

Joseph A. Sinnott (1930-2004)

Joe Sinnott was the State Geologist for Massachusetts from 1971 to 1992. Although Edward Hitchcock was named the first director of the Massachusetts Geological and Natural History Survey in 1830, a position he held between 1830 and 1839, it can be argued perhaps that Joe was the first officially designated “State Geologist” of Massachusetts. Regardless of your opinion, his appointment in 1971 ended a 132-year drought during which there was no official geological representation at the state level.

Joe was born in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1930. He graduated from St. Johns High School in 1948 and attended Worcester State College where he received his B.S. degree in 1955. He later earned an M.S. degree in Geology from Boston University. He worked for a time as an exploration geologist before returning to Worcester where he taught geology at Clark University and math at Shrewsbury High School. In 1961, he founded Sinnott Geological Services, Inc., where he performed drilling services throughout the New England region.

After his appointment in 1971, Joe teamed up with Bill Barton from the U.S. Bureau of Mines and Joe Pecoraro from the Energy Department to form an energy task force during the energy crisis of the 70's. Father Jim Skehan, a geologist from Boston College, referred to the triumvirate as the “Three Musketeers”. One result of this task force was the Narragansett Basin Coal Project located in the southeastern part of the State. The project was directed by Father Skehan. Results of that work were published in Informational Circular 8760 in 1977.

During this time Joe and Bill Barton contributed regularly to the annual USGS Minerals Yearbook. Joe had a great interest in minerals and mining. He and Bill Barton prepared a 200-page manuscript titled “Massachusetts Mines and Minerals” in the early 90's. The manuscript has never been published. Joe was also in office when E-an Zen and others published the statewide bedrock geologic map of Massachusetts in 1983. In addition, Joe headed up the Goshen Drilling Project in the western part of the state as part of a nationwide effort to address nuclear waste disposal issues.

Joe retired in 1992. This allowed Joe to devote more of his time to his true passion, archaeology. Throughout his career he had been an archaeology enthusiast. He was chairman of the Massachusetts Underwater Archaeology Board and was a member of the Archaeological Institute of America and New England Antiquities Research Association. He oversaw the excavation and recovery of the pirate ship “Whydah”, which sank off of Cape Cod in 1717. The Whydah was the first pirate ship ever salvaged. Larry Woodfork, who regularly spends time on Cape Cod, remembers fondly the time Joe made arrangements for the two of them to go to the shipwreck site and watch the recovery of cannonballs and other artifacts. They also visited Provincetown to view all the artifacts

recovered from the excavation. Up until the time of his death, Joe was working actively on the mystery of the carved stone faces. These were flat-backed stones with sunken eye sockets and large gaping mouths found along the Quinebaug River in central Massachusetts. He had been working on pinpointing an archaeological dig to try and determine the origin of these carvings as recently as the summer of 2003.

Joe was a good and faithful friend, a professional colleague to many and a man of integrity and good humor. He was 74 years old.

-Steve Mabee