

Our State Fossil

by Tai Dinnan, Grade 4, Charlotte Central School, Charlotte, Vermont

The bones of the Charlotte whale were found while digging the Rutland and Burlington Railroad in 1849. Workers thought they belonged to a horse or cow so they kept on digging until a curious local farmer, John G. Thorp, questioned their find. He thought the bones were unusual and called Zadock Thompson at the University of Vermont. Zadock brought the bones to UVM to examine and identify them.

Unfortunately, the bones were dipped in “animal glue” to preserve them from desiccation, which made it impossible to prove the exact age of the skeleton. We do know that “Charlotte” lived during the time span of the Champlain Sea, 10,000 to 12,500 years ago. Today the skeleton of “Charlotte” is on display in the Perkins Museum of Geology at UVM where visitors are welcome to see her. The Charlotte Historical Society has placed a historic marker near the site where the bones were found. You can go and see it at the railroad crossing on Thompson’s Point Road.

A few years ago, Jeff Howe from the Perkins Museum decided the bones should be the state fossil. He asked for help from the Charlotte Historical Society and students from Charlotte Central School to bring this idea to the state government. Charlotte representative Hazel Prindle introduced a bill to declare “Charlotte” the official State Fossil. C.C.S. students then traveled to the state capital, Montpelier, to meet with a special committee and Governor Howard Dean. The state legislature later passed the bill and Governor Dean signed it into law at a ceremony at the Charlotte Central School on June 7, 1993!

The Charlotte whale was a White whale. Other names for it are Beluga, White porpoise, and Sea Canary. It was a toothed whale and is recognized by its grayish white color. It lived about 10,000 to 12,500 years ago. It is not known exactly what its habitat was, but now Belugas live in the colder Arctic Ocean, the North Atlantic, and the North Pacific. They prefer shallow waters and rivers. These whales eat fish including char, sand lance, capelin, pollack, cod, and salmon, plus shrimp and octopus. Belugas are 3 to 5 meters long and weigh about 1.5 tons while the calves measure about 1.5 meters at birth. The Beluga has up to 11 teeth in each side of its upper and lower jaw (at least 32 total) and lacks a dorsal fin which makes it easy to identify. Along with their camouflage, Belugas have the ability to turn their heads from side to side. They also are able to look over and under their shoulders to protect themselves from predators such as polar bears and killer whales.

Scientists do not know exactly how Charlotte died. They think it either died out at sea or it died of hunger in shallow water. It was buried over time and was undiscovered for thousands of years.