

HENRY A. WARD AND THE RECOVERY OF THE SANTA ROSA, COLOMBIA, METEORITE

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Henry A. Ward (1834-1906) was perhaps the shrewdest and most enthusiastic meteorite collector of his day. He was also very knowledgeable. Word of a massive iron meteorite in Santa Rosa, Colombia, captured his imagination. Ward's interest can best be viewed in the context of the confusion that existed between this meteorite and two other irons that had been found nearby, Tocavita and Rasgata. In an effort to clear up the mess--and also to see if he could acquire the meteorite in whole or in part--he decided to visit the desolate locale in 1906, a few weeks prior to his 72nd birthday. My account of Ward's Colombian trip is primarily based on the extensive collection of unpublished material in the Henry A. Ward papers at the University of Rochester, including diaries, correspondence, and photographs.

Upon arrival in Colombia, it took Ward nineteen days by steamer, mule, and carriage to reach Santa Rosa. He arrived at nightfall, but as soon as he looked out from his hotel window the next morning, he saw the large meteorite (612.5 kg) perched atop a fluted column in the middle of the town square. Ward realized the meteorite was highly venerated by the townspeople, and knew it would be extremely difficult--if not impossible--to acquire any of it. But he had a clever plan.

Calling on the Governor, Ward boldly proposed an exchange: in return for a promise to erect a statue in the town square of the President of the Republic (who happened to have been born in Santa Rosa), he would be given the entire meteorite. The Governor liked this idea, and at a stormy meeting with the Mayor and other municipal officers forced their approval. Late that night, in the middle of a large eating and drinking party which Ward threw at his hotel for the townspeople, the Governor and a party of 50 soldiers quietly overturned the column, placed the meteorite on a cart, and whisked it away.

Ward left for Bogota the next day, but shortly after reaching there heard that the Chief of the Colombian police had sent out a party that had captured his wagon, retrieved the meteorite, and locked up the cart driver. Although Ward insisted he had proper authorization for the meteorite, a heated legal battle ensued. A decision by the Minister of Public Instruction forbade him to leave the country with the meteorite, but he was allowed to cut off a large endpiece (147.5 kg) for his efforts. Ward took this back with him to New York, but he died tragically a few months after his return, when struck by an automobile while crossing a street in Buffalo.

Ward's unfinished report on the Santa Rosa meteorite will be examined, as will our present understanding of its relationship to Tocavita and Rasgata. The main mass of the Santa Rosa meteorite (about 460 kg) is now in the National Museum in Bogota, while Ward's endpiece was cut up and distributed to various museums throughout the world for study and curation.