

New England Antiquities Research Association



Fall Meeting Preview: Vermont Platform Cairns by Norman E. Muller

Note: This is a sneak preview of a presentation that Norman Muller will be making at the NEARA Fall Meeting in Norwich CT. For details of the November 14-16 NEARA Fall Meeting, [click here](#).

Vermont Platform Cairns

One curious lithic feature that the author has been intrigued about, and which may even be more significant than stone chambers, is what is called a platform cairn. This is a large, waist-high stone platform of dry stone masonry, sometimes measuring twenty or more feet to a side, and in form either rectangular, square, oval or some other shape. If constructed on a steep slope, the downhill side of the platform can be upwards of ten or more feet high, whereas the uphill side is waist high or less. The top surface of these platforms is usually flat and covered with smaller stones called paving, though a rounded surface is not unheard of, as the reader will soon discover.

Rochester

By far, the best and most impressive examples of platform cairns are found in central and southern Vermont. One site alone in Rochester, called the West Hill Cairn Field, is a 40-acre, wooded and hilly tract on which are 78 cairns of various shapes and sizes, 52 of them being 15 or more feet long or wide. The property was once owned by a Chester Smith, who first settled in the land in 1838. His farmhouse and barn were located on the east, downhill side of the property, below where the majority of the cairns are found.

One of the platform cairns is located on a steep slope, and is from 2' to 8' high, 21.5' long, and varies from 5' to 12' wide [Figure 1]. This cairn as well as a number of others at the site have extensions or "tails" [Figure 2], which some have termed "effigies," likening them to various animals such as turtles. Based on measurements of some of the stones making up the cairn represented in figure 1, a friend of the author's, Herman Bender, gave a very rough estimate of 10,000 stones comprising it, which would have a combined weight of approximately 80 tons. There are more than fifty of these cairns on the property, some of which are much larger than the one depicted (the largest seems to be one 44' x 35' x 6') each of which was built from local stones found on the slope, and then brought to the site. This was a massive undertaking, and it makes no sense from a practical and agricultural standpoint, given that most farmers in this part of Vermont had a hard enough time just scraping by on a day-to-day basis. And the image of such a farmer, at the end of a hard day, trudging through the woods gathering stones to build a monumental platform cairn having no obvious function is simply ludicrous. Still, in spite of the illogic of such an enterprise, some archaeologists and historians continue to claim that all structures

of this sort are colonial unless proven otherwise. So, here we have a scenario of a crazy farmer doing all this work for no obvious purpose.

We might dismiss all of this as the aberrant behavior of a single farmer, were it not for the fact that Smith was not alone. More than three-quarters of a mile to the east is site R7-8, in pine woods adjacent to a swamp. Here are found about a dozen moss covered platform cairns, all of them on gently sloped or nearly level ground. The one depicted has a slightly domed profile [[Figure 3](#)].

And another mile to the southeast is another curious site (R7-2) with one large platform cairn among other unusual lithic structures. This is a large, oval platform cairn [[Figure 4](#)] 25' long, intact on one side with a large quartz cobble incorporated in it, but in ruinous condition on the other.

Stockbridge

Stockbridge is a small town about ten miles southeast of Rochester, and on the side of a mountain about a mile from the nearest road, a half dozen or so cairns, terrace wall constructions and platform cairns were found by a hunter scattered in pine woods, who then notified Ernie Clifford, a Vermont native, who in turn showed the author the site. One of these platforms is roughly round in form and six feet high, with a large quartz cobble deliberately incorporated in one face [[Figure 5](#)]. Nearby and below is a curious terrace fill [[Figure 6](#)], which is similar to one found at the first Rochester site mentioned [[Figure 7](#)].

Newfane

At the south end of the state, a good forty miles south of Rochester, lies Newfane, where on the side of a mountain platform cairns and other odd but impressive manmade stone formations have been found. Just this spring, the largest platform cairn at the site was discovered in beautiful pine woods [[Figure 8](#)]. But probably the most interesting of these is one with a large quartz cobble deliberately placed in the middle of one side of this square-shaped cairn, which measures a good 6' high [[Figure 9](#)]. This quartz cobble faces north, as does the one in the cairn at Stockbridge. At the southwest corner of the Newfane cairn, a six foot long wall extends outward, in a manner not unlike what is found at the West Hill Cairn Field in Rochester [[see figure 2](#)].

While the greatest number of platform cairns exist in Vermont, forming a stylistic link that implies a common origin, other examples have been found in Pennsylvania, Connecticut and Rhode Island. It is unclear where the form originated, or its purpose, but if readers of this short article have found examples not discussed by the author in their region, particularly in states to the west, the author would appreciate knowing about them.

[Email Norman E. Muller](#)

Illustrations



Figure 1: Platform Cairn at West Hill Cairn Field, Rochester VT



Figure 2: Stone 'Tail' to Cairn at Rochester Cairn Field



Figure 3: Domed Platform Cairn at site R7-8, Rochester VT



Figure 4: Oval Platform Cairn at Site R-2, Rochester VT



Figure 5: Platform Cairn with Quartz at Southbridge VT



Figure 6: Terrace Fill at Southbridge VT



Figure 7: R7-1 Site Terrace Cairn, Rochester VT



Figure 8: New Platform Cairn at Newfane VT



Figure 9: Platform Cairn with Quartz at Newfane VT

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