Eben Norton Horsford, the Northmen, and the Founding of Massachusetts

RICHARD R. JOHN

The West is preparing to add its fables to those of the East. The valleys of the Ganges, the Nile, and the Rhine having yielded their crop, it remains to be seen what the valleys of the Amazon, the Plate, the Orinoco, the St. Lawrence, and the Mississippi will produce. Perchance, when, in the course of ages, American liberty has become a fiction of the past — as it is to some extent a fiction of the present — the poets of the world will be inspired by American mythology.

—Henry David Thoreau, “Walking”

On a grassy knoll overlooking the Charles River near Mount Auburn Hospital in Cambridge, Massachusetts, one can find a commemorative stone tablet with a curious inscription. Here once stood a house of Leif Erikson’s, or so we are told. The inscription is so authoritative, and the tablet itself so similar to the myriad historical markers in the immediate vicinity, that it has doubtless been taken at face value by many of the countless passersby who have paused to make it out. After all, so many famous people have lived in Cambridge at one time
or another that it would hardly seem remarkable if Leif Erikson had, too. Yet those with at least a passing acquaintance with the byways of early American history are bound to find this inscription more than a little odd. Though there is widespread agreement that Norse voyagers could conceivably have landed somewhere in New England in the eleventh century, there is no proof that their landfall was in Massachusetts, much less on a particular patch of earth in West Cambridge on the left bank of the Charles.

This curious tablet first came to my attention in the early 1980s, when I was a resident fellow at the Cambridge Historical Society, which happened to be just down the street. As a graduate student in American civilization, I quite naturally found its inscription intriguing and set out to discover what I could about its installation. This essay brings together my findings. Intended less as an exercise in retrospective social psychology than in cultural history, it seeks above all to explore why the idea of a Norse settlement in Massachusetts could once have seemed a matter of such pressing concern.

The Erikson tablet, it turns out, was the work of neither a crank nor a fraud. Rather, it was the gift of Eben Norton Horsford (1818–93), an industrial entrepreneur and one-time Harvard professor who is probably best known today as the inventor of Rumford's baking powder, an artificial leavening agent used in baking. At the time of his death, Horsford was among the eminent chemists of his generation. Yet it was as an archaeologist that he hoped to gain his most enduring renown.

In the last years of his life, Horsford became convinced that he had discovered incontrovertible proof of the existence of an extensive Norse settlement in Massachusetts that antedated the settlements of the Pilgrims and Puritans by more than six hundred years. It was in conjunction with this discovery that he commissioned the Erikson tablet as well as several similar commemorative markers in Cambridge, Watertown, and the surrounding towns. In addition, Horsford underwrote the publication of a series of lavishly illustrated books and went so far as to hire his son-in-law to erect a thirty-five-foot-high replica of a Norse fort, complete with a scenic overlook. The fort, handsomely restored by the Metropolitan Park Commission, remains in Newton's Norumbega Park, where, like the Erikson tablet, it still tempts the curious.

Horsford's initial interest in the Northmen was spurred by a chance acquaintance with the celebrated Norwegian violinist Ole Bull. Horsford met Bull sometime around 1870 during one of Bull's extended visits to Cambridge, and the two men soon became close friends. As a Norwegian nationalist, Bull took enormous pride in Leif Erikson — whom, with pardonable exaggeration, he hailed as a fellow Norwegian — and the two men spent many a happy hour discussing how the celebrated Northman might have found his way up the Charles. Horsford would already have known about the possibility of a Norse landfall in Massachusetts, since local poets and antiquarians had discussed this theme for almost half a century. But it was Bull who persuaded him to set the record straight.

Tablet marking the probable site of Erikson's house in Cambridge
Bull’s inspiration furnished the backdrop for Horsford’s first major foray into Norse history: the erection of an idealized statue of Leif Erikson. Prior to Bull’s death in 1880, he had worked tirelessly to build an Erikson statue somewhere in the United States, and by 1887 Horsford had helped raise the funds necessary to win the honor for Boston. Though Horsford had figured prominently in the planning of this project and gave the principal address at its dedication, he was by no means its only distinguished backer. The Erikson statue also had the support of a host of local luminaries, including the mayor of Boston, the governor of Massachusetts, and the poets James Russell Lowell, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Notwithstanding this impressive base of support, the project did not go unopposed. Among its most determined critics were the officers of the Massachusetts Historical Society, who complained that it constituted an affront to the memory of the Pilgrims and the Puritans, since it implied that they had not been the original founders of the state. It looked for a time as if the historical society might prevail. Though supporters of the project secured the necessary financing to erect the Erikson statue near the heart of the central business district in what is now Government Center, at the last moment their principal backer withdrew, presumably because of pressure from the opposition. In the end, however, even the Massachusetts Historical Society proved powerless to block the installation of the Erikson statue, which stands to this day on Commonwealth Avenue near Charlesgate East in what was then the city’s western fringe.

It might seem inevitable that Horsford, having backed the statue, would soon throw himself into the search for possible Norse sites. In fact, however, he approached the subject in a decidedly skeptical spirit. In his Erikson statue address, he took pains to distinguish his approach to the Norse voyages from those of earlier Norse enthusiasts and heaped special scorn on writers who traced a Norse ancestry for such curiosities as the Stone Tower in Newport, Rhode Island. In the
following years, when he set about to investigate the historicity of the Norse voyages, he did his best to avoid making a similar mistake.

Given his background, it should come as no surprise that Horsford approached the study of the Norse voyages in a decidedly scientific spirit. In his youth, he had studied for a time in the laboratory of the noted German chemist Justus Liebig, whom Horsford credited with instilling in him an abiding faith in the value of hypothesis testing as a tool of research. As a chemistry professor, Horsford introduced Liebig’s methods to a generation of Harvard undergraduates, including the noted logician Charles Sanders Pierce, who would later praise Horsford for having taught him how to think in the laboratory.

He would apply an identical technique to what he was wont to call the problem of the Northmen. As his first step, Horsford undertook to frame a suitable hypothesis; as a second step, he subjected this hypothesis to empirical proof. Should his hypothesis fail in a “single particular,” Horsford promised, he would not hesitate for an instant to abandon it at once. To this end, Horsford invited criticism, subsidized the publications of a number of his critics, and on at least one occasion formally admitted that he had made a mistake.

But how was Horsford to frame a hypothesis to test the plausibility of an event that had occurred almost one thousand years before? Casting about for an answer, he found it in the mariners’ instructions in the Icelandic sagas, the standard sources, then and now, for all students of the Norse voyages. Like the German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann, who had broken with conventional wisdom in his quest for the ancient city of Troy by trusting the veracity of the Homeric epics, Horsford put his faith in the historicity of the sagas. The acid test was the location of Erikson’s house. “Here is a sketch … of the outlines of Leif’s house,” Horsford postulated, “or, for the present, let us say a house on the spot where, according to the Sagas, Leif must have built one.”

“I say must,” Horsford added, “because … movements of tides, topography, artificial structures, to which description dating back nine hundred years fits to-day, without a wanting element, cannot apply to two groups of entities. A little reflection will satisfy the candid mind on this point.” And all this he claimed, incredibly enough, to derive from the “strict construction” of the sagas.

To test his hypothesis, Horsford set out to discover whether Erikson had indeed built his house on the site Horsford predicted. As luck would have it, this proved to be relatively straightforward, as the site turned out to be a mere three blocks from Horsford’s Craigie Street home. Shovel in hand, Horsford strode confidently down to the Charles River, dug a hole, and found a jumble of rocks. Here, or so he proclaimed, was the site of Erikson’s house. Horsford used an identical method to discover the supposed site of the Norse fort. Having deduced its location from the “literature of geography,” Horsford wrote, he drove directly there and found it on his first visit. Not surprisingly, given these initial triumphs, he felt sure that the discovery of other sites would be merely a matter of time. And what a grand opportunity this would offer the archaeologist! After all, Horsford exulted, there was not one square mile in the entire Charles River basin that did not contain “incontestable traces” of the presence of the Northmen.

Horsford’s approach to the problem of the Northmen went well beyond his discovery of supposed archaeological sites. In addition, he compiled a remarkably full account of the Norse settlers themselves. He characterized Leif Erikson and his compatriots as pious, civic-minded, “industrial adventurers” who had initially come to the New World to seek their fortune and decided to stay on as “human beings of common sense” intent upon “bettering their condition” and, Horsford added portentously, “all that means in its train.” He was well aware that his thumbnail sketch was sharply at variance with the conventional understanding of the Northmen as roving marauders. But Horsford stood firm. His Northmen, as he never tired of explaining, had nothing in common with
the notorious maritime pirates known as the Vikings, who had conducted “predatory excursions over the then known seas.” To the contrary, they were a peace-loving, sedentary, and commercial-minded people who put down solid roots in the region that lasted for almost four hundred years. In his more expansive moments, Horsford envisioned this settlement’s consisting of as many as ten thousand people, with offshoots extending throughout North and even South America.

To clinch his point, Horsford turned once again to a passage from the sagas. By itself, this passage seemed unremarkable enough: “Thorfinn had wood felled and hewn and brought to the ship, and the wood piled on the cliff to dry.” But for Horsford, it opened up vistas on the past that until that moment had never been glimpsed. As he later reminisced, when he had first read that passage, he felt sure that he had not only reached the “heart of the problem” but could also now “feel its beat.”

The key to the problem of the Northmen, he explained, was the wood that Thorfinn had left on the cliff to dry. This, Horsford added, was not ordinary lumber, but an exotic lumber by-product known as maser wood, which was highly prized by European craftsmen, who fashioned it into luxury goods ranging from communion chalices and furniture to beer steins. In Europe it had become relatively scarce; in the “primitive forests” of the New World, however, it could be found in abundance. All that the Northmen had to do to make their fortune was to build a series of dams to facilitate its transportation from the interior to the coast, where they dried and sorted the wood before loading it onto ships for its final journey to Europe. Though this intricate system of inland waterways had long since fallen into disuse, Horsford believed that he could detect traces of its remains throughout eastern Massachusetts, particularly in modern Watertown, which, he maintained, was the site of Norumbega, the Northmen’s major port. All this, predictably enough, Horsford claimed to derive from his reading: “I do not deduce the maser industry from the presence of the dam at Watertown, but I deduce the dam and seaport and docks and wharves as essential to the maser industry as revealed in the Sagas.”

For four centuries, Horsford posited, the settlement flourished. In the fourteenth century, however, the Northmen ran out of maser wood, which they had harvested far more quickly than it could reproduce itself. As a consequence, they found that they had no choice but to abandon their settlement and return to Europe. Like the mining camps of the old West, Norumbega was a boom town whose fortunes rose and fell with the supply of the nonrenewable natural resource upon which it had been built. As long as this resource remained abundant, the settlement grew and prospered; when it was depleted, the settlement collapsed. In the end, all that remained were the Indians, who, having intermarried with the Northmen, bore traces of their Norse heritage in their physical features, their language, and their culture.

Horsford never wavered in his conviction that it would one day be hard to find anyone in Massachusetts who did not “always know” that the Northmen had once settled “somewhere about the basin of the Charles.” He could not have been more mistaken. In fact, after enjoying a brief period of intense interest in the 1890s, Horsford’s ideas were soon forgotten outside the immediate environs of Cambridge; there they lingered sporadically until the 1920s, after which they became little more than curiosities of a vanished age.

The response to Horsford’s ideas owed a good deal to the widespread public interest in the four hundredth anniversary of the European discovery of America by the Genoese explorer Christopher Columbus. Today, of course, we are far more likely to focus on the ecological, economic, and cultural consequences of Columbus’s landfall than on the voyage itself. In the nineteenth century, however, the voyage remained the overriding concern. No single event in the history of civilization, declared the well-known orator Edward Everett, was of comparable significance, and many Americans agreed.

Yet if Horsford were right, this vital chapter in the annals
of discovery would have to be radically revised. Horsford himself always denied that his findings did anything to tarnish the memory of Columbus. As he once explained, “If it were possible today to prove that the Phoenicians visited and long occupied parts of this country, or that this country was the Atlantis of Pliny and Solon,—either or both of them would dim, by the measure of the faintest Indian-summer haze only, the transcendent glory of the life-work of Columbus.” Nevertheless, he was well aware of the revolutionary implications of his own research. “In view of the great interests involved,” Horsford mused on the eve of the Columbus anniversary in 1892, “one might almost wish — say you?” that the Norse sites he had discovered might have “remained lost for a few years longer.”

While Horsford always assumed that his ideas would eventually carry the day, he never made much headway within the tight-knit and notoriously conservative circle of scholars who made up the historical establishment. The closest he ever came to an outright endorsement from a prominent historian was probably in 1891, when Professor Albert Bushnell Hart of Harvard wrote him a polite note after visiting the Erikson house site. Though Hart was a bit surprised at the modest size of the site, he conceded that he had no special knowledge of the sagas and praised Horsford for educating the community about its antiquities.

Following Horsford’s death in 1893, Hart retained his interest in Horsford’s theories. Indeed, he went so far as to join the University of Pennsylvania historian John Bach McMaster in serving on a special prize committee that Horsford’s daughter Cornelia had established to publicize her father’s ideas. In so doing, of course, neither Hart nor McMaster necessarily endorsed Horsford’s conclusions. Still, their service lent the prestige of two of the country’s leading universities to the premises on which these conclusions had been based.

While Hart and McMaster proved willing to entertain the possibility that Horsford might be on to something, no other historian went even that far. Far more typical was the response of Justin Winsor, the librarian of Harvard College. Most history students, Winsor freely conceded in an anonymous review for the influential Nation magazine in 1888, agreed that the Northmen had landed somewhere in North America. Yet only uncritical enthusiasts like Horsford could find “clearness in obscurity” and “decisiveness everywhere.” Horsford’s books might reveal a “wealth of cartographical adornment” and a “sumptuousness of page,” but they contributed nothing to scholarship and, indeed, were more significant in the “study of psychology” than in the “elucidation of the problem to which they are addressed.” In private, Winsor’s colleagues were even more damning. “Cranks and boosters I suppose we shall always have with us,” chortled Professor Herbert Baxter Adams of Johns Hopkins in a letter to Winsor shortly after his editorial appeared, “but fortunately they are sometimes easily managed.”

Horsford’s neighbor John Fiske was decidedly more even tempered but hardly uncritical. Though Fiske lacked a university affiliation, he was widely respected as a gentleman scholar and the author of a popular history, The Discovery of America, which he published to coincide with the Columbus anniversary celebration. Though he felt it necessary to take up Horsford’s ideas in his Discovery, he found his conclusions far from compelling. If Horsford were right, Fiske observed, what had become of the Northmen’s cattle and horses? Why do we find no vestiges of their burial sites and of their iron tools and weapons? Why is there no documentary mention, in Scandinavia or elsewhere, of this transatlantic trade? “Until such points as these are disposed of,” Fiske concluded, “any further consideration of the hypothesis may properly be postponed.”

It has long been assumed that Winsor and his historical colleagues reflected the views of the public at large. In fact, however, it may be that they provided Horsford with a perfect foil; at least this was what he thought. Freely quoting from Winsor’s review, Horsford chided him for its “undertone of recognized authority” and its “intimation” that Horsford lacked the prop-
er credentials to pursue historical research. "One may ask," he responded sarcastically, "Is Massachusetts a preserve?" For some, this was a highly effective retort.

In the years immediately after Horsford announced his discoveries, his theories met with a solid base of support from such prominent public figures as Charles Daly, the chief justice of the New York Supreme Court and the president of the American Geographical Society. According to E. H. Clement, the editor of the *Boston Evening Transcript*, Horsford's geographical society supporters found Winsor's assault outrageous, adding encouragingly that they had much damaged Winsor's "position and standing." Prior to Horsford, added one admiring journalist in Horsford's obituary, in a clear reference to Winsor and his historical society cronies, most students of early Massachusetts history had confined themselves to the "crabbed chronicles" of the Pilgrims and Puritans. Thanks to Horsford, however, the annals of Massachusetts had been expanded to embrace the literature of all of Europe. Even some of Horsford's critics found Winsor a bit much. The linguist Julius Olson found much to fault in Horsford's handling of Old Norse, but he was even more critical of Winsor's implicit denigration of the historicity of the sagas upon which so much of Horsford's research had been based. "I am very anxious," Olson wrote to Horsford in 1891, that the "historical phases" of the Norse voyages be put on a secure enough footing so that they "cannot be disputed by such men as Justin Winsor."

Further complicating the position of Horsford's critics within the historical establishment was the undeniable fact that none could be said to be entirely disinterested. Fiske had an obvious stake in the status quo, having timed the publication of his *Discovery* to coincide with the traditional date for the landfall of Columbus, while Adams had built his academic career on the then fashionable "germ" theory of institutional development, which traced the origins of American institutions to the forests of Germany. If Horsford were right, both would have to reconsider some of their most cherished beliefs.

Winsor's position was, if anything, even more complex. Winsor was an officer of a university that remained, even at this seemingly late date, acutely aware of its Puritan past; he was also the corresponding secretary of the Massachusetts Historical Society, which saw itself, along with Harvard, as the Puritans' principal intellectual conservator. In addition, he was the author of a Columbus biography and the editor of a collaborative history of the United States that placed great stress on the role of Columbus in the annals of discovery. To complicate matters still further, Winsor was a proud descendant of seventeenth-century Pilgrims and retained an almost proprietary stake in the traditional account of the founding of Massachusetts. Under the circumstances, it is no surprise that he responded to Horsford's ideas with almost visceral disgust. By dislodging Winsor's ancestors from their privileged place in the annals of the state, Horsford challenged one of the defining features of Winsor's personal identity and professional career.

Just as Horsford's most determined critics tended to have a vested interest in his ideas, so, too, did his most enthusiastic supporters. Consider, for example, the remarkable letter that Horsford received in December 1891 from Charles Sanders Pierce in which Pierce praised the "surprising force" of Horsford's application of the deductive method and found much to applaud in his hypothesis regarding the location of Leif Erikson's house. Even more effusive was a draft of this letter that Pierce chose at the last moment to keep to himself. It had "put the thing beyond respectable doubt," Pierce observed. "That Leif came up Symond's Hill seems to me as certain as a fact in the tenth century could be." Pierce's interest in Horsford's notions may well have been sincere but, it is worth noting, hardly disinterested. Desperately in need of money for his sick wife, Pierce was not above flattering his former professor's vanity to secure a personal loan.

The response of the Norwegian nationalist Rasmus B. Anderson was no less complicated. Much like Ole Bull, whom he greatly admired, Anderson was disposed to be sympathet-
gle artifact that could indisputably be linked to the Norse, he felt sure that such discoveries would soon be made. Fowke found especially convincing the supposed house site of Thorfinn Karlsefni—the first Northman who had sailed to the New World with the intention of establishing a permanent settlement—which Fowke may very well have been the first to explore, because it had remained unopened until shortly after Horsford’s death. Like Horsford, Fowke regarded Thorfinn’s career as of particular importance and made much of this site. Here, Fowke observed in the Naturalist in 1894, was the house site of the very individual who had “planted the first colony in a.d. 1007, within a few rods of the present site of the Cambridge Hospital.”

Several years later, Fowke returned to the theme in an extensive article that he published in the American Anthropologist. Expanding on his earlier Naturalist piece, Fowke itemized the “points of difference” between the sites that Horsford had discovered and the English and Indian sites with which he was familiar and reiterated his conviction that they included indisputable “evidences” of Norse settlements in the valley of the Charles.

Before long, Fowke’s enthusiasm rubbed off on McGee. Journeying to Cambridge to see for himself, McGee met with Cornelia, toured the various archaeological sites, and came away impressed. Before long, McGee assured Cornelia, her father’s critics would all be forgotten, and the “verity of Vineland” would be acknowledged by all. To help hasten this day, McGee aided Cornelia in her repeated efforts to publicize her father’s work and raised the issue of whether it might not be important to guarantee the future preservation of the sites that her father had found. McGee even assisted Cornelia in the preparation of a feature article on the “Dwellings of the Saga-Time” in the National Geographic magazine. Be sure to add footnotes, McGee coached Cornelia, since this would “add somewhat to its weight in scientific circles.” Though Cornelia conceded in her article that she had yet to discover any “relics,” and while the accompanying illustrations labeled the sites “sup-
actual artifacts, Horsford’s ideas could no longer be given the respectful attention they had once received. Symptomatic of this new trend was the devastating critique of Horsford’s beliefs that the geographer Juul Dieserud published in 1901 in the *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society*. “If I am not mistaken,” he wrote, “very few competent archaeologists or historians take Prof. Horsford’s extremely uncritical philological deductions or his Norse ruins seriously.” Dieserud’s critique was particularly notable since, in previous years, the American Geographical Society had given Horsford a considerable measure of editorial support.

By the 1920s, support for Horsford’s theories had receded to the journalistic equivalent of the lunatic fringe. Illustrative of this new development was a feature article that the maverick journalist Edward H. Packard prepared for the *Cambridge Tribune* in February 1924. Intent on reviving Horsford’s fading reputation, Packard urged that his theories be dramatized in an educational film in the tradition of such cinematic classics as the *The Birth of a Nation*. Such a film, Packard predicted, would awaken American youth to the idea that one could discover the taproot of the “spiritual Nordic ideals” that through some mysterious process — Packard never said just how — would later reemerge to shape the lives of all true Americans. For Packard, these spiritual heirs to the Northmen included the Pilgrims, the Puritans, and every president of the United States, including Calvin Coolidge — whose ancestors, Packard added, fairly bursting with pride, hailed from Watertown, the “site of the ‘Ancient City of Norumbega’.”

Packard’s editorial was tinged with the xenophobia that was then a common feature of the popular press. It was almost certainly timed to coincide with the passage of the highly restrictive Immigration Act of 1924, which significantly limited the further entry into the United States of the immigrants from southern Europe who had arrived in such enormous numbers during the previous thirty years. Though Packard did not refer to the act directly, he was obviously sympathetic to Horsford’s implicit glorification of the northern European Leif Erikson at the expense of the southern European Christopher Columbus.

Leif Erikson’s landfall, Packard explained, had set American civilization on a thousand-year mission that would culminate in the ultimate triumph of “Christian Nordic stock” over every other race on earth. So overblown was Packard’s rhetoric, so inflated its mingling of local pride, racial chauvinism, and millennial zeal, that it is tempting to speculate that his editorial might have been intended as a spoof. There can be little question that it was not: Packard later reiterated his views, in even greater detail, in a curious collection of essays published in 1929. Still, it is hard to repress a smile at its almost cosmic rhetorical excess. How else, after all, is one to respond to Packard’s calm insistence that the Erikson house site would one day become the “American Mecca” to which Americans from all over the country would reverently repair? Or, for that matter, to his confident prediction that Horsford deserved to be remembered as the divine agent who had revealed the “design of Providence” in selecting Cambridge, Massachusetts, as the “radiating center of American discovery, civilization, and destiny”?

If xenophobia seems a sufficient explanation for Packard’s appropriation of Horsford’s ideas, Horsford’s own motives were more complex. Horsford himself, of course, always claimed that his conclusions were the inevitable product of his rigorous application of the scientific method. From the standpoint of hindsight, however, it is worth considering whether they may have owed a good deal more to his resolutely Protestant approach to the printed word. Like the inner-directed individual described by David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd*, Horsford treated the printed word with an almost superstitious awe that worked like a mental gyroscope to deflect criticism and to focus his attention on a particular goal.

As a pillar of Cambridge’s Shepard Congregational Church and the son of a missionary to the Seneca Indians in upstate New York, Horsford had long been accustomed to
treating the Bible as a practical guide to the trials and tribulations of everyday life. Given this cast of mind, it required but a short step to apply an identical technique to the explanation of the sagas. Like the Bible, the sagas could be invested with the authority of a sacred text. And like the Bible, they could be interpreted with the confidence of a true believer even if their interpreter lacked a firsthand knowledge of the language in which they had originally been composed. In this context, it is notable that Horsford saw nothing peculiar in identifying the Indian word "sagamore" as a variant of the Icelandic for "saga-men," or "America" as a variant of "Erik's land," the Icelandic word for the land of the Norse explorer Erik the Red. When Horsford was rebuked by Julius Olson for his ignorance of Icelandic, he responded, with true Protestant self-assurance, that the sagas, like the Bible, were properly accessible to all. "All that one needs of Icelandic literature," Horsford asserted, taking the offensive, "might... be printed on less than half a page of the New York Daily Tribune.

Given his assumptions, it is perhaps understandable that Horsford rarely evinced more than perfunctory interest in an actual dig. He may have been quick to fault his critics for their preoccupation with the literature of the Pilgrims and Puritans, but in his own way he was no less insistently bookish. According to Cornelia, the only archaeological fieldwork that her father ever sponsored involved sinking a few test pits at the supposed site of Leif's house. All this was entirely compatible with Horsford's premises. He may have insisted that the most important sources to be consulted were not the annals of New England but the "book" of "the coast and the field." Yet his approach to this landscape had been profoundly conditioned by his prior familiarity with the printed word.

Further insight into Horsford's motives are suggested by comparing his career with that of an almost exact contemporary, the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith. Like Smith, Horsford spent much of his childhood in a region of upstate New York in which the English settlers mingled freely with the older Indian population, which had not yet been entirely dis-
meaning of America, Horsford’s archetypal American came to resemble no one so much as Horsford himself: a successful industrial entrepreneur who had turned nature to profit. “Industries for 350 Years,” proclaimed a plaque on the site of Horsford’s Norse fort, “Maser wood — burrs — fish — furs— agriculture.” Such promotional language was the stock-in-trade for the industrialists of Horsford’s day. Yet it rarely, if ever, had been used to describe the earliest settlements of the Pilgrims and the Puritans. Several of the photographs that Horsford used to illustrate his books reinforced his basic point. The factories of Watertown, these photographs suggested, had evolved naturally — indeed, almost organically — out of the stone walls the Northmen had left behind.

Horsford’s notions were relevant to the needs of his day in a further respect. By supplanting John Winthrop with Thorfinn Karlsefni as the prototypical Massachusetts settler, Horsford crafted a potentially usable past for the thousands of European immigrants of non-English and non-Protestant stock who had come by his day to make up such a large portion of the population. Few of these residents could have been expected to identify particularly closely with the storied exploits of the seventeenth-century English Protestant dissenter. Yet as relative newcomers determined to improve their condition, they had, at least potentially, a good deal in common with Thorfinn Karlsefni, the Norse entrepreneur. Whether Horsford himself was fully aware of this implication of his ideas remains an open question. Though he championed the cause of immigrant groups like the Norwegian-Americans — whom, like Ole Bull, he hailed as the descendants of the Norse — he was equally solicitous of the native born, who he hoped would return to Leif Erikson’s house site to rekindle pride in their “birthright.” Still, Horsford understood the need to find some way to fit the Indians into the story and so can be said to have anticipated a major trend in the historical sensibilities of the present. Even more notable was his insistence on the symbiotic relationship between the human population and the natural environment. Here Horsford prefigured the current preoccupation with the potentially devastating ecological implications of the exhaustion of a nonrenewable resource. Now that historians have come to put such concerns near the top of their agenda, perhaps it will once again be possible to appreciate the imagination that inspired Horsford’s quixotic quest.

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Richard R. John is an associate professor of history at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He received his Ph.D. in the History of American Civilization from Harvard University in 1989. Between 1981 and 1986, he served as an Emerson Resident Fellow of the Cambridge Historical Society. His publications include Spread the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse (1995), which was awarded the Herman E. Kroos Prize of the Business History Conference and the Allan Nevins Prize of the Society of American Historians.
Notes

1. For a survey of the evidence, see David B. Quinn, North America from Earliest Discovery to First Settlements: The Norse Voyages to 1612 (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 20–40. Quinn identifies Vinland with Newfoundland, though he freely admits that the subject remains controversial (p. 40). For a translation of the sagas, see Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson, trans., The Vinland Sagas: The Norse Discovery of America (New York: New York University Press, 1966). Like Horsford, Magnusson and Palsson conclude that it is “impossible to avoid the conclusion that Vinland cannot have lain very far from New England” (p. 42).


3. Horsford’s principal publications on the Norse voyages are: Discovery of America by Northmen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1888); The Problem of the Northmen (Cambridge: John Wilson, 1889); The Discovery of the Ancient City of Norumbega (n.p., n.d); Remarks at the Second Anniversary of the Watertown Historical Society (n.p.: [1890]); Sketch of the Norse Discovery of America (n.p.: [1891]); The Defences of Norumbega (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1891); The Landfall of Leif Erikson (Boston: Damrell and Upham, 1892); Leif’s House in Vineland (Boston: Damrell & Upham, 1893). Horsford also oversaw the publication of Julius Emil Olson, Review of the Problem of the Northmen… and a Reply by Eben Norton Horsford (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1890).

The publishing history of these books is surprisingly complex. In 1890, Houghton Mifflin issued two editions of The Problem of the Northmen as well as an edition of The Discovery of Norumbega. Though the various editions of Problem appear to be identical, the Houghton Mifflin edition of Discovery differs from the privately printed edition in various respects. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Horsford’s Discovery are to the privately printed edition.


6. Horsford, Sketch, 1.

7. Inez Bull, Ole Bull’s Activities in the United States Between 1843 and 1880 (Smithtown, N.Y.: Exposition Press, 1982), 58, 68.


10. Garrett exaggerated Horsford’s role in the erection of the Erikson statue when he contended that Horsford was its “chief instigator.” Even more important were Bull, who had been collecting money for the project since 1873, and Rasmus B. Anderson, who suggested the idea to Bull. Garrett, “Discovery,” 102; Rasmus B. Anderson, Life Story of Rasmus B. Anderson (Madison, Wis.: n.p., 1915), 189–91, 206–8.

11. Horsford, Discovery of America, 24–27. As Horsford became more involved with his Norse explorations, he later changed his mind and credited the Stone Tower to the Norse. Horsford, Remarks, 12.


17. Ibid.


19. Ibid., 15.

20. Ibid., 18.


22. Horsford, Discovery of America, 54.

23. Horsford, Defences of Norumbega, 83.

24. Horsford, Discovery of Norumbega, 23.

25. Ibid., 24.


27. Horsford, Discovery of Norumbega, 37.

28. Ibid., 43.


31. [Edward Everett], “The Discovery of America by the Northmen,”
33. Ibid.
34. Albert Bushnell Hart to Eben Norton Horsford, 8 March 1891, Eben Norton Horsford papers, RPI.
36. [Justin Winsor], Nation, 3 May 1888, 368. For the attribution, see Horsford, Problem, 5, 20. See also Justin Winsor, ed., Narrative and Critical History of America, 8 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1889), vol. 1, 98.
39 Horsford, Problem, 8.
40. E. H. Clement to Eben Norton Horsford, 3 February 1892, RPI.
41. Boston Advertiser, 2 January 1893.
42. Julius Olson to Eben Norton Horsford, 2 May 1891, RPI.
43. Charles Sanders Pierce to Eben Norton Horsford, 3 December 1891, RPI.
44. Draft of ibid., Charles Sanders Pierce papers project, Indiana University. I am grateful to Professor Max Fisch of Indiana University for drawing this letter to my attention.
46. Horsford’s interest in Norumbega was initially spurred by its appearance on a number of early French maps. For a discussion of this mythical city, see Sigmund Diamond, “Norumbega: New England, Or, the Archaeological Treasures along the Charles River” (Boston: Damrell & Upham, 1893).
47. John F. Whitman, Watertown Historical Society, to Eben Norton Horsford, 12 December 1890, RPI.
50. Eben Norton Horsford, Sketch, 3. Horsford found especially notable Frank Hamilton Cushing’s pioneering fieldwork among the Zuni Indians, which, Horsford contended, lent support to his confidence in the reliability of orally transmitted sources such as the Icelandic sagas. Horsford, Discovery of America, 14.
51. Frank Hamilton Cushing to Eben Norton Horsford, 18 January 1892, RPI.
52. Ibid., 1 February 1892, RPI.
53. Anderson, Norse Discovery, 309.
54. Cornelia Horsford to W. J. McGee, 12 January 1894, BAE. Cornelia also commissioned reports from scholars familiar with Norse sites in Europe and with Eskimo sites in North America. Horsford, Leif’s House, 7. Among the scholars Cornelia commissioned were the anthropologist Franz Boas and the archaeologists Valtyr Gudmundson and Thorstein Erlingsson. Horsford, “Vinland and Its Ruins,” 15–17; Thorstein Erlingsson, Ruins of the Saga Time in Iceland (London: David Nutt, 1899).
55. Gerard Fowke to W. J. McGee, 29 April 1894, BAE.
57. Fowke, “Norse Remains,” 626.
58. Ibid., 624.
60. Horsford, Inscribed Stone, 6.
61. W. J. McGee to Cornelia Horsford, 10 March 1898, BAE.
62. Ibid., 22 May 1900, BAE.
63. Ibid., 18 January 1898, BAE.
70. [Edward H. Packard], “Leif Erikson Beat Chris Columbus to It, Five Centuries,” Cambridge Tribune, 16 February 1924. The attribution is based on the copy at the Cambridge Historical Society.
vidualist (Boston, 1929).

72. Ibid.


77. Horsford, Discovery of Norumbega, 41, and Horsford, Defences of Norumbega, 3.

78. Cited in Bacon, Walks and Rides, 271.

79. Horsford, Sketch, 4.

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