

DETERIORATION OF THE WRITTEN ROCK POLISSOIR, CLEAR CREEK, FAIRFIELD COUNTY, OHIO

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A chance trip up the valley of Clear Creek, an area now in large part owned by the Columbus Metroparks System, prompted a stop at the Written Rock rockshelter and examination of the Written Rock *polissoir*, once one of the best preserved examples of this form of rock "art" in the state and, I think, the first described (Murphy 1975: 319-320), although a number have been described since (e.g., Dunn 1990; Long 1983; Mortine and Randles 1994).

I had not seen the *polissoir* for 25 years and was dismayed at the change (cf. Figs. 3, 4). The rock, which sits in front of the shelter, is immediately adjacent to a now-paved township road, providing ready access to park visitors (Fig. 1).

The first thought was that if weathering can virtually destroy these artifacts in 25 years, how could they be prehistoric? But examination of the rock cliff, which has been equally exposed to the weather, reveals perfectly legible rock carvings dating to 1905 and 1875, without any major trace of wear. The weathered stone, however, is so friable, that it would take little effort to wear these away. Although some of the deterioration of the rock is undoubtedly due to natural weathering of the friable Black Hand sandstone, it is evident that the bulk of the damage has been due to recent abuse of the site, presumably by people climbing on and rubbing the rock. Since the site has been in the custody of Columbus Metroparks System for only a fraction of those 25 years, it would be unfair to throw the onus of this destruction on it; but incorporation into the park has undoubtedly increased traffic and activity at the site.

A similar, if less dramatic situation was encountered recently during a Phase I survey of Ansel's Cave, in The West Woods, part of the Geauga Park District in northeastern Ohio (Murphy 1999). Here, scores of historic graffiti had survived among the rock ledges that have long been a popular picnic site as well as scene in the historical novel *Ansel's Cave* by Albert G. Riddle. A *polissoir* consisting of a series of narrow, groove-like incised lines was discovered during the course of the survey (Murphy 1999) but had been recently damaged by some visitor or visitors deciding to trace the grooves with a stick or other sharp object (Fig. 5). The fragility of these artifacts clearly is belied by the massive stones on which they are often found.

It is not clear what could be done to preserve the Written Rocks site, including the *polissoir*, for, short of a chain link fence it

would be difficult to prevent people from walking all over the site. And destruction of the *polissoir* does not mean that there is no archaeological potential left at the site. Murphy (1976, 1989) and Carskadden (1969) both reported significant Late Woodland artifact material found in limited testing. Its location adjacent to a frequent roadway probably prevents looting of the remnants of this site, at the same time that it renders more likely the complete destruction of the Written Rock *polissoir*.

Moral of the story: Putting something in a park does not necessarily mean that it will be preserved.

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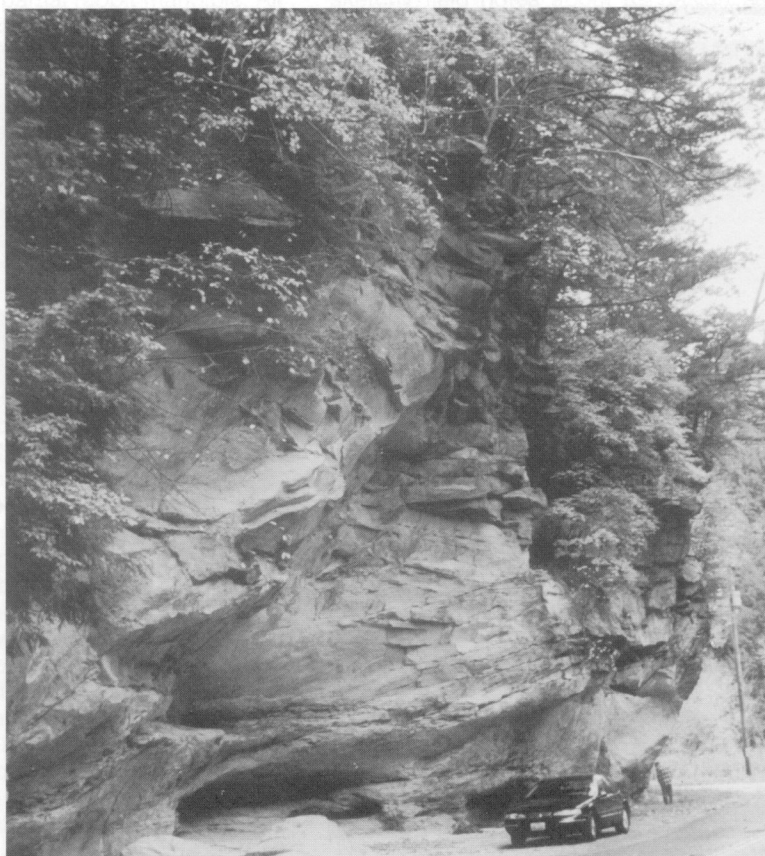


Figure 1 View of the Written Rock Shelter, looking east.



Figure 2 Interior of shelter, with polissoir at lower left.

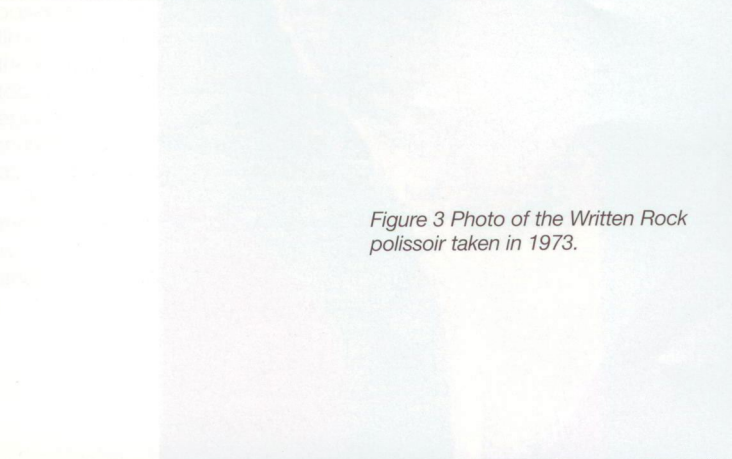


Figure 3 Photo of the Written Rock polissoir taken in 1973.



Figure 4 Remnants of the Written Rock polissoir as it appears today.

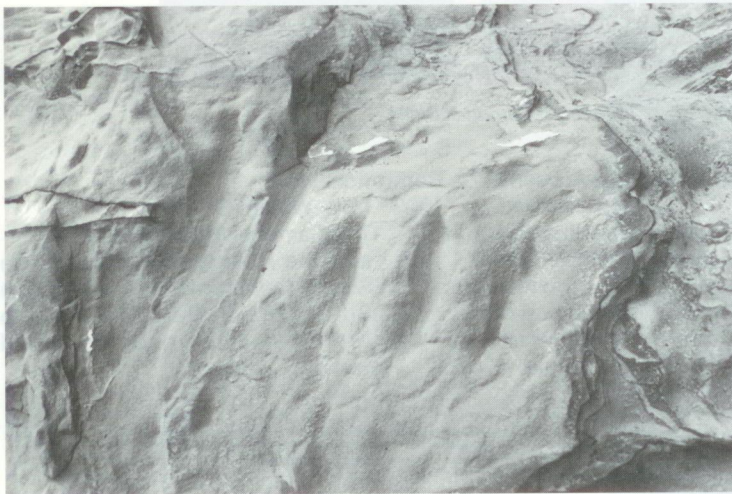


Figure 5 The Ansel's Cave polissoir, The West Woods, Geauga Co. Metric tape extended to 40 cm.

