

REVELATIONS IN STONE: EDWARD HITCHCOCK AND THE GEOLOGY OF CAPE COD AND THE ISLANDS

by Robert T. McMaster

Two hundred and one years ago, Reverend Edward Hitchcock visited Martha's Vineyard in an effort to unravel the island's geological history. What he saw challenged his faith and changed the course of nineteenth-century science.

In June 1823, the residents of Vineyard Haven, known then as Holmes Hole, were no doubt intrigued, perhaps even a bit amused, by a curious sight. The packet boat from New Bedford had just arrived and a tall, gaunt figure had disembarked. Dressed in a black topcoat and a stovepipe hat, he must have seemed out of place amidst the hustle and bustle at dockside, surrounded by fishermen hawking their wares and liverymen loading their wagons.

That unlikely figure was the Reverend Edward Hitchcock (Figure 1), pastor of the tiny Congregational church in Conway in western Massachusetts. He had dedicated his life to preaching the word of God, to saving souls. But his mission on this spring day was not spiritual—it was geological.

Hitchcock hired a chaise, a horse-drawn carriage with a single seat, then set out to tour the Vineyard. It probably turned more than a few heads, the sight of that austere figure trundling along the island's rough and rutted roads, from Edgartown to Tisbury to Chilmark, stopping frequently to survey the landscape and collect rock samples. Along the way he made notes for an article that would appear in the *American Journal of Science* the following year, the first detailed geological study of the Vineyard ever to appear in print.

As he traveled around the Vineyard, Hitchcock observed three distinct geological zones (Figure 2). To the south he found “a perfectly level, sandy tract, uninhabited and uninhabitable.” He named it the “Alluvial Formation.” On the western end of the island he noted a second zone consisting of “alternating beds of variously coloured clays, sand, ferruginous sand, pebbles, clay and



Edward Hitchcock
Figure 1. Portrait of Edward Hitchcock from
W. S. Tyler, *A History of Amherst College* (New
York: Frederick H. Hitchcock, 1895).

pebbles, and clay and sand intermixed” that he termed the “Plastic Clay Formation,” borrowing a term from British geology of his day.

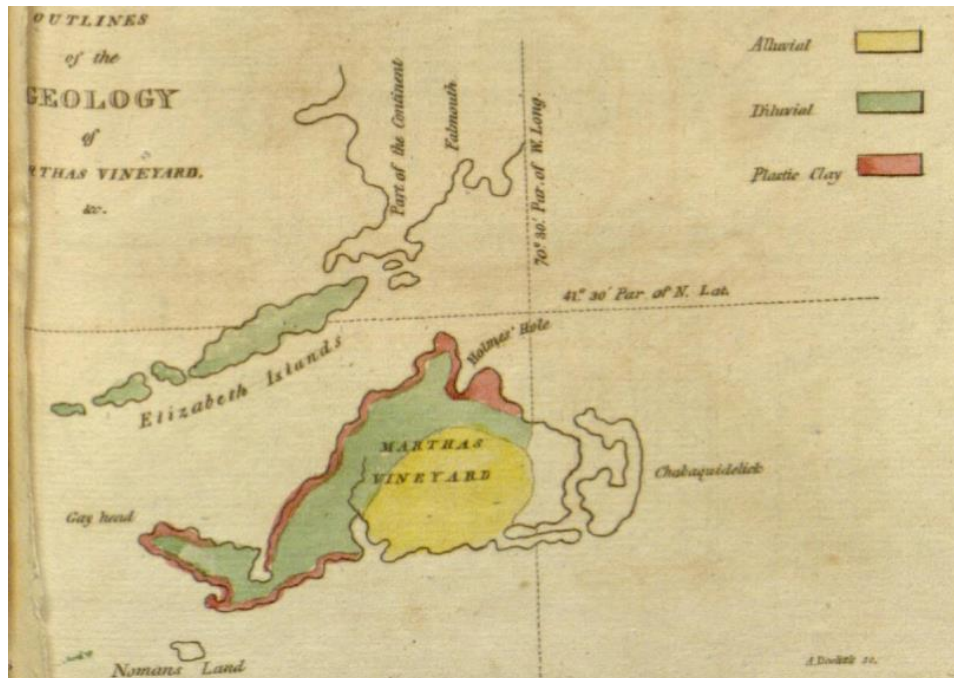


Figure 2. Geological map of Martha's Vineyard from Edward Hitchcock, "Notices of the Geology of Martha's Vineyard and the Elizabeth Islands." *American Journal of Science* 7(2) (1823):240-8.

But the feature that most attracted Hitchcock's attention on that first visit to the Vineyard lay atop the clay. "All the north western extent of the island is hilly and uneven," he wrote, "with no abrupt precipices...but rising into rounded eminences," some reaching three hundred or more feet above sea level. Strewn across that rolling terrain he observed a jumbled mantle of pebbles and stones of granite, gneiss, quartz, and mica. He named this the "Diluvial Formation," the term "diluvium" in his day referring to material deposited by flood waters.

Most striking of all to Hitchcock was "the quantity of huge boulder stones, scattered over these hills on every side," some over 50 feet in diameter. From the outset he assumed these to be outcrops of the underlying bedrock. But the local inhabitants soon set him straight—there was, they assured him, no bedrock to be found anywhere on the island of Martha's Vineyard.

But if those huge boulders were not derived from the underlying bedrock, where had they come from? Here Hitchcock made a telling observation, one that would resonate among geologists worldwide over the coming decades. Those boulders, that diluvium, he asserted, must have been "derived from the rocks that occur in place along the coast, on the mainland."

Near the end of the same article, Hitchcock made another point with profound implications. Those three formations he observed on Martha's Vineyard were not limited to the Vineyard. He wrote,

...the Vineyard and Nantucket are a continuation of the extensive formation, hitherto called alluvial, of which Long-Island has been regarded as the north-eastern limit. If we prolong this curve still further, it will include within it Nova Scotia and at least part of Newfoundland.

Edward Hitchcock, like most scientists of his time, regarded much of the surface geology of the earth as the result of a flood, the Great Flood of Genesis, the flood of Noah and his Ark. So when he assigned the label “diluvium” to the detritus covering the northwestern portion of Martha’s Vineyard, he was ascribing its deposition to that great biblical cataclysm, a conclusion with which most geologists of his day would concur.

Now Edward Hitchcock was a man of strict orthodox Christian faith, ill-inclined to trifle with God’s word. But he was also an astute observer and thinker, particularly on matters geological. And that mixture of pebbles and stones, all apparently transported from the north and west—it clearly troubled him. And those huge “boulders,” some weighing 100 tons or more—what flood, however powerful, could move one of those, he asked. And why would a flood carry all that material in one direction rather than dispersing it randomly over the sea bottom? In time those questions would lead him to a stunning conclusion, one that would overturn many long-held beliefs, both scientific and religious.

Seven years later, Edward Hitchcock returned to southeastern Massachusetts, no longer as a church pastor but now as Professor of Chemistry and Natural History at Amherst College, a position to which he had been named in 1825. He had received an appointment as the first State Geologist of Massachusetts with the goal of surveying the state’s untapped mineral resources.

In July 1830 Hitchcock set out on the first field excursion of the Massachusetts Geological Survey, traveling in a rickety horse-drawn wagon accompanied by one of his students. A month into their travels, they arrived on Cape Cod. His first observations, not surprisingly, harked back to his visit to the Vineyard seven years earlier:

From Sandwich to Barnstable 12 miles diluvium all the way. In many places the boulders are enormously large weighing 100 to 200 tons and very thick....In short the face of the country and its geological character appear to be precisely like those of Martha’s Vineyard and the Elizabeth Islands. I doubt not but the same remark will apply to the whole of Cape Cod. (Sept 4, 1830)

Some of Hitchcock’s notes from that first foray to Cape Cod read more like the random musings of a tourist than the methodical observations of a scientist:

The roads are not as bad as we expected to find them. The scenery made up of sand hills—marshes—saltworks and here and there a copse of low trees is picturesque though

generally dreary. The houses appear better than we had anticipated and there is an appearance of comfort and even thrift which we had not expected. The inhabitants also appear obliging and civil everywhere. (Sept 6, 1830)

Professor Hitchcock had just a single complaint along the way, one that might well be heard from travelers to the region two centuries later: *“There is a great deficiency of guide boards and we are apt to get out of the way.”*

Hitchcock reserved his most effusive descriptions of the Cape’s scenery for its outermost extremity:

...Truro exhibits the most remarkable example of diluvial action that I ever saw. The whole town is scooped out and piled up in that peculiar manner which characterizes diluvium—the hills being from one to two hundred feet high and often very steep.

Still farther up the arm of the Cape he observed,

The appearance of Provincetown is exceeding picturesque—as we ride along the beach below the houses first stand the windmills then the houses in irregular order generally two or three rows and mixed with yards for drying fish and salt works...A semicircular bay is enclosed on the north and east by a sandy beach and low sand hills almost destitute of vegetation, which seem to threaten, and do in fact threaten, to bury the village, and to fill the harbor. (Figure 3)



Figure 3. A woodcut of Provincetown by Orra White Hitchcock, from Hitchcock’s *Final Report on the Geology of Massachusetts*. Northampton, MA.: J. H. Butler, 1841.

Hitchcock was so enamored of Provincetown that he offered an accolade that many modern-day visitors would likely endorse:

...a visit to Provincetown by land, would probably in most cases, be quite as effectual a remedy for ennui and other fashionable complaints, as a resort to Ballston and Saratoga.

Traveling south once again, Hitchcock described an odd sensation that he termed a “mirage,” an experience this writer recalls from his childhood vacations to the Cape long ago:

A curious deception was noticed by myself and two companions...in the sandy regions of the Cape particularly in Orleans. We seem even on level ground to be ascending in other words to be placed in a basin. We observed this mirage so frequently and it was so striking that it could not have been a mistake. Frequently the road seemed to have an ascent of two or three degrees before us and on passing forward and looking back an elevation equally great appeared in that direction. This phenomenon seems to be of the nature of what the sailors call looming but I cannot explain it and especially why it should appear in a sandy rather than any other region. (Sept 8, 1830)

Hitchcock’s description of that “mirage” may have been the first ever to appear in print, but it would not be the last. Some thirty years later another astute observer of the natural world, Henry David Thoreau, wrote of a similar experience in his famous essay, *Cape Cod*, even mentioning Hitchcock’s earlier observations.

At Falmouth Hitchcock boarded a steamer, intent on studying the Gay Head Cliffs. For what he witnessed on that excursion he spared no superlatives:

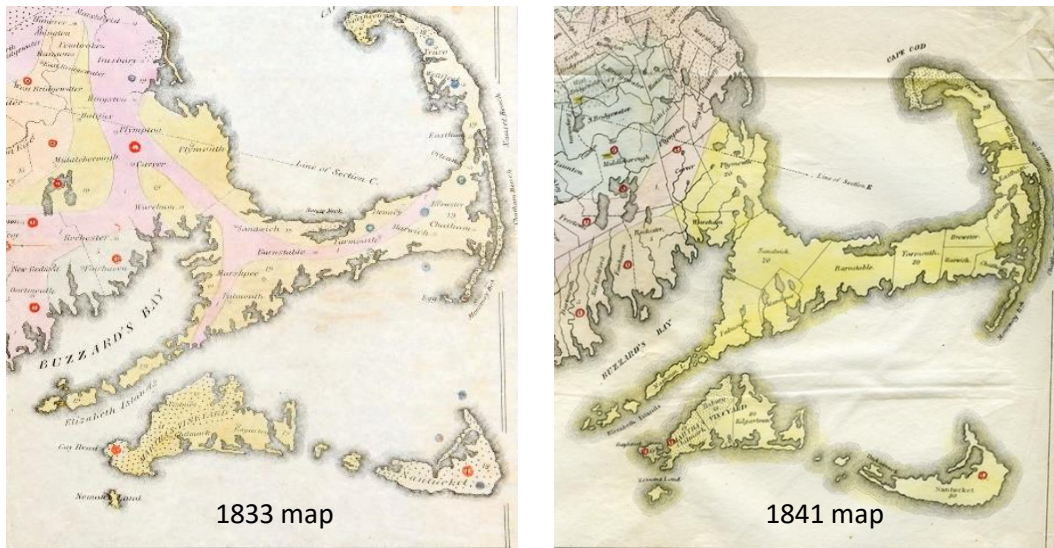
The most interesting spot on Martha’s Vineyard is Gay Head; which constitutes the western extremity of this island, and consists of clays and sands of various colors. Its height cannot be more than 150 feet; yet its variegated aspect, and the richness of its colors, render it a striking and even splendid object, when seen from the ocean... Every lover of natural scenery would be delighted to visit this spot. There is nothing to compare with it in New England.

Back on the mainland, Hitchcock traveled north from Falmouth toward the mainland. Once again he was perplexed by the many huge boulders scattered over that sandy peninsula:

From Falmouth to Plymouth 36 miles diluvium all the way. But in the west part of Falmouth and Sandwich the bowlders are so large and thick and so numerous and the hills so high that there can be no doubt that granite and gneiss are in place a little below the surface [by “in place” he means bedrock]. (Sept 13, 1830)

In his 1833 report, Hitchcock reiterated his belief that the “bowlders” of Cape Cod were derived from bedrock, and his geological map for that report indicated as much. Nevertheless, he seemed to leave the subject open to further discussion:

The map will show...that I have extended a strip of granite from Plymouth into Barnstable county as far east as Brewster, and carried another branch into Falmouth...Others must judge, whether the evidence of the existence of granite in place in the region under consideration, is probable enough to justify me in the course I have taken. (Figures 4a and 4b)



Figures 4a and 4b. The granite bedrock underlying parts of Cape Cod shown in pink in his 1833 map was removed by Hitchcock in his 1841 revised map. From Hitchcock (1833) and Hitchcock (1841).

But in his 1841 revision of that map, the granite bedrock of Cape Cod had been removed. In his explanation he hedged a bit on the question:

...as the entire surface is diluvium, I thought it better to color it as such; thus representing what I know exists there, instead of something about which I am not certain.

Hitchcock may be forgiven his equivocation on this point. Not until the mid-twentieth century would the matter be resolved when geophysicists determined that the depth of the bedrock ranged from 80 feet at the Cape Cod Canal to over 1600 feet at Nantucket. A map from that study shows the highest elevation of the bedrock extending from Bourne eastward to Barnstable and southward to Falmouth, comparing very favorably with Hitchcock's map of more than a century earlier.

Hitchcock received yet another hint about the region's geological history in his travels to the Cape and Islands in 1832:

...a pilot told me that on the west side of the harbour [Holmes Hole] he had seen what looked like a swamp or marsh and another man said he believes some cedar stumps had been found formerly toward the lighthouse in shallow water. Mr. Allen of Chilmark tells me that cedar stumps have been found on the northwest shore of the Vineyard near Gay Head. (May 19, 1832)

He received similar reports on Nantucket, at Yarmouth on Cape Cod, and elsewhere along the Atlantic coastline. In his 1833 report he wrote,

Geologists are not a little perplexed satisfactorily to account for submarine forests...in general it has been supposed that these forests have subsided in consequence of earthquakes, or other internal movements of the earth.

He seems to have accepted the idea that those “submarine forests” had once stood on higher ground, well above sea level, before the land subsided and the trees were inundated with sea water. Whether he ever contemplated another explanation, rising sea level from glacial meltwater, we do not know. But in 1833 the idea that a vast glacier once covered most of New England was the stuff of science fiction, even to Professor Edward Hitchcock. But not for long.

On the mainland Hitchcock observed two other important features that reinforced his doubts about the origin of that so-called diluvium. Gouged in bedrock across New England he noted deep furrows, nearly all with the same orientation, from northwest to southeast. In addition he observed sinuous trains of large boulders, many extending tens of miles from their origin, all with similar orientations.

By 1833 Edward Hitchcock had seen more than enough evidence to make him skeptical of the “diluvial hypothesis,” that notion that the Great Flood was the force responsible for most of the sculpting of the earth’s surface. In his report he wrote,

Making every allowance for the reduction of the gravity of these boulders when in water, I confess I cannot conceive how such a work could have been effected by this agency [by water].

Then he broadened the point:

That a transient deluge, like that described in the Scriptures, could have produced, and brought into its present situation, all the diluvium which is now spread over the surface of this continent, will not, it seems to me, be admitted for a moment by any impartial observer. It has obviously been the result of different agencies, and of different epochs.

But what were those “different agencies?” That question continued to bedevil Hitchcock. Then in 1841 he received a copy of a geological treatise entitled *Études sur les Glaciers*. The author was

a Swiss scientist named Louis Agassiz (although recent research suggests that much of that work had been “adapted” without credit from the writings of German-Swiss geologist, Jean de Charpentier and others). Agassiz put forward the radical notion that ice, not water, was the primary agent responsible for sculpting much of the surface of the northern hemisphere, that a huge ice cap had accumulated in the northern polar regions, gradually expanding southward over hundreds of thousands of years. It was a glacier, or series of glaciers, of massive extent, and it gouged, scraped, and bulldozed the earth’s surface as it advanced.

When Edward Hitchcock read Agassiz’s treatise, he was an immediate convert. In an address to the Association of American Geologists in Philadelphia in April 1841, he described the theory of the glacial origin of those effects with evangelical fervor:

While reading this work...I seemed to be acquiring a new geological sense; and I look upon our smoothed and striated rocks, our accumulations of gravel, and the tout ensemble of diluvial phenomena, with new eyes.

Hitchcock’s ringing endorsement gave Agassiz’s theory wide exposure and credibility among American scientists, although there remained a good deal of resistance in some quarters—Hitchcock himself backpedaled and equivocated on the idea repeatedly. But the evidence was strong and compelling. By the 1860s the concept of continental glaciation had been accepted and embraced by most scientists in America and worldwide.

As to nonscientists, particularly theologians, members of the clergy, and other people of faith who were suspicious of new ideas in science, the fact that Reverend Edward Hitchcock, well known as a devout man of strict orthodox Christian views, was comfortable with such a notion may well have given them license to accept the theory.

Edward Hitchcock’s life was a dual journey of faith, faith in God and faith in science. It led him to question some of the basic tenets of his religion as well as some of the fundamental scientific ideas of his day. And that journey began with a visit to Martha’s Vineyard in 1823 and the sight of those huge “boulders” scattered over a sandy Chilmark plain.

In a sermon delivered to his congregation in 1822, Reverend Hitchcock warned his parishioners to pay heed to the world around them. “*Let the unbeliever then remember that as he passes over our hills the very stones cry out against him.*” The stones did cry out to Edward Hitchcock that day on Martha’s Vineyard, and the message they bore was truly a revelation in stone.

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Fugitive from Injustice: Book 2 of the County Wicklow Mysteries (Unquomok Press, 2023). For more information on Edward Hitchcock, please visit www.EdwardHitchcock.com.

Acknowledgement

Author's note: I am indebted to the Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, Amherst, MA, for providing access to their collection of thousands of pages of Hitchcock's notes, letters, and sermons.

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