



PHOTOS BY MYKAL MCELLOWNEY/STAFF

Allen Coleman points out an array of ancient petroglyphs at the new one-of-a-kind Rock Art Museum at the Hagood Mill in Pickens.

# THIS ART ROCKS

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## PICKENS

It took more than 1,000 years for historic rock carvings to be discovered at the Hagood Mill Historic Site and Folklife Center, but the 12 years since then have seemed like an eternity to enthusiasts who have been waiting impatiently for public viewing of the petroglyphs. ¶ The long wait, apparently, is almost over. ¶ Pickens County Council, which had been investigating the delay in the opening of the Hagood Creek Petroglyphs Site of South Carolina, voted to open the facility “as soon as possible,” which the county tourism and marketing director says will be Sept. 19. ¶ Unearthing the reasons for the repeated delays in opening the center has been nearly as murky a business as discovering who made the enigmatic carvings and when. ¶ The latter may never be known. The former is one that no one seems to be able or willing to talk much about.



Some of the ancient petroglyphs that will be on display.

“All I can say is that I’m glad it’s coming to fruition because I put a lot of heart and soul into it. That whole rock art center was my baby. I conceived it, I designed it and I raised the money to build it.

ALLEN COLEMAN  
COUNTY MUSEUM DIRECTOR

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# Petroglyph

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"That's the \$64,000 question that nobody's been able to answer for a long, long time," said Dennis Chastain, a Pickens County outdoorsman who was part of the group that discovered the petroglyphs in 2003.

Regardless, it will be worth the wait, according to Helen Hockwalt, county tourism and marketing director.

## Tourist attraction

The center was built over the site where the petroglyphs were found, but it took some special technology to make it possible to see the carvings, Hockwalt said.

The 32 petroglyphs, which includes 17 human figures, were so eroded when they were discovered that they could be seen only under certain conditions.

Chastain says he and a friend who were looking for petroglyphs in the area looked at the 30-foot rock and couldn't see anything.

Then another friend, Mike Bramlett, from Oconee County, went back to the site on a rainy, misty day.

"Lo and behold he found a human stick figure, which is pretty incredible," Chastain said. "That was the first human stick figure petroglyph that had been found in South Carolina."

They are believed to be at least 1,000 years old, but their time and creators aren't known.

Designers of the Hagood Creek Petroglyph Site facility have recreated conditions inside the viewing area that make the carvings stand out like they did that day, Hockwalt said.

As visitors enter the facility, they first come to a lobby area with exhibits, including some "portable" petroglyphs, a video and materials from a book on petroglyphs in South Carolina by Tommy Charles, who was a professor at the Institute of Archeology and Anthropology at the University of South Carolina and among the discoverers of the carvings, Hockwalt said.

In another room, the petroglyphs are in their natural location, protected from further weathering by the building.

It's like a darkened theater, with a viewing ramp, and lights that shine on sections of the rock in synch with an audio presentation narrated by Charles.

"You flip them on in succession and those human stick figures just jump out at you," Chastain said.

Among the human figures is a rare carving that's sometimes called "Refrigerator Man." It's a stick figure with a rectangular body shaped something like a refrigerator.

Other carvings are abstract figures.

The audio program "was difficult to develop because of the diversity of visitors we expect," Hockwalt said. "We wanted it to be informative for school children, academics, ordinary people, as well as international travelers who will come here."

The center is expected to draw people from around the world because petroglyphs are usually found in places that are hard to reach, such as in remote mountain caves, she said.

## Long time coming

Sorting out the history of the delays in the project has been a chore, even for County Council, which assigned its Administration and Finance Committee to look into two months ago.

"Obviously something has been amiss at the mill for quite some time," a member of the audience at Monday's County Council meeting told the council. "Buildings going up and not opening. Buildings going up and mysteriously disappearing. We don't know what's caused the problems and we can't know that changing the staff out or the management is going to correct it."

"What I'm asking for is some transparent accountability to let us know that the problem is understood, that you know what it is or that somebody does, and that steps are being taken to correct the problems out there."

County Council already had made plans to pull the item out of committee Monday just long

enough to vote to open the center "as soon as possible" and send it back to committee for further investigation.

County Council Chairman Jennifer Willis didn't respond to a request for an explanation of the center's delayed opening.

Interim County Administrator Ralph Guarino said the facility was completed in June 2014, which coincided with the hiring of a new county administrator, Matthew Delk.

That resulted in "a learning curve" and the county was unable to address the project during his brief time in the job, Guarino said.

Delk left the position in February after signing a secret agreement to receive one year's pay and allow the county out of its contract with him.

Since February, Guarino, who is also the county finance director, has been busy with planning the budget and handling day-to-day operations, he said.

When the ancient rock art was discovered 12 years ago, county officials immediately recognized its value and began considering how to preserve and display it.

Fundraising started in 2005, and by July 2007, the county said construction would start soon on a building.

The Great Recession hit in 2008, and attempts to raise money for the project faltered.

In October 2009, plans for a capital campaign called "Preserving a Place of Ancient Voices," were announced, with a goal of \$400,000 to create what was then being called a rock art center.

By November 2010, \$200,000 had been raised and a groundbreaking ceremony was held in May 2011, with plans to open the facility in early 2012.

In January 2012, the county reported that the construction was "nearing completion." Allen Coleman, then-executive director of the Pickens County Cultural Commission, which at that time ran Hagood Mill and the Pickens County Museum of Art and History, said another \$25,000 to \$30,000 was needed to finish the job and he hoped to have the center open by summer.

*The Greenville News* reported in December 2013 that the center was expected to open in early 2014.

Hagood Mill site manager Ed Bolt died unexpectedly before the new year, which brought a change in management.

County Council created a tourism and marketing division and made Hockwalt its head, which put the Hagood Mill site under her authority and Coleman in charge of the county museum.

"All I can say is that I'm glad it's coming to fruition because I put a lot of heart and soul into it," Coleman told *The Greenville News* this week. "That whole rock art center was my baby. I conceived it, I designed it and I raised the money to build it."

"I have no idea why it took so long."

It's the only facility of its kind in the United States and perhaps one of the few in the world, he said.

The capital campaign raised \$300,000 eventually, he said. The county chipped in \$286,051, according to Guarino.

During the process of building the petroglyph center, construction started on a "performance pavilion" at the Hagood site, Coleman said. It started off to be a pole building with sides around it.

"It kind of blossomed and ballooned and became more than what I think County Council intended for it to be," he said.

That happened after Coleman had been taken off the Hagood site job and under the direction of former County Administrator Chap Hurst, he said.

That structure was torn down before it was completed.

After the petroglyph center was finished, there were some leaks in the foundation that had to be fixed, Coleman said.

But everything will be ready for a "soft start" on Sept. 19, Hockwalt said.

The Hagood Creek Petroglyph Site of South Carolina will be open on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. The address is 138 Hagood Mill Road, Pickens.

A dedication will be held at a date yet to be set.