

Whetstones: Oldest Hoosier Mineral Industry



Fine-grained sandstone quarried in northwestern Orange County was a valuable Indiana mineral resource for more than 150 years. The stone was shaped into many different types of sharpening stones (whetstones), and grave markers were crafted from the stone. These products were sold throughout the United States and beyond.

As early as 1821, rough stone, quarried about 9 miles west of the town of Orleans, was hauled overland by oxcart and horse-drawn wagons to a water-powered finishing mill at Hindostan Falls on the White River. Finished stone was then shipped by flatboat to New Orleans and other markets.

The production of whetstone grave markers peaked during the 1840s and dropped off rapidly in the early 1850s. This drop in production can be tied to improvements in transportation in southern Indiana. The establishment of regional railroad lines opened Indiana to white marble from Tennessee, Georgia, and Vermont. Because whetstone is far more resistant to weathering than limestone or marble, those grave markers are easy to read even today, while the other, once more desirable stones have eroded.

Today, artificial stone dominates the abrasives industry and Hoosier whetstone production has ceased. The Hopper Quarry in Orange County was the last quarry producing whetstone in Indiana; it closed in 1988.



Whetstone being smoothed on a “rub wheel”