson, thus, who had given the initial impulse that ended in the studies of Professor Horsford and the discoveries that these had led to, and it was a Red Letter Day for both when they walked together over the ground of Leif Erikson's Vinland—for they had no doubt that what Professor Horsford had found was Leif Erikson's Vinland. As they stood on the Commons at Gerry's Landing, Professor Horsford said, "Now I will not point out to you just where the house of Leif Erikson stood, but you may make the discovery for yourself." It was not a hard thing to do, for out of the level sod of the Commons rose the well defined rectangular ridge, also grass-grown.

This Commons at Gerry's Landing was public property, owned by Cambridge, so Professor Horsford could not buy it and present it as another State Park, as he had bought the land at Stony Brook and presented it to the people of Massachusetts, but he obtained permission from the authorities to mark the spot suitably, protected it properly by fencing it in, and placed a marker there to tell its history.