Orange County Mastodons

Presentation by Joseph Devine
Orange County History Conference
Albert Wisner Public Library ~Warwick, NY
2011
The 1801 Mastodon Discovery by Charles Willson Peale

How did the discovery of this magnificent creature affect the world of politics, science and culture in a young United States of America?
Eighteenth Century Finds – Large bones of an unknown animal

Referred to as the mammoth (large) or incognitum (unknown)
Compte de Buffon (1707-1788), French Naturalist

Theory of American Degeneracy
Portrait of George Washington 1732-1799

By Charles Willson Peale

Visited the Hamptonburgh farm of the Reverend Robert Annan in 1780 and in 1782 to view bones.
Throughout the 1790s, Orange County farmers unearthed huge bones while digging for marl, a gooey substance that acted to enrich the farmer’s fields. When these discoveries were reported to the APS in 1800, Thomas Jefferson launched a series of actions to recover a complete skeleton of this huge animal, unknown at the time.
Charles Willson Peale  1741-1827

Famed portrait artist of the Founding Fathers, turned scientist
Peale’s first Orange County excavation was at the farm of John Masten in the Town of Newburgh where he erected the giant wheel to drain the water from the morass as shown in this Peale 1808 painting of the dig.
Peale’s second Orange County excavation was at the farm of Capt. Joseph Barber, located right across the road from where we are right now.

The Year 2006 huge 9x12 foot oil on canvas mural of this event was painted by Montgomery artist and columnist Shawn Dell Joyce. This fantastic mural is on display in the lobby of the Montgomery Town Hall.
A close up view of Shawn’s mural shows a young boy sitting on a platform and watching the whole story unfold. That young boy was Samuel Eager who would later become a lawyer and Orange County’s first historian. Eager wrote about his 1801 experience, 46 years later.
At the third site in Crawford, Peale secured the prized lower jaw and other bones. In all, Peale had enough bones for two fully articulated skeletons of a prehistoric animal, the first in recorded history.

The 1801 Orange County discovery shook the worlds of culture, science and politics, both here and in Europe, where Buffon’s theories were fading fast.
MAMMOTH CHEESE

- 4 feet across
- 18 inches tall
- 1,200 pounds
- 900 cows
The mastodon, known at the time as the mammoth, became America’s first true national icon. President Jefferson, always fighting with the Federalists, was emboldened to begin negotiations with Napoleon for the Louisiana Purchase. Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark westward to find mammoths, dead or alive.
NYS Mastodon map - pealemuseumofdiscovery.com
The Mastodons of Orange County
New York

pealemuseumofdiscovery.com
A descriptive account of the historical exhumations of mastodons in Orange County, New York where more of these fine creatures has been found than anywhere else in America.

The remains of these remarkable Ice Age mammoths were recovered and preserved by extraordinary individuals who contributed greatly to the advancement of science. As this publication illustrates, many of these exhumations were also significant in American History.

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