



**Cornelia Horsford (1861–1944), c. 1880**

Courtesy of the Sylvester Manor Archive, NYU Special Collections.

# Cornelia Horsford and the Adventures of Leif Erikson: Viking Settlements in the Bay State

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**Abstract:** *By the nineteenth century, an extensive body of literature had appeared arguing that Norse explorers (exemplified by Leif Erikson) had arrived in North America centuries before Christopher Columbus and thus are the “true” discoverers of America.<sup>1</sup> One of the most ambitious of these authors was Harvard chemist Eben Norton Horsford, who wrote a number of lavishly produced tomes on the subject. What is less well known is the work of his daughter Cornelia (“Nellie”) Horsford. Her father’s assistant and closest ally, Cornelia can be seen as part of the realm of female nineteenth-century American archaeologists. With no formal training, Nellie Horsford, because of her Boston Brahmin pedigree, gained entrée into the world of professional archaeologists in ways her university-trained female contemporaries rarely received. Her attempt to prove the Viking theory of American discovery was driven in large part by her desire to support her father’s work.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Brian Regal is an Associate Professor of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine at Kean University.*

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Cornelia (“Nellie”) Horsford’s career must be understood in light of her father’s. Eben Norton Horsford (1818-1893) was a professor of chemistry at Harvard and studied at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts

and then in Germany under the chemist Justus Liebig. He gained a fortune by reformulating and improving the existing formula for baking powder, inventing condensed milk, and acquiring a host of other chemical and food-related patents. He married into the well-connected Gardiner family, produced a house full of children, and took his place within Boston's elite.<sup>3</sup>

In 1856 he founded the Rumford Chemical Works to continue his research. Eventually he left Harvard to run the company full time. He purchased a grand house on Craigie Street in Cambridge and also took possession of a considerable estate on Shelter Island (on the far eastern end of Long Island near Sag Harbor, New York). He was close to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow as well as the Norwegian musician and social gadfly Olé Bull (1810-1880). Later in life he developed a powerful interest as an amateur historian, investigating the question of whether or not the Vikings—or Norse, as he preferred—discovered America centuries before Christopher Columbus.<sup>4</sup>

Olé Bull was a Norwegian violinist of world renown. In 1867 he came to America on the first of many concert tours. While in Wisconsin, he met a young scholar of Scandinavian history and literature, Rasmus B. Anderson (1846-1936), who took a leading role in promoting the claim that Leif Erikson discovered America and that Scandinavians had a profound right to be in America as full-fledged citizens. This meeting of like-minded individuals catalyzed the wider interest in the Norse issue in America.

By the later 1870s, influenced by Rasmus Anderson, Olé Bull, and others, Horsford devoted more and more time to proving the Norse Theory and less and less to running his company or doing chemical research. Pouring over the Vinland Sagas (a collection of Norse stories supposedly dating back to the time of Leif Erikson in the early second



**Eben Horsford**

millennium), rare books, and maps, Horsford became convinced he had made several discoveries. He believed he had found evidence that not only had Norse explorers discovered North America in the 980s CE, but that Leif Erikson had built a homestead on the Charles River. In addition Horsford claimed he had discovered the site of the lost city of Norumbega close by and that it had been built by the Norse. Luckily all this was located not very far from his own home in Cambridge. He wrote a series of books, including *The Defenses of Norumbega* (1891) and *Leif's House in Vinland* (1893), outlining in detail how he found what he argued were the sites of these historic and important locations.

Horsford spent years quietly amassing what he considered to be irrefutable evidence of his assertions. When he went to the locations his studies suggested would reveal physical evidence of a Norse presence, he found "ruins." These he claimed vindicated his claims. Professional historians and archaeologists, however, counter argued that what he found were the remains of common colonial European building sites, not ancient Norse ones. Horsford spent the rest of his life trying to convince the scholarly community he was right.

Horsford believed absolutely in the notion that Leif Erikson had discovered America. He loved to tell audiences and readers in breathy, exuberant prose that he had discovered these sites because he had tracked them down by the use of the scientific method: "In 1889 I treated the chief results at which I had arrived as fulfilments of predictions which I had not hesitated to make, in the light of legitimate scientific deduction, from the Vineland [sic] Sagas."<sup>5</sup> Through all this research, he had the constant companion of his youngest daughter, Cornelia.

Eben Norton Horsford's belief that Leif Erikson discovered America was so complete and overwhelming he inspired his daughter to believe it just as thoroughly. Nellie was the one to carry on his work. She began to assist her father while she was still in her teens and continued long past his death. She believed passionately that "Boston Back Bay is the Vinland of the Flatey Book!"<sup>6</sup> In her mind's eye, Nellie Horsford could smell the waves and feel the salt tang as the Viking ships pulled hard for Vinland. She imagined Leif, virile and strong, standing proudly in the prow of his ship, the ocean propelling them on while the lands and fields beckoned them like sirens. This was the Horsford fantasy. If only they could find adequate evidence to support it.

## NELLIE HORSFORD: CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

Cornelia "Nellie" Conway Felton Horsford (1861-1944) was Eben Norton Horsford's youngest child. As the only child he had with his

second wife, Phoebe Gardiner (who was herself the sister of his first wife, Mary Gardiner), Nellie grew up in what was left of the world of the Boston Brahmins. The city was becoming more energetically ethnic with a growing population of Italians and especially Irish (most of whom were Catholic). Their brash loudness was in sharp contrast to the more staid Protestant culture which had dominated the town's society since the earliest days of European colonization. Nellie did not go to college.<sup>7</sup> Although she inherited some of the more scientific leanings of her father, she was at heart a poet and artist. She loved music and drawing, and filled her diaries and notebooks with original writings and sketches. She enjoyed performing for the family as a child, even having a special collection of "acting clothes." Later in life she designed book plates for various authors.

From a young age, Nellie exhibited a mature, intellectual, creative character. She combined a "take-charge woman of influence" attitude with a romantic and artistic soul that was somewhat out of character for her peers. Brought up amongst elegant, beautiful girls vying for husbands of wealth and position, she was less Edith Wharton's May Welland and more Jane Austin's thoughtful and self-assured Lizzy Bennett. She was always close to her father. As a child she precociously wrote out her last will and testament. In it she left all her possessions to him, including "all my money to do what he likes with."<sup>8</sup>

He would always be the most important man in her life.

As a youngster, Cornelia kept a diary. Besides observations of everyday life, she often wrote herself inspirational notes. "I got up early this morning," she says at the age of fourteen in an entry for September 7, 1875, "to start my new habit and try and become better." Her penmanship was flawless, going on for pages without a mistake or edit. She had inner dialogues in which she exhorted herself to improve. "Try Cornelia, the wild waves ask you, the pure fall



**The Horsford Sisters**

flowers ask you, the wind that sways the trees asks you to be loyal, noble, true, generous, and brave.” Throughout her life, she consciously told herself to be a good person, to read, and to improve. “I must study hard and not fail!” When she felt she had become too aloof or elitist, she reminded herself to stay grounded in good works. “I must go back to the poor, to the brave.”<sup>9</sup> She wrote herself long, poetic passages about her view of the world:

Do not stop or listless ponder  
Whether all of this is true  
Do not hesitate in wonder  
Which will be the best to do<sup>10</sup>

It is no wonder she wholeheartedly embraced her father’s Norse obsession. As a teenager, she met Olé Bull and listened to him play his music and weave his fantasies about Vikings numerous times. She listened to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow recite “The Song of Hiawatha” and the “Skeleton in Armor” in his living room and then again in her own home. It inspired her to think “I wished I might find a skeleton in armor.”<sup>11</sup>

She had helped her father research the past and collate evidence. The idea that Norse adventurers had come to America well in advance of Columbus—battling terrible seas and land-based privations to conquer a new world—was an emotional, romantic story that suited her well.

By her early twenties, the beautiful Nellie had been attracting the attentions of the sons of Boston’s best families. Other young women her age found the attention exciting, but not Nellie. She found the sons of Boston to be decidedly unappealing.



**Cornelia Horsford**

(c. 1880s)

Mothers were continually trying to set her up with their sons and nephews. She told her own mother “Mrs. Cushing has a cousin who makes me feel as if I could lose my senses if he came one step closer.”<sup>12</sup> She enjoyed the summer party circuit but found the men unbearable. Concerning her attending a particular soiree, she complained, “I hear Phoenix Remsen has said he intends to spend the evening with me and he is almost never sober.”<sup>13</sup>

One of her more persistent suitors was Louis Dyer (1851-1908). An assistant professor of Greek art at Harvard, Dyer became smitten with Nellie after meeting her through her father. Born in Chicago, he attended Harvard (then Baliol) College, Oxford. He could trace his ancestry to William Dyer, the first clerk of Rhode Island. Ten years her senior, Dyer tried vainly to get Nellie interested in him, but to no avail. He even managed to get invited to stay with the Horsfords briefly at their Craigie Street home the summer of 1886, though Nellie was mostly not there.<sup>14</sup> At a loss, he tried everything including the age-old tactic of approaching her mother to get to Nellie. “I posted a love letter to Miss Cornelia,” he told Mrs. Phoebe Gardiner Horsford, “in which I opened my heart to her.” It did not go well. “I fully see,” he continued, “how wretched and inexcusable it was.”<sup>15</sup> Nellie responded to the professor’s overtures with indifference. He continued to pursue her like a love-struck teen for several years until he left the country to go back to Oxford to acquire a master’s degree. He went on to become a well-known author, translator of Plato, and lecturer on Greek art and civilization, but he never achieved the relationship with Nellie he dreamed of. She was dreaming of something else. To Nellie, the tales of the lives of the Norse explorers read “like a story from the Arabian Nights.”<sup>16</sup> Dyer had no idea, nor did any of the young Boston gentlemen, that he had been competing with a heavily armed Viking in search of new lands and adventures.

Because of her father’s celebrity, Cornelia hobnobbed with the literati of Boston society. She and her family regularly appeared in the society sections of the big city newspapers from Boston to Los Angeles. In addition to the Longfellows, she knew the historian George Bancroft and head of the Bureau of American Ethnology, J. W. Powell. This allowed her a much easier entry to the world of New England scholarship. Despite her total lack of academic training, her connections allowed her to contact prominent historians and archaeologists in America and abroad and give papers at prestigious conferences, including one at Columbia University and in London.<sup>17</sup>

### **EBEN NORTON HORSFORD'S DEATH (1893)**

By the early 1890s, Eben Norton Horsford believed with great confidence that he had proven the Norse had discovered America and founded the city of Norumbega. He was troubled, however, that he had not been able to convince the world of professional history or archaeology. Now in his mid-70s and in ill health, he was beginning to decline. By the holidays of 1892, his body had given out. As he lay dying in his bed at home on New Year's Day 1893, he held his daughter Nellie's hand. She was his youngest, and she was the one who would carry on his legacy—not in science, but in the story of Leif Erikson. He had plenty of students to continue his chemical work, and though she would eventually inherit most of his patents, ownership of the company, and the Shelter Island House as well as the house on Craigie Street, she was not much interested in baking powder. That didn't matter to either of them. As he slipped away, with the family in attendance, the last thing he said was to Nellie. He had only one thing on his mind. He made her promise to continue his work proving Leif Erikson discovered America. She tearfully assured him she would.<sup>18</sup>

### **FIELD WORK AND WESTON STONE DISCOVERY (1893)**

After Eben Norton Horsford breathed his last breath, Nellie composed herself. As others in attendance wept openly, she rose, left the room, and went into her father's study. The walls were festooned with the antique maps he had acquired. The shelves bulged with rare first editions of travelers' and explorers' tales. Closing the door behind her, she sat at his desk which had the uncompleted manuscript of his latest book in piles. She took this material and began organizing it. All through the night, she worked on it so that it could be published.<sup>19</sup>

Now thirty-four years old, Cornelia was determined to support her father's thesis and fulfill the pledge she made to him on his deathbed. Up to this point, she had spent relatively little time in the field with her father. Her research had been more bookish. Now with her father gone, she stepped forward and took the initiative. She found the foreman who had overseen the early excavations at Leif's purported house and Norumbega and employed him. She continued to recruit workers to excavate the sites. As they dug she would stand on a little copse writing notes and sketching in her notebooks.

Along with sketching, measuring, and digging at the sites he had located, Nellie extended the search outward. She assumed that if there had been a settlement at the site of Leif's house and at Norumbega, there might be physical remains scattered around the surrounding countryside. In the years

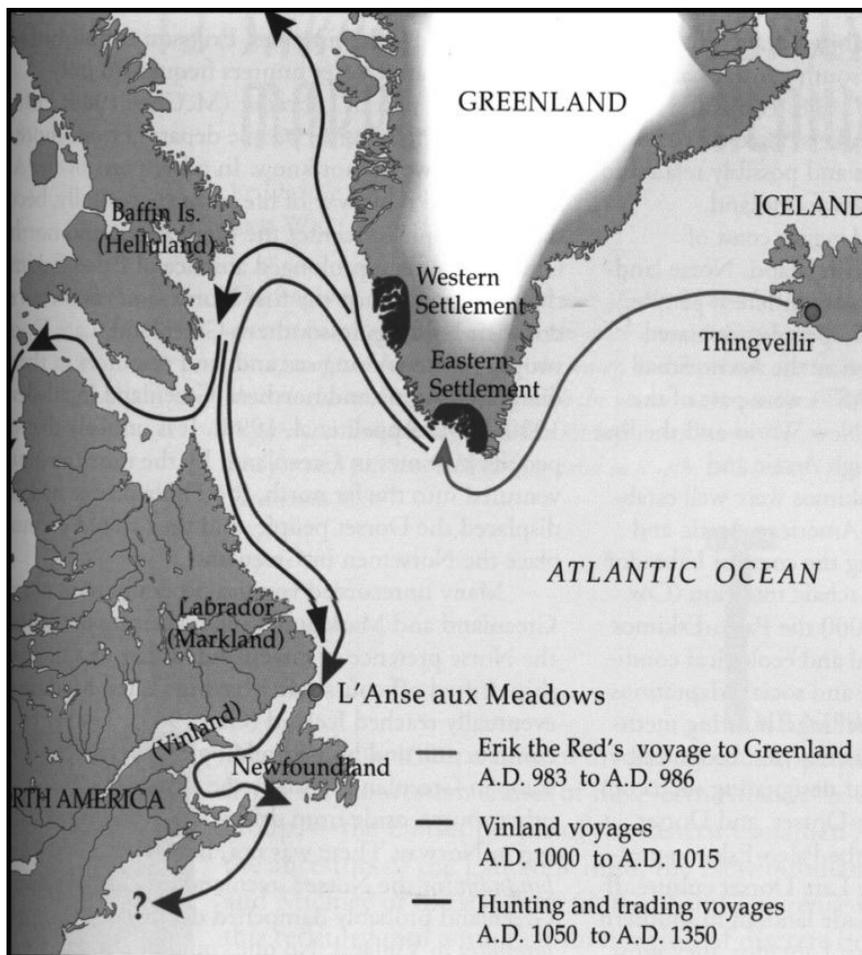
following her father's death, she took a horse and cart, and sometimes a sister or two, and traveled around the various highways and byways of Massachusetts looking for artifacts or evidence of other settlements. She quickly found that one could barely take a step in this region without stumbling across some evidence of what she thought was a Norse presence, and that had already been examined. "In every Vinland graveyard, I have discovered, are to be seen excavations made by persons who dug there long before my researches began."<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, she never elaborated on these supposed Norse sites and "graveyards." She never said who it was that had been excavating these sites or even where they were. It is difficult to know if she was referencing actual locations or if it was just her romantic heart getting the better of her out in the field.

Being a nature lover, Cornelia found solace in these trips. She felt free of the restraints of Boston Society with its dullards, wastrels, and rakes. She could pursue her intellectual proclivities and maybe find a Viking or two. Still deeply mourning her father's passing, in October of 1893 she headed off again with her sister Gertrude (1852-1897), who was married to Andrew Fiske, on another trek into the wilds of Massachusetts. Traveling down a quiet "shady lane" just outside the town of Weston, something caught her eye. She spotted a pile of stone slabs by the side of the road. The landowner had excavated a number of large stones to use in a fence gate he was building at the entrance of the drive leading up to his house.<sup>21</sup>

Stopping the carriage, she climbed down to examine them. Cornelia Horsford believed it was common practice for Norse people to take large flat stones and inscribe them as markers. She never seemed able to pass a large rock without examining it for such inscriptions. That she had found no carvings up to this time did not deter her enthusiasm. This time, however, as she knelt down in her riding costume and began pushing the rocks around, her heart quickened. On one slab-shaped stone she saw deep cut marks. To her, the marks looked like runic inscriptions. To her, these were not random scratches caused by natural erosion or modern quarrymen's tools. They were the words of ancient Norse explorers far from home. Did they sing their Viking songs as they carved the notches? She managed to lift the stone up to lean it against another. Turning to her sister who stood over her watching, she smiled.<sup>22</sup>

As Nellie began to sketch the stone and its marks, she explained what she was doing to the inquiring landowner and said she wanted to buy the stone. To her amazement he refused to sell and would not negotiate. The rock, he informed her, was the perfect size for his construction project. He



### Norse Voyages, 983-1350 CE

Did Norse (Viking) explorers go as far south as Massachusetts? In 1960 it was demonstrated that they had made it to the northern tip of Newfoundland when a Norse settlement was discovered at L'Anse aux Meadows. In the early Middle Ages, driven by famine at home and the promise of wealth abroad, the Viking people exploded out of Scandinavia and set about conquering parts of England, Ireland, France, Russia, and even Turkey. Emboldened by their successes, they eventually crossed the North Atlantic and founded settlements in Iceland, Greenland, and eastern Canada. See William F. Fitzhugh and Elisabeth Ward (editors), *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2000). In this collection three dozen scholars examine and debate the archaeological evidence.

was dubious of these society women wanting what was essentially a worthless rock. Temporarily thwarted, Cornelia and her sister left to return home leaving the somewhat bewildered man to wonder what had just happened.<sup>23</sup>

Unable to return again immediately, but desperate to acquire what she thought was a genuine, ancient, inscribed Norse rune stone, Cornelia convinced her sister Gertrude to return on her own the next day and continue the negotiations. After insisting again, they supplied a replacement stone, the landowner gave in, and after an “exchange of stones was made that afternoon,” the artifact was whisked back to the Fiske house in Cambridge. Within a few days, what Cornelia was now referring to as the “Weston Stone” was safe at Craigie Street where it could be closely studied. Because of the way the stone was weathered, and the way the lower pointed end was covered in dried dirt, Cornelia concluded the stone had been stuck upright in the earth with the inscribed portion showing to act as a signpost. “In all this,” she said, as to her techniques of research, “I have made my methods of research as nearly possible like those used by my father.”<sup>24</sup>

A few weeks later, Cornelia saw a report of a similar stone recently found in New York City. She quickly sent a sketch of the Weston Stone to one Alexander Crawford Chenoweth. A civil engineer who also had attended Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute like her father, Chenoweth too was an



amateur archaeologist who had been exploring Manhattan Island. Before urban sprawl had pushed the city too far north, the upper part of Manhattan was still heavily wooded with hills and rocky outcrops. Here Chenoweth came across a series of caves, near Inwood Hill, some of which were natural and others extended by Native Americans. These “Indian Caves” produced a number of artifacts, including a stone with strange cut marks on it. Chenoweth believed that Norse people had been all over this region and had left behind their traces in stones cut with their runic alphabet.<sup>25</sup> If genuine, the Inwood Hills Stone would prove the Norse had made it as far south as New York.

### **Dighton Rock in Berkley, MA, 1853 (opposite page)**

Although no images survive of the Weston Stone, a nearby rock had puzzled observers for centuries. The petroglyphs were painted to be more visible. Until 1963 it was submerged in the river except during low tide. As early as 1677, English colonists began speculating about the inscriptions on the boulder in the Taunton River. Many of the most learned men in colonial New England, including Cotton Mather and Ezra Stiles, theorized about the origins of the petroglyphs—identifying them variously as Phoenician, Roman (Latin), Norse, or even Chinese or Japanese.

In the 1830s, when Carl C. Rafn, the Secretary of the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries in Copenhagen who was searching for evidence of a Scandinavian discovery of America before Columbus, contacted New England historians, they brought Dighton Rock to his attention. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the inscriptions were associated with the romantic story of Leif Erikson's voyage to Vinland, but it was not until 1960 that concrete evidence of a Viking settlement in North America finally was located, and it was far from Dighton in northern Newfoundland.

In 1918 a new theory credited the markings to a shipwrecked, sixteenth-century Portuguese explorer, Miguel Cortereal, although most remain skeptical. Famed Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison, who examined the petroglyphs many times, believed that Algonquian Indians carved them with additional markings added by more recent visitors to the site. “If the history of the Dighton Rock is nothing else,” he concluded, “it is a remarkable demonstration of human credulity.” Native Americans in New England are not known to have used petroglyphs (unlike in the Southwest), but it is not inconceivable that they were the creators. In 1963 the rock was removed from the river and is now located in a tiny museum at Dighton Rock State Park.

Source: Dighton Historical Society website, accessed Jan. 11, 2020.

Cornelia sent a drawing of the Weston Stone to Chenoweth, and he reciprocated by sending sketches of the Inwood Stone to her. By March of 1894, these drawings convinced Cornelia to travel to New York to see the Inwood Stone in person. Both Horsford and Chenoweth agreed the stones were Norse, but likely carved at different periods. The serendipitous discovery of the Weston Stone led to the publication of *An Inscribed Stone* (1895). Produced as a twenty-two page pamphlet, it tells of her adventures carriage driving around the backroads of New England looking for Norse artifacts.<sup>26</sup> The two stones only convinced her more that her father had been right. The two stones “seemed to me to be similar, but to belong to different periods.”<sup>27</sup> The evidence was too overwhelming to be ignored.

Oddly, however, Cornelia did not directly assert that objects like the Weston Stone were carved by Norse people. “The problem is,” she said, “who made the pre-historic man-works of the Charles River Valley?” Because there was such doubt, even by believers, she decided to call whoever made these carvings or lived in this area “Vinlanders” rather than Norse. That was just a handy shortcut for “I assume they are unknown.”<sup>28</sup>

## CORNELIA'S PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

Cornelia Horsford was not the only woman with archaeological interests. David Browman, in his survey of the role of women on American archaeology, concluded that “Before 1860, for all intents and purposes, women were not involved in American archaeology.”<sup>29</sup> Following the Civil War, however, a number of women began working in the field, although they are rarely mentioned—not only in contemporaneous accounts, but in modern ones as well. They were relegated to second-class status and regularly ignored. Matilda Coxe Stevens (1849-1915), for example, was the first woman hired by the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) based in Washington, D.C., at the Smithsonian Institution. She was forced to publish at first under her husband’s name.<sup>30</sup> There were capable female archaeologists working in America at this time, including Alice Cunningham Fletcher (1838-1923), Zelia Nuttall (1857-1933), and others. They toiled with great dedication in obscurity. This disregard was a result of not just misogyny, but the general sentiment of the time that “real” archaeology concerned the classical Mediterranean world rather than the antiquities of North America. Cornelia Horsford had the advantage of her wealth and social status and the reputation of her father to gain entry into the world of science. She had the luxury of being accepted because of her social

position, something few of the academically trained woman archaeologists of the day could call upon.

In 1894 Cornelia Horsford became a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). Her first presentation before a group of scholars came in late December of 1897. At the meeting of the anthropology section “H” of the AAAS at Cornell University, she lectured about her trip to Iceland. She spoke as part of a panel with the pioneering anthropologist Franz Boas, and her friend, the Vice President of the “H” section, W. J. McGee. Her talk, titled “Cairns of Southwestern Norway,” became her book, *Dwellings of the Saga-Time in Iceland, Greenland, and Vineland* (1898).<sup>31</sup>

She compared suspected dwellings in New England with similar ones in Iceland and Greenland. Boas gave the public comments after her talk. He expressed there was an “essential distinctness” between the supposed sites in Vinland and those of the Native Americans, including the Eskimos.<sup>32</sup>

Boas had already discussed this idea with her in 1895. He had travelled to Cambridge, at her request, to visit her Vinland sites. Nellie wanted to know if they might have been built by Eskimos. “Regarding all of the ruins which you pointed out to me,” he said, “I will say that none of them resembles Esquimo [sic] structures.”<sup>33</sup> This was a step in the right direction for her. Ruling out an Eskimo presence in New England allowed that much more room to credit the Norse for these sites. A major component of Horsford’s working methodology was a process of elimination. Using such an influential person as Boas to confirm that Eskimos could not have built the Vinland sites circumstantially supported her Norse hypothesis. She employed other archaeologists and anthropologists to similarly demonstrate that the ruins of Vinland were not built by the Iroquois or Algonquins either. She brought in Icelandic people (including a Mrs. Eiríkr Magnússon of Cambridge, U.K.) to view the site to see if they recognized any of the architecture. As there was no direct evidence to link these ruins to the Norse, this approach was all she really had.

Horsford hoped to rule out the theory that the Vinland structures had been made by native peoples, even Eskimos. As far back as 1789, British author William Robertson had noted that “the Esquimaux [sic] of America perfectly resemble the Greenlanders in their aspect, dress, and mode of living.”<sup>34</sup> Cornelia felt there might be a connection between the Eskimos and early Scandinavian explorers. The crux of her thesis was that the “Norse structures” found in America too closely resembled Icelandic and Greenland historical structures to be a coincidence.

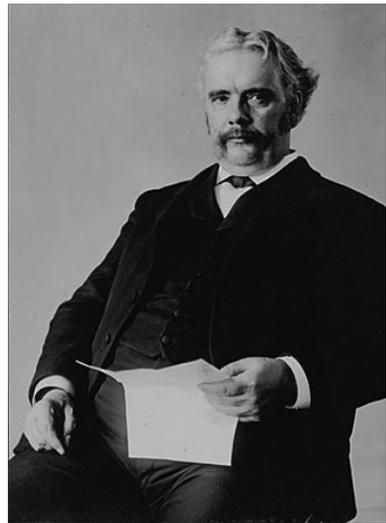
## THE SCHOLARS ARRIVE, 1893-99

Eben Norton Horsford had worked with a few local surveyors and photographers to record his finds. Once on her own, Nellie realized she had to have the opinions of genuine experts in the field. She began to call in and cultivate advice and direct observation from some of the noted historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists of the day. She hired work gangs to clear the fields and expose the various architectural remains they had found so that they could be easily examined and photographed. She also made extensive drawings and measurements of the sites herself, filling notebook after notebook. At the spot where her father felt a Norse grave had been, she made sketches then added, “grave at Dr. Berrie’s place, near edge of second terrace, consisted on the surface of a mass of stones covering a space about 9x11 feet.”<sup>35</sup> She had George Davis, who had worked for her father, make accurate engineering drawings of the sites through the summer of 1893.<sup>36</sup>

Cornelia called in a string of various naturalists. Once again, her charms and her social position had scientists who would likely not have responded heading to New England. In 1893 she contacted William John McGee of the Smithsonian to try to get him involved. McGee was an autodidact geologist and anthropologist who studied the Indian burial mounds of the Ohio Valley in the 1870s. He served as head of the BAE from 1893-1903.<sup>37</sup> McGee could not come at first, and so to Cornelia’s delight, he sent Gerard



**Ethnologist Gerald Fowke**  
(1855-1933)



**Anthropologist W. J. McGee**  
(1853-1912)



**Franz Boas**  
(1858-1942)  
“Father of American Anthropology”



**Valtýr Guðmundsson**  
(1860-1928)  
Icelandic Scholar



**Poet Thorsteinn Erlingsson**  
(1858–1914)



**Cornelia Horsford**  
(c. 1880s)

Fowke. A Smithsonian Institution ethnologist, Fowke had begun his career as a geologist, then turned to the archaeology and antiquities of Native Americans from the Ohio River Valley to New England. He traveled the world, including Siberia, while working out the migration routes of Asiatic peoples to the New World. Fowke spent five weeks meticulously going over the Vinland site.

Intrigued by what Cornelia and Gerard Fowke told him, McGee made a study of the Vinland material. Like Fowke, McGee saw no direct evidence of a Norse presence, but due to circumstantial evidence as well as Cornelia's enthusiasm, conceded that there was a chance. When describing her talk at the AAAS meeting at Cornell University in December of 1897, McGee was a bit more animated. He said that her description of domestic structures in Scandinavia she thought similar to the New England structures was convincing, and that several dwellings from the time of Erik and Leif "have been identified with considerable certainty in Iceland." While "a few have been identified with fair certainty in the 'Vineland the Good' of the Sagas—[in] what is now eastern Massachusetts."<sup>38</sup>

McGee helped her compile what she had at that point into an article for *National Geographic Magazine* titled, "The Dwellings of Saga-Time in Iceland, Greenland, and Vinland."<sup>39</sup> He made sure to insist that she employ footnotes and citations, as they would give her work an air of scholarly respectability which might help deflect criticisms of her amateur status.<sup>40</sup> In this article she recapped all her work in comparing the Vinland sites to ones in Scandinavia as well as reasons why native peoples could not have made the Vinland structures. She also graciously thanked all the specialists from the U.S. and abroad who had helped her.

Canadian archaeologist David Boyle also came to see the sites and determine if any Canadian native peoples might have made structures in Vinland. Eben Norton Horsford had pinpointed sites around the mouth of the Charles River that he claimed Norse explorers had built. The sites, little more than the vague remnants of stone walls and house foundations barely recognizable as such, were considered early European settler home remains by professional historians. Boyle had risen to become curator of the Canadian Institute Museum and later secretary of the Ontario Historical Society. His specialty was the native cultures of North America.<sup>41</sup> Cornelia hoped, as she did with most of the specialists she brought in, that Boyle would rule out Canadian native peoples. After he examined the Vinland sites around Weston, he put together a typescript Report on the Various 'Norumbega' Works on the Charles River, and its Vicinity Compared with the Works of the Iroquois and Algonkin [sic] Indians," which he sent her.

He concluded that they “are in their chief features and most of their details, totally unlike the work of such aborigines as inhabited any portion of New France [Canada].” He argued that the architecture of the Vinland sites was unlike anything built by native peoples of North America.<sup>42</sup>

## ICELANDIC FORAYS AND SCHOLARS

Cornelia’s approach took two tracks. First, she wanted to show that the purported Vinland ruins could not have been made by Native Americans or early English colonists as historians insisted. Second, she wished to compare them with known Norse sites from Scandinavia to show that they at least shared design similarities. Although these two ideas by themselves proved nothing, they at least opened the way for the plausibility of a Norse origin. In 1895, while work crews toiled to uncover the Massachusetts ruins, she travelled to Iceland and other locations in Scandinavia to see for herself.<sup>43</sup> She wanted to visit sites that dated from the time of Leif Erikson, what she and others referred to as, “Saga-Time.”<sup>44</sup> She met with historians and archaeologists who specialized in the history of the ancient Nordic world.

Charmed by Cornelia, Valtýr Guðmundsson (1860-1928), regarded as the father of Icelandic archaeology, agreed to supervise a survey of Norse sites in Iceland. Guðmundsson, however, was unable to do it himself, and had one of his students, Thorsteinn Erlingsson (the future poet), do the actual on-site work. Erlingsson (1858-1914) had no training as an historian or an archaeologist but needed the money and thus went to the site in the Hawk River Valley in Iceland believed to be the home of Erik the Red. The few structures there had long since fallen into disrepair and were in fact so grown over that it was difficult to even find what was left of the foundations.<sup>45</sup> Erlingsson made the most accurate measurements he could and produced several rough drawings. Making things difficult, few structures or archaeological sites from the time of Erik and Leif were positively known, nor had any runic inscriptions been found in Iceland. The few such structures in Greenland, including one on the supposed site of Erik’s “Brattahild” (estate), had been extensively modified over the centuries since it had first been constructed in the tenth century. Guðmundsson then planned to visit New England.

## FOWKE’S FINAL REPORT

After viewing the New England sites in 1893, Gerard Fowke had to leave on Smithsonian business. However, he promised Cornelia that he would write a full report as soon as possible. His initial report appeared in *American Naturalist* in 1894 and was simply a brief to explain what he was doing.

He gave credit to Eben Norton Horsford for bringing these locations to public attention through his books and lectures. He then simultaneously claimed that the main structure at the site of Leif's house resembled Iroquois structures, but also that they may well have been Norse.<sup>46</sup> Time went by, however, and a detailed report to Cornelia did not materialize. She grew concerned she'd ever hear from him again. In September of 1896, he wrote to apologize for the delay, which was due to his adventuring in Asia, and that his report was now ready.

Fowke had done some excavating and had visited the other sites as well.<sup>47</sup> He began by stating "I have been careful to claim no more than observable." He had found Indian pottery at the site as well as the remains of what were obviously early English settler houses. Fowke found the sites intriguing but inconclusive as far as a Norse presence was concerned. He saw nothing explicitly Scandinavian or that could not plausibly be credited to the native inhabitants of the area or English settlers. Letting her down as gently as he could, Fowke finished by telling Horsford that later peoples had scrambled the sites, mixing in more modern debris and artifacts and making a clear attribution difficult. His final assessment of the question of whether Norse peoples had built the Vinland sites was, "maybe." Fowke vacillated on this point for years. He knew no explicitly Norse material had ever been found at the Vinland sites, but nevertheless was willing to keep open the possibility.

Fowke published his conclusion about Vinland in 1900. Because there was no positive evidence to prove the Vinland sites were clearly Norse, the best he could do was to argue that they could not be Indian constructions. The central thrust of his argument was to produce negative results. What he and the Horsfords considered foundations, walls, artificial islands, and dams were of designs never employed by Native Americans. Fowke had done research and excavations on some of the burial mounds of the Mississippi Valley and felt they also bore no resemblance to the New England sites. Therefore, the storied Mound Builders could not have been active in Vinland.<sup>48</sup>

About the same time as Gerard Fowke turned in his findings, Valtýr Guðmundsson, who had as promised travelled to Massachusetts, produced his report. If Horsford had hoped her Scandinavian friends would save her, she was disappointed. Guðmundsson was unable to say conclusively that Norse people had been to New England. They might have been, he suggested, but maybe not. The materials he saw could easily have been produced by local native peoples or early English colonists. He finished by letting himself off the hook, concluding that the question of a Norse presence in the Americas "therefore must be left to American scholars."<sup>49</sup>

In the end, Horsford still sounded optimistic. “The ruins [in New England] did not differ,” she declared, “in their essential features from those in Iceland in the Saga-time.”<sup>50</sup> In 1898 she was in London giving a talk on her work to the Viking Society. She was politely received, but she did not convince many that her father had found Leif Erikson’s house outside Boston. She discussed the excavations using numerous lantern slides, which peaked the crowd’s interest. Unfortunately, upon closer examination of the images, most thought she had not proven anything. There seemed too many types of stone work, and a few balked at her mention of bricks (something the Norse never employed). The published review held that she had given “a very interesting paper,” but while the society did accept that Norse explorers had made it to North America, “Miss Horsford had not proven that they had made it to Massachusetts.”<sup>51</sup> This critique sounded again and again: the Horsfords did good work, the theory seemed logical, there certainly was intriguing material and scope, but in the end the evidence was simply not convincing.

Other negative reviews began pouring in. In 1895 the journal *Science* reviewed Cornelia’s pamphlet, *An Inscribed Stone*. M. W. Davis stated “It is well known that adventurous Norwegian navigators in the eleventh century visited . . . the Eastern coast of North America.” He did not, however, feel that Eben Norton Horsford had made the case. His daughter, likewise, was vague on specifics that proved anything. Despite this, Davis declared the idea “is well worthy [of] the attention of historians.”<sup>52</sup> Similarly, in 1899, F. York Powell commented of her article, “Vinland and its Ruins” (which she had published in *Popular Science Monthly* and based on the two talks she gave in 1898), that “her thesis is not proven, but there is nothing impossible in it as far as it goes.”<sup>53</sup>

As the new century dawned, Cornelia Horsford acknowledged that neither she nor her esteemed father had been able to prove their theory of the Norse discovery of America. No archaeologists, no historians, no anthropologists or geologists supported them beyond saying: “maybe.” The efforts of thirty years had gone by, and they were no closer to their goal. As a girl listening to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow recite Hiawatha and Olé Bull weave his magical tales of the Vikings, she became drawn to the idea. What disappointed her most was not having failed to prove that Leif Erikson and the Norse had built Norumbega, but letting her father down. She had promised him on his deathbed she would pursue the cause. In that she had been faithful, but the final prize had eluded her.

After 1900 Cornelia Horsford gave up working on the Norse. Instead, she turned her attentions to historic conservation of houses and gardens,

Sylvester Manor in particular. She always loved the estate on Long Island. She felt most at ease and comfortable there and lived quietly out of the public light until her passing in 1944. Fairly quickly Nellie Horsford, her father, and their efforts to prove Leif Erikson discovered America were fully discounted by professionals. As such, they drifted into the realm of fringe archaeology, if remembered at all. Although the discoveries at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland in the 1960s showed Norse travelers did make it to the New World prior to Columbus, the belief that Leif Erikson and the cast of characters from the Vinland Sagas built a society just outside Boston, Massachusetts, never had any supporting evidence. The fantasy of Vikings taming what would become the United States may be an appealing image, but had no basis in any reality.

HJM

## Notes

1. The Icelandic historian Arngrímur Jónsson (1568-1648), called “The Learned,” may have been the first to suggest in his *Gronlandia* (published posthumously in 1688) that the Norse might have made it to North America. He was followed in 1705 when Icelandic historian Tormod Torfæus (1636-1719) published his *Historia Vinlandiae*. He also published a *Gronlandia* (1715). American authors then joined in. See Samuel Mather, *An Attempt to Shew that America Must be Known to the Ancients* (Boston: 1772). Henry Wheaton's *The History of the Northmen* (1831) supported the Leif Erikson story. See also Julius Olson, *The Northmen, Columbus, and Cabot* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York: 1906); Arthur Middleton Reeves, *Voyages to Vinland: The First American Saga* (A. A. Knopf: New York, 1942); and Paul Du Challu, *The Viking Age* (J.J. Little & Co., New York: 1889), 514-530. *The Vinland Sagas*, the fount of all Norse discovery texts, appeared in Carl Christian Rafn's *Antiquitates Americanae* (1837). See also David Goudsward, *Ancient Stone Sites of New England and the Debate Over Early European Settlement* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006).

2. Mainstream historians and archaeologists were dubious at best over such claims of the Viking discovery of America. Several, like Justin Winsor, were ready to accept that it was possible that Norse explorers had come to America, but few accepted that there was any evidence that they actually had. One who did was the American historian of Scandinavia Rasmus B. Anderson in his *America Not Discovered by Columbus* (Chicago: S.C. Griggs & Co., 1874). Although largely rejected by the mainstream, the Viking theory had begun to seep into school texts and popular books on American history.

3. *In Memoriam, Eben Norton Horsford*, Wellesley College, (n.p. 1893). Copy in the Widener Library, Harvard University.
4. See the various correspondence in the Sylvester Manor Collection of the Horsford family papers in the NYU Fales Library in New York City.
5. Eben Norton Horsford, *The Defenses of Norumbega* (Boston: Riverside Press, Boston: 1891), introduction.
6. Note jottings from Cornelia Horsford found in the Horsford Family Papers, Sylvester Manor Collection, Fales Special Collections, box 105, folder 6, New York University, hereafter known as SMC.
7. This is interesting, as her father was such an advocate of female education at the collegiate level. I have checked with all the colleges in the Boston area that she could have conceivably attended, and there is no record of her as a student.
8. Cornelia Horsford, undated document, Horsford Family Papers, box 108, folder 6, SMC.
9. Cornelia Horsford diary entry, Sept. 7, 1875, box 114, SMC.
10. Ibid.
11. Cornelia Horsford, *The Graves of the Northmen* (Boston: Damrell and Upham, 1893), 18. The reference to a “skeleton in armor” comes from a famous Longfellow poem of that title in which an ancient warrior was found in a burial in Rhode Island. This poem in turn came from an actual burial some thought might have been a Viking. It was, in fact, a Native American burial.
12. Cornelia Horsford to her mother, Jul. 8, 1886, box 92, folder 57, SMC.
13. Cornelia Horsford to her mother, Aug. 13, 1886.
14. Louis Dyer to Cornelia Horsford, July 1884, box 109, folder 19, SMC.
15. Louis Dyer to Mrs. Horsford, Aug. 27, 1884, box 92, folder 29, SMC.
16. Cornelia Horsford, *The Graves of the Northmen*, 20.
17. *Daily Los Angeles Herald* (March 9, 1881), 3, and Washington D.C. *National Republican* (Feb. 3, 1883), 2.
18. Cornelia Horsford, *Graves of the Northmen*.
19. Ibid., 17.
20. Cornelia Horsford, *An Inscribed Stone* (Cambridge: John Wilson & Sons, 1895), 6.
21. Ibid., 7.
22. Ibid., 6.
23. Cornelia told the story of discovering the Weston Stone in *An Inscribed Stone*. A short version also appeared in an anonymously authored blurb in the *New York Herald*, Aug. 4, 1895. There are no surviving drawings or photographs of the Weston Stone that I could find.
24. Horsford, *An Inscribed Stone*, 12.
25. *New York Herald*, Aug. 4, 1895.
26. Cornelia Horsford wanted her work—which as far as she was concerned was her father’s work—to be disseminated to the right scholarly audience. As her father did, she paid for the printing then sent out copies of *An Inscribed Stone* gratis to

various libraries, historical societies, and museums. On the title page she included the sentence “One Hundred Copies, none of which are for sale.” The copy I worked from was in the possession of the Rhode Island Historical Society.

27. Horsford, *An Inscribed Stone*, 10.

28. *Ibid.*, 5.

29. David Browman, *Cultural Negotiations: The Role of Women in the Founding of American Archaeology* (University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, 2013), 1.

30. Nancy Parezo, *Hidden Scholars: Women Anthropologists and the Native American Southwest* (University of New Mexico Press: Albuquerque, 1993), 4.

31. Cornelia Horsford, *Dwellings of Saga-Time in Greenland, Iceland, and Vinland* (Washington, D.C., Judd & Detweiler: 1898).

32. “Scientists in Session within the Wall of Old Columbia,” *The Herald*, Los Angeles, California (Dec. 29, 1898), 6, and W. J. McGee, “The Section of Anthropology at Ithaca,” *Science* (Jan. 14, 1898), 53-54.

33. Franz Boas to Cornelia Horsford, Sept. 6, 1894. Franz Boas Papers #82012, American Philosophical Society.

34. William Robertson, *The History of the Discovery and Settlement of America* (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1829), 136.

35. Sketches and notes by Cornelia Horsford, SMC, box 105, folder 1.

36. SMC, box 105, folder 2.

37. *American Anthropologist* 14:4 (1912), 683-685; Emma R. McGee, *The Life of W. J. McGee* (Farley, Iowa: 1915).

38. W. J. McGee, “Sections of Anthropology at Ithaca,” *Science* NS VII: 159 (Jan. 14, 1898), 53-54.

39. Cornelia Horsford, “Dwellings of Saga-Time in Iceland, Greenland, and Vinland,” *National Geographic Magazine* IX: 3 (Mar. 1898), 72-84.

40. See letters from W.J. McGee to Cornelia Horsford in “Letters from W. J. McGee Collection,” 1894-1900, National Anthropological Archive, Smithsonian Institution.

41. Gerald Killan, *David Boyle: From Artisan to Archaeologist* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1983).

42. See David Boyle materials in SMC, box 105, folder 3.

43. See letters and notes in SMC, box 105, folder 3.

44. Roughly 875-1025 CE.

45. “The Houses of Saga-Time,” *Appleton’s Popular Science Monthly* 53 (May/Oct., 1898), 859.

46. Gerard Fowke, “Norse Remains in the Neighborhood of Boston Bay,” *American Naturalist* 28 (July 1894), 623-629.

47. Gerard Fowke to Cornelia Horsford, Sept. 30, 1896. SMC, box 105, folder 6.

48. Gerard Fowke, “Points of Difference between Norse Remains and Indian Works Most Closely Resembling Them,” *American Anthropologist* NS 2:3 (July-Sept., 1900), 550-562.

49. The Guðmundsson Report, Sept. 1896, is in SMC, box 105, folder 7.

50. Horsford, “Dwellings of Saga-Time,” 81.

51. *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 2 (Privately printed, London: 1899), 134.
52. M. W. Davis, "Current notes on Physiography," *Science* 1:18 (May 3, 1895), 487-488.
53. F. York Powell, "Review of Vinland and its Ruins," *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 29:3/4 (1899), 334-335. Cornelia Horsford, "Vinland and its Ruins: Some of the Evidences that Northmen were in Massachusetts in Pre-Columbian Days," *Popular Science Monthly*, Vol 56 (Dec. 1899), 160-176.