

# HOW DO YOU GET A WHALE IN VERMONT?

The Unlikely Story of Vermont's Official State Fossil

by  
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## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS / STORY TOPICS

### **What do we *know*, and *not know*, about the Charlotte whale?**

The book utilizes primary sources to cut through legend and folk lore and establish the essential facts about the Charlotte whale. For instance, by interpreting the sediments in which the Charlotte whale was preserved, we can rule out the notion that the whale was beached.

### **Why can't we determine the exact age of the Charlotte whale?**

When the fossil bones came to the cottage lab of Zadock Thompson in 1849, he slathered them with horse glue to prevent further desiccation, shrinkage and cracking. Unfortunately this organic glue contaminated the bones and rendered them unsuitable for carbon<sup>14</sup> dating.

### **Why does the skull appear to be reconstructed so haphazardly?**

Until 1861, the whale skull remained in fragments. Following the disastrous fire that destroyed the Vermont state house and natural history collection in 1857, the skull was hastily reconstructed using burlap and wire to be pressed into service as a new exhibit.

### **What is the significance of the Mt. Holly mammoth?**

The Mt. Holly mammoth and Charlotte whale were found on subsequent summers by the same railroad crew building a railroad through Vermont. Together they represent two of the most important fossil finds in 19<sup>th</sup> century New England and provide an insight into both terrestrial and marine environments during the Ice Age.

### **What is the mystery of the periotic bone?**

The periotic bone is a small, dense, inner ear bone very characteristic of whales. There is no mention of the periotic in any of the original notes or reports by Zadock Thompson, yet one appears in subsequent reports in the early 1900's by George Perkins. Was it found at the original site or was it mistakenly included with the specimen at a later date? This story is detailed in the Appendix.

### **What was the social/political climate in 1849?**

The social/political climate in 1849 revolved around westward expansion, abolition and possible secession, and the Great '49er Gold Rush.

### **Does the Charlotte whale deserve to be the State Fossil?**

Interesting question. Ask me.

**What were the essential arguments in geology in 1849?**

With such luminaries as Charles Lyell and Louis Agassiz leading the dialogue, and Charles Darwin a decade later, the main questions in geology centered on the age of the Earth and the processes by which it came to be. In Vermont, science and religion debated interpreting the local topography as the result of glaciers or biblical flooding.

**What was learned from an exploratory dig at the whale site by a crew from UVM's Perkins Geology Museum in 1993?**

Although no vertebrate remains were discovered, the dig helped to locate the original discovery site within reasonable limits and verify the original observations and descriptions of Zadock Thompson. The presence of dense clay, marine shells and ice-rafted debris supports the Champlain Sea environment.

**Is there any relationship between the Champlain whale and the legendary Lake Champlain "monster" known as "Champ?"**

There is solid, physical, verifiable evidence to verify the nature of the Charlotte whale. There is not, as yet, any unassailable evidence to identify "Champ." Until such time as there is, no relationships can be drawn.

**Why is Zadock Thompson buried in an unmarked grave?**

There is no specific reason but over the years his grave in a Burlington has deteriorated and no marker or headstone remains. ***It is hoped that this book will create community interest in erecting a suitable monument to Vermont's greatest naturalist.***