

Pipestone

National Monument
Minnesota

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



An Unbroken Legacy

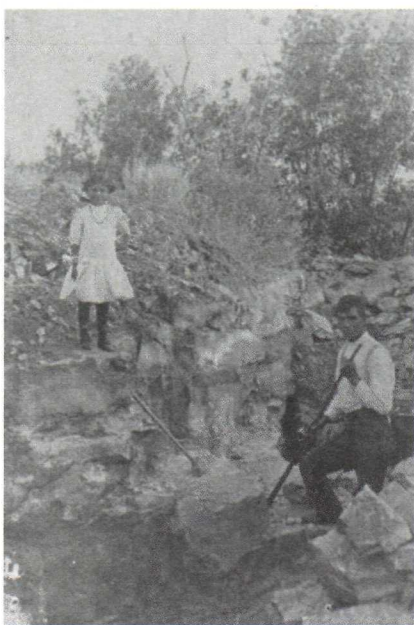
For centuries, pipestone has been an item of ceremonial importance as well as an object of trade for the people of the Great Plains. The task of extracting pipestone is a difficult and slow one. Quarrying is the first and most basic step of the pipestone tradition. The beautiful pipestone creations are the final result of a long process that begins with the monumental effort and the unyielding dedication of the pipestone quarriers.

Many Tribes, Many Traditions



Quarriers ca. 1890s

Indigenous people began to quarry pipestone here sporadically ~3,000 years ago as they passed through the area. Around 900 CE, ancestors of the Mandan and Hidatsa people were the first to quarry regularly. Around 1300 CE, ancestors of the Omaha, Ponca, Ioway, Otoe, and Missouri Tribes were the dominant quarriers. In ~1700 CE, the Ihanktonwan Oyate (Yankton Sioux) Tribe were keepers of the quarries prior to the government forcing them ~120 miles south in the late 1850s. Pipes made from the stone at these quarries have been found from New York to Montana, and from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. In 1911, Ihanktonwan (Yankton) Elders led by Hollow Horn were the last large group to quarry pipestone, but individuals, families, and smaller groups continue to quarry to this day.



Joe and Bessie Taylor ~1913

Keeping the Tradition Alive

Three local families – the Bryans, Derbys, and Taylors – kept quarrying and the craft of pipe-making alive during the early to mid-1900s. For the most part, these crafters learned to carve from their parents and grandparents as the skill was passed from generation to generation. Up until the mid-1960s, the quarries were worked by a small group of people who used the same quarry pits each year. The number of quarriers jumped from ten to twenty-three between 1966 and 1973 as more Indigenous families began to travel here.

As of 2023, there are 56 active quarry pits worked by Indigenous people from all over the country. Anyone enrolled in a federally recognized tribe has the right to quarry here.

Quarrying Today

Quarrying today is still done by hand - the use of power tools is not allowed. The tools have changed over time, but the amount of labor required has not. Quarriers in the distant past used large quartzite boulders to smash through the quartzite along with tree branches to pry layers of rock apart. Today, quarriers use sledge hammers, steel wedges, shovels, and pry bars. Breaking through the Sioux Quartzite on top of the pipestone can take weeks, months, and even years depending on how deep the quarry pit is.

The Sioux Quartzite is harder than steel, but the pipestone rock is only as hard as a human fingernail. Quarrying by hand ensures that the pipestone is not damaged by the time the quarrier reaches it.

There are 56 quarry pits that are annual - so long as a quarrier works the pit once a year, they are given the option to renew their permit. There are also 2 monthly pits and 2 weekly pits that are open to anyone enrolled in a federally recognized tribe. There is no charge for any permit, the cost is one's labor and time.



Travis Erickson working his pit with help from Jessica Arkeketa.



The photo above shows quarrier Aaron Prim working his way through the layers of quartzite in a monthly pit. Reaching the pipestone layer in just one month requires an incredible amount of labor and strategy. Experienced quarriers don't just swing at the rock. They carefully plan on where to place their wedges to remove layers in a strategic way that affords them the best advantage in reaching the pipestone while also keeping them safe from falling boulders.