

THE MYSTERY OF HISTORY — FEBRUARY 3, 2020

# WHAT'S IT?



Fig. 1 (left): Face view. (right): Side view. PHOTO: © 2020 Norm Frisch

## ARTIFACT 20-01

### SPECIFICATIONS:

Material: Soapstone? and round metal wire.

Slab length = 19.37 cm (7 5/8 in), width at holes = 14.92 cm (5 7/8 in),  
thickness = 23.81 mm (15/16 in).

Overall length with wire = 24.92 cm (9 13/16 in),  
overall width of wire = 17.94 cm (7 1/16 in).

Hole diameter = 6.35 mm (1/4 in). Wire diameter = 3.97 mm (5/32 in)

Weight = 2.118 kg (4.67 lb)

*continued...*

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**WHAT'S IT?****ARTIFACT 20-01****CLUES / QUESTIONS:**

This is an artifact that your tactile sense, touch, may come in very handy! As you examine the object with your hands, what do you notice about the feel? This stone artifact has a quality that most stones do not have and this quality is what made—and makes—it useful. Notice I used the present tense, “makes it useful”. Even though this artifact is considered an antique, there are companies that recently started making these again because of the special quality of this stone. It is a hot new item for distributors like Amazon—and you have just been given a clue! When this stone is crushed, it has another entirely different use. Most children have had this crushed stone on their bodies at sometime in their early life. You have probably had this on your own body! So your two clues are; it’s a hot new product on Amazon, and in crushed form, this stone has been on nearly everyone’s body—happy guessing!

**ANSWERS ARE ON THE FOLLOWING PAGE !**

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**WHAT'S IT?****ARTIFACT 20-01****ANSWER:****Soapstone and its uses!**

Did you put a good feel on the artifact? If it felt greasy it should. Soapstone is what the artifact is made of and it was used as a bedwarmer for those cold winter nights. It could also be used as a footwarmer, a heat source to put under your blanket for outdoor horse and buggy travel, and anything else that would require heat for comfort. The stone would be placed next to the fire place/woodstove to absorb heat. A unique property of soapstone is that it gives off the stored heat slowly - most other types of stone are not able to store heat efficiently and/or give up whatever heat is stored quickly.

Other names for soapstone are steatite, soaprock, and talc-schist. It is one of the softest metamorphic rocks on Moh's Scale of Hardness - most metamorphic rocks (rocks changed by extreme heat and pressure)

are very hard. Besides its ability to hold heat, soapstone can be crushed and ground into a very fine powder that most people have had on their body's multiple times during their life. In this form it is known as talc or baby powder. It's smooth soapy texture and ability to absorb moisture make it a great addition to a baby's diaper in case they have an "accident". Many people put it in their shoes to absorb moisture and malodorous fumes caused by sweat.

Beyond these practical uses, soapstone has been used for carving figures for thousands of years. It comes in several different colors and is still mined today in various places including nearby Vermont. Take a look at some of the images of soapstone on your browser - the carvings are beautiful! You can also purchase these bedwarmers that are still manufactured in Vermont. Stay warm!

**GUESSES:**

**Ron Wood**, "Cutting board."

**Michelle Rath**, "Talc. Sharpening knives. To make powder."

**Delilah Thomas**, "I think it is a scribe block, used in ancient times for scribes to write, or document things. It was [used for] the first form of writing."

GUESSERS: Thanks for your patience in posting you guesses. If these had not been uncertain times We are sure there would have been more guesses. While some guesses were not what we were looking for, they are definitely plausible. [—Ed.]

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**WHAT'S IT?****BACKGROUND**

“WHAT’S IT?” has been a feature of the BCM website since its inception in 2007. In 2017 Brockport Community Museum board member Archer “Buck” Noble, a Brockport Central School District teacher (now retired) developed “The Mystery of History” school project that encouraged fourth and fifth grade students to use observational and investigative techniques to help determine the type and use of different historic artifacts.

That project was introduced to the general public during a Brockport Community Museum outreach presence at the 2017 Brockport Sidewalk Sale. That success led to this collaboration between the Brockport Community Museum, Seymour Library and Brockport Central School District.

**GET INVOLVED**

- **Take your best guess** regarding the current artifact.
- **Do you have an artifact** you would like to know more about? Open your query to a larger audience.
- **Have a suggestion** about how we can improve this project?

**If so...**

Leave your contact information in “Ye old prediction box” near the exhibit display.

**CREDITS**

*Museum project committee*

Archer “Buck” Noble

Norman Frisch

*Seymour Library*

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