

# BIG DIG IN BINGHAM MAINE CAIRN FIELD STUDY

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## INTRODUCTION

### NEARA'S EARLY INTEREST.

While NEARA members in the rest of New England were tromping the woods searching for chambers, Ros Strong's interest in stone mounds (mounds being more numerous than chambers in Maine) was piqued. Ros, Natalie McKenney, White Nichols, and John Briggs were the core Maine mound hunters, with Ralph Robinson



joining summer expeditions. Nichols had learned of a cluster of stone mounds in Bingham, on the Kennebec River not far from the well known Embden petroglyphs. The tip came from Bob Ater, a Bath dowser who was dowsing for a well for Willard Hamilton, the owner of a large tract of land in Bingham that had been subdivided into house lots.

In September 1981, White Nichols and Ralph Robinson, using a plane table, engineers' compass, range pole, and plumb bob, surveyed these eight cairns located on top of a gravel esker overlooking the river. In addition to the cairn arrangement, the survey by White Nichols and Ralph Robinson noted both solar and magnetic alignments, suggesting use for astronomical observation or possibly baseline surveying (Figure 1). A copy of the original survey was deposited with the Bingham Historical Society and several copies were retained by the Maine NEARA Chapter. At the time, the subdivision, including the knoll. Ros, who has checked the site regularly since White Nichols showed it to her 1983-4, noted on a November 2003 visit that the knoll had been logged and a driveway made to the top (Figures 2A, 2B). As a result, the cairns are more visible but have suffered no significant damage. By chatting with neighbors, she tracked down the new owner of the lot, who was responsible for the clearing. He had been careful to preserve the cairns and is quietly enthusiastic about archaeological investigation to learn more about the cairns. He bought the land as an investment and has no immediate plans for construction on the site.

### WHY CONDUCT A PROFESSIONAL INVESTIGATION?

When we realized that we had a well-preserved group of stone mounds, a supportive owner, and a site that was readily accessible, NEARA, through Ros Strong, approached Deborah Wilson, an open minded Maine archaeologist, to see if she would be interested in supervising an investigation of the site. She was, and suggested that her colleague Mark Hedden, a specialist in Maine rock art, be included in the team along with NEARA volunteers.

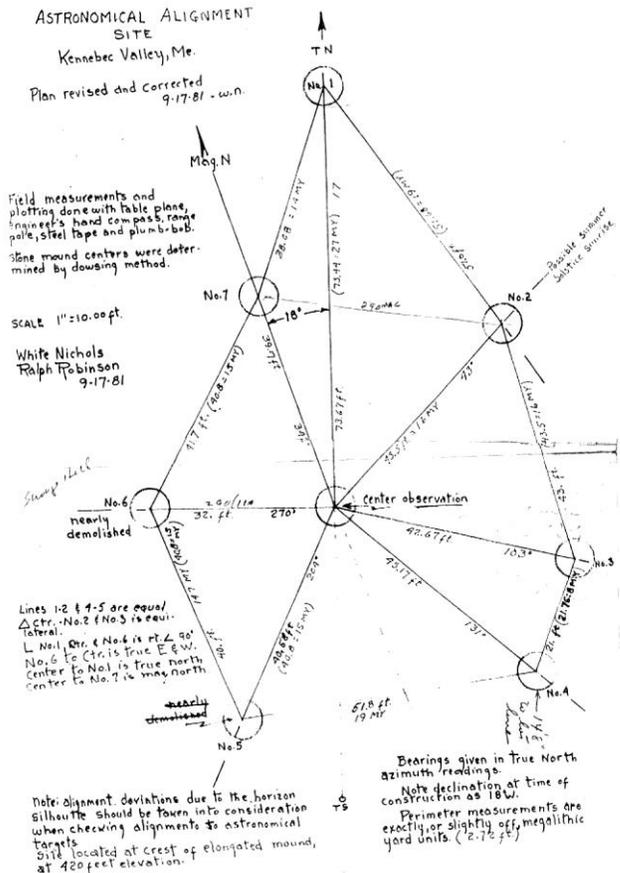


FIGURE 1. NICHOLS-ROBINSON SURVEY, 1981.



**FIGURE 2A.** 1984 PROFILE OF THE ESKER FROM THE ROAD AND BELOW THE CAIRNS



**FIGURE 2B.** EXISTING PROFILE OF THE ESKER FROM THE ROAD AND BELOW THE CAIRNS.

Wilson and Hedden made a proposal for the project, which was approved by the NEARA board, and plans began for summer work.

The proposed project, funded by NEARA in June, 2004, was designed to test for evidence of when the cairns were built, whether their orientation to one another was deliberate or random, and whether significant signs of other cultural activity were present at the location. Our aim was to keep an open mind and to consider any and all theories, but not look for results based on preconceptions any of us might have had.

#### GOALS

We hoped, in a few days of field work, to garner as much information as possible about the site and the cairns.

We would try to find answers to the “who, how, what, where, when and why” of our site. We would look for artifacts that might give clues to the “who and when.” We would look for unique or diagnostic traits, or signs of cultural activity that could suggest the “how and what.” Perhaps more information on the astronomical alignments would be a hint in answering “why.” The only known factor in our project was the “where.”

We also hoped that this study might show a correlation with other cairn fields in Maine and, by extension, the rest of the Northeast U.S. and Canadian Maritimes.

(NOTE: The sections printed in italics are taken from the 2004 archaeological report submitted to the NEARA Research Committee titled *Report for NEARA on Test Excavations of Cairns in Bingham, Maine*. Mark Hedden and Deborah Wilson, Contracting Archaeologists)

#### WHAT AND WHERE? DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT AREA

The Kennebec River runs its 150 mile course from Moosehead Lake deep in the Maine woods, to the open Atlantic at Phippsburg, encountering white water rapids and dramatic falls interspersed with broad calm stretches dotted with islands.

Located nearly a hundred miles above the mouth of the Kennebec and sixty miles below the Canadian border, our site overlooks a calm stretch between Caratunk Falls and the shortcut to the Dead River, or “great carry,” which starts below the Forks, at the junction of the Dead River and the Kennebec, and leads eventually to the Chaudiere River and Canada.

*The cairns, a group of eight stone piles of large rolled cobbles, are located on a knoll on the east bank of the Kennebec in the Town of Bingham, Maine. The knoll, probably a section of a glacial esker, is composed largely of sand, gravel, and small cobbles. The esker was emplaced under melting glacial ice at the end of the Pleistocene. Apparently breached by the newly-formed Kennebec River, the esker follows the west bank of the Kennebec River above the site but is on the east side in the site vicinity. Two sharp bends in the river by the site mark the place where the river cut through the esker. Of interest to the current project, the esker includes few large cobbles/small boulders of the size used in the cairns. This raises the question of why the large stones were selected and whether the cairns were deliberately built with a specific layout in mind or if they were piled randomly for a purpose such as land clearing.*

#### GEOLOGY AND GEOGRAPHY

*The bedrock in the area consists of metasedimentary quartzite and meta-graywacke of Devonian-Silurian origin (Doyle et al.)*

**FIGURE 3.** 1904 USG TOPOGRAPHIC MAP OF THE KENNEBEC RIVER ABOVE CARATUNK FALLS SHOWING THE SITE (\*).

Map of the site has been removed to protect the privacy of the owner

at 1967). Surficial deposits are described as glacial/marine coarse grained facies containing sand, gravel and minor amounts of silt (Thompson et al 1985). For reasons given below, we speculate that the sand and gravel deposits forming the knoll were probably originally part of a glacial esker which was modified and cut through by the Kennebec River during the early Holocene period.

The River makes a bend to the west just north of the knoll and, within a kilometer or less south, shifts back easterly, cutting through glacial/marine gravel deposits at both ends. The initial sand and gravel deposits probably derive from the glacial esker along the west bank that was cut through by the river. Traces of an elevated old channel are visible as a topographic depression along the east side of the knoll. It is unclear at this point whether the abandoned channel marks the original course of the post glacial Kennebec River, was an abandoned high water channel or, most likely, contains elements of both. We noted massive deposits of medium to coarse sand, exposed during bulldozer leveling operations, along the eastern edge of the high channel depression. Deposits of this nature tend to be the end product of single massive flood events, such as did occur at the Pleistocene/Holocene boundary when natural dams of ice, gravel and sand occasionally burst along the upper Kennebec and its tributaries (Reference—Carrabassett Valley event). We speculate that

the effects of a flood of this nature may have forced the Kennebec westward and placed a section of the original esker on the east bank. Consultation with a geologist would produce a more authoritative answer.

The high knoll with low or moderate slope overlooking the Kennebec River has—with or without cairns—potential for prehistoric sites, particularly given the height above the present river shore for the early Holocene (Paleo-Indian and Early Archaic Periods).

The cairns encompass an area measuring 120' ( $\approx$  40m) N-S by 75' ( $\approx$  25m) E-W on top of the unevenly rounded knoll at 400' above sea level. The ridge or high points of the knoll run more or less north/south. An elevated, generally level bench borders the Kennebec River below the knoll, and this is the current location of an abandoned railroad right of way and a subdivision that includes perhaps a dozen developed lots. The knoll, which has been logged over in the past, is currently wooded with mixed conifer/hardwoods. The forest cover has been recently thinned, with care taken to avoid damage to the cairns. An inactive gravel pit has been cut into the north end of the knoll below the cairns and a large kettle hole is a prominent feature below the knoll's southeast side.

#### **WHEN? LIFE ALONG THE KENNEBEC**

##### ***Prehistoric:***

Caratunk Falls, located about 1 mile (2 km) below the Bingham Cairns, marks a distinct change in the character of the Kennebec River. Above the falls north to the river's origin at Moosehead Lake, the Kennebec features an almost continuous series of rapids marked by gorges between steep hills. Below Caratunk Falls, the river expands between rolling hills into a series of braided channels which are readily navigable by canoe or other small craft, except for portages around falls at Madison and Skowhegan. Numerous prehistoric sites, largely habitation sites, but also including a petroglyph site located three and three-quarter miles south of the cairns in Embden, are situated along the river below Caratunk Falls. These sites indicate seasonally intense activities in the area, likely supported by an eel fishery in September and concurrent fall hunting of deer and moose. Test excavations and surface finds have located lithic artifacts and other materials attributable to occupations from at least 7000 years BP up to late eighteenth century settlement (Spiess and Hedden, 1993 & 1994).

##### ***Medieval and Contact Period:***

Theories abound on pre-sixteenth century contact and/or settlement by Irish monks, Vikings, Medieval Norse, Orkney adventurers via Henry Sinclair, and Basque fisherman. The first accepted explorer to make landfall on the Gulf of Maine was Verazzano (1524), whose explorations stalled at the mouth of the Kennebec. The turn of the next century saw

Gosnold (1602), Pring (1603), and George Weymouth (1605), for the English and, in French interests, Champlain and Sieur de Monts explored the Sheepscot as far as Wiscasset, but seem not to have explored beyond the mouth of the Kennebec. It was not until 1607 that Raleigh Gilbert reached head tide at Cushnoc, today's Augusta. By 1627 the Plymouth Company had expanded trade to Skowhegan.

Meanwhile, the Jesuits were following the Chaudiere in search of souls and fur. Under the patronage of French King Henry IV, Father Pierre Biard was among the earliest French missionaries on the Kennebec, but it was not until 1643 that Father Gabriel Druillettes made his way down the well-worn route from Quebec to establish his tiny mission at Cushnoc.

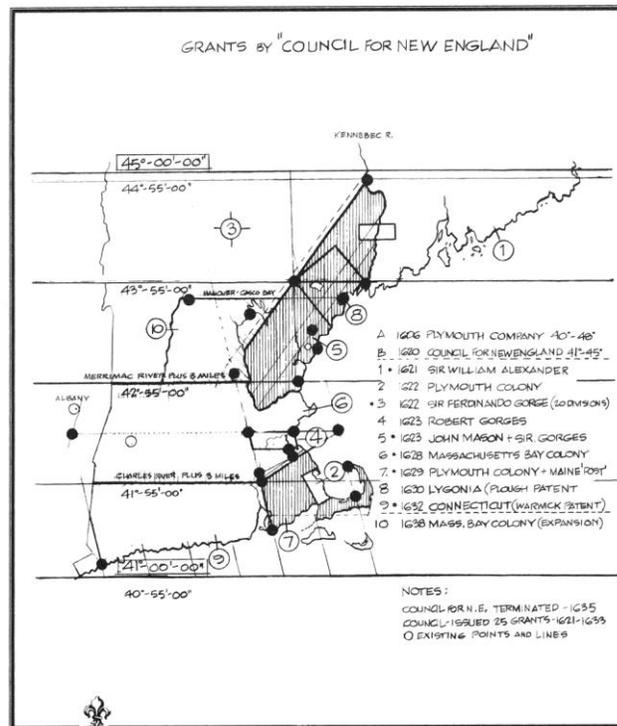
From the first landfalls, investors in both London and Paris were plotting land grabs and relishing grants from the crown. On the northern edge of English aspirations, the 45<sup>th</sup> parallel marked an almost universal boundary, sometimes with a five minute buffer between 44° - 55' and 45°. In 1621, King James I granted Sir William Alexander an extensive area of northern Maine that ran to the Kennebec. Ferdinando Gorges and company were granted all the land from the Merrimac to the Kennebec River and north to the 45<sup>th</sup> parallel during 1622 and 1623. Although seldom visited by the grantees, surveyors were likely to have explored the area, meeting fur traders, natives, and missionaries along the route (FIGURE 4 FROM NEARA JOURNAL 31-2, 1997, p. 93).

### ***French and Indian Wars:***

The last part of the seventeenth century and early part of the eighteenth century was consumed by the relentless French and Indian Wars where, by 1720, all white settlers had been kidnapped or killed, and every building burned to the ground. One assumes that activity along the Canada Trail was war-related. After a short interval of peace, the seeds of revolution arched toward Canada, and the doomed Benedict Arnold expedition to storm Quebec followed the age-old route in heavy, cumbersome wooden bateaux.

### ***The Old Canada Road:***

A new round of land grants in the 1740s was held in abeyance until the end of hostilities. Cautious resettlement began in the mid 1760s. The revolution and a new country with new opportunities spawned a rush of land seekers. Along with this settlement came the lure of new markets to the north in burgeoning Quebec City. Farmers drove their livestock along the riverside trails of the Chaudiere and Kennebec, and the Canada Road was born. Government efforts on both sides were interrupted by the war of 1812, but by 1818 the last 43 miles of "improved" road followed the river on the west side through Somerset County. As the nineteenth century wore on, Canadian immigrants poured southward. Towns from Jackman, on the Canadian frontier, to Bingham, and on



**Map 6** Grants by the Council for New England  
(Chart - Major New England Land Grants)

**FIGURE 4.** LAND DIVISION GRANTS OF THE "COUNCIL OF NEW ENGLAND. (DRAWINGS BY H. MORSE PAYNE)

to Augusta boasted lodging, eateries, shops and new industry while rural farmers found new markets. Architectural features of older houses in the area tell us that settlement along the Solon-Bingham banks of the river began after the Revolution. The major source of hard cash in the area north of Caratunk Falls was related to lumbering activities, but scattered small farms along the Canada Road provided hay and feed for draft animals, and provisions and lodging for travelers to and from Quebec, as the Old Canada road replaced the Kennebec-Dead River route.

Although the first train had chugged into Augusta in 1851, it was not until 1888 that the track reached Embden, crossing the river two miles south of our site. In 1898 it had reached Bingham, heading for the Forks and Canada. The nineteenth century gradually saw the expansion of industry along the river. Logging and enterprises serving the loggers and their goods, the railroad, mills, stone quarrying, and the emerging paper industry changed the face of the Kennebec.

The Gilded Age brought the "sports" to recreate in the Maine wilderness. While the sporting camps prospered, industry dwindled, the population stabilized, and the Great Depression once more changed life along the Old Canada Road.

**Documented History of the Property:**

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*Planning site inspection and walk-over*

Archaeologists Mark Hedden and Deborah Wilson did a preliminary walk-over of the site on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004, guided and assisted by NEARA members Ros Strong, Sue Carlson, and Clayton McLaughlin. First, a tour of the immediate area around the knoll and down to the river confirmed the sandy gravelly nature of the soil and the dearth of large boulders on or near the top of the knoll. Examination of the exposed wall of the old gravel pit was hampered by the amount of slash piled up from the clearing work above on the knoll. The gravel pit had been abandoned in the early 1970s but was still exposed until the recent clearing. All evidence suggested that the large cairn cobbles were hauled up the hill for the construction. Back on the top of the hill, a baseline was set up to run northerly through Cairn #7 from the center. We established five test pits at regular intervals, both within the cairns array and beyond its limits. The location of five more test pits was determined by dowsing to see what information that method would produce. The ten test pit locations were flagged and recorded (FIGURE 5).

**PROJECT STRATEGY/ SURVEY PROCEDURE**

**Research:**

Fieldwork was preceded by a document search by Mark Hedden for deeds, prior notices regarding the stone piles, historic accounts of the Solon-Bingham area, etc., in the State Library, State Archives, and Somerset County Registry of Deeds.

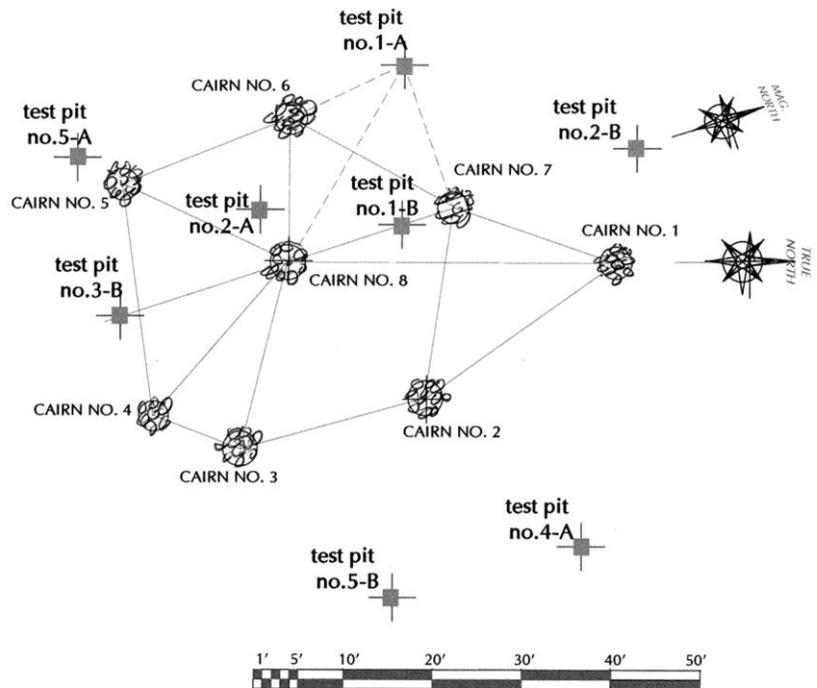
**Excavation:**

*Pre-project investigations*

Early in December, after the November 2003 Kennebec field trip to show the cairns to visiting NEARA members, Chuck Bailey and Ralph Coffman, Ros Strong, Sue Carlson, and Clayton McLaughlin were joined by Harvey Mitchell on further reconnaissance. Harvey, who died suddenly in the spring of 2004, was a retired registered land surveyor, amateur astronomer, and Penobscot Indian. Before seeing the site, he had made a computer analysis to determine the exact time of high noon. Although his initial reaction was that the cairns represented Indian burials, he soon demonstrated to himself (and us) the accuracy of the true north-south alignments by observing the transit of the noon meridian over the center cairn from cairn number one.

In April 2004, Clayton, Ros and Sue returned to the site to verify information on the Nichols/Robinson survey, and number and photograph all the cairns for review by the archaeologists.

In preparation for the excavation, Clayton, Ros, and Sue, joined by Norman Muller, returned several weeks later to clear brush, open up site lines, and to reassess and lay out the basic grid for cairn #7, which had been selected for deconstruction (FIGURES 6, 7).



**Bingham excavation test pit locations**

**FIGURE 5. LAYOUT OF CAIRNS AND TEST PIT LOCATIONS.**

FIGURE 6. PHOTO OF CAIRN #7 BEFORE EXCAVATION.

## FIELD WORK RESULTS

### OVERVIEW

On July 26th, 2004, a field crew of NEARA members Ros Strong, Sue Carlson, Ted Ballard, Rick Lynch, Nancy Hunt, Alan Hunt, and Clayton McLaughlin assembled at the cairns to begin work under the direction of Deb Wilson and Mark Hedden. Field work was divided into two segments: test pit excavation under Deb Wilson's direction, and Cairn #7 investigation under Mark Hedden's direction.

Test pits were excavated on both days of the survey. Nancy and Alan Hunt, Ros, and Ted Ballard excavated five 50cm x 50cm test pits on the first day of the project (1B, 2B, IA, 2A, 4A). Another three test pits were dug by Deb, Rick, Ros, and Nancy on the second day (3B, 5B and 5A). Field testing procedures followed a standard archaeological format of subsurface test pits related to a surveyed baseline. All soils were screened through 1/4 inch wire mesh, profiles were drawn of the soil stratigraphy, and photographs were taken to document each pit.

At Cairn #7, Clayton and Rick began removing stones, with Sue measuring, sketching, and photographing the process on the first day of the survey. On the second day, Mark, Clayton and Sue completed the work of removing and documenting the stones, and excavated the soils underneath to a depth of thirty centimeters in an effort to locate cultural material that might be present underneath the stone pile. This hole was then back-filled and the stones were replaced in reverse order of the excavation (FIGURE 8).

Our goal was to assess what evidence might be present to help determine when the cairns were built, why they were constructed, and establish whether other related or non-related cultural activities were present.

### TEST PITS

*The test pits were excavated to locate artifacts reflecting cultural activity associated with the cairns and to examine the soils for contextual information. In terms of the latter, we wondered if the soils surrounding the cairns included cobbles and boulders similar to those composing the cairns. We reasoned that if the cairns were built of materials at hand—the product of a practical effort to clear the ground for pasture or for other purposes—we would expect denser concentrations of rock and cobbles outside the 3.5 meter clearing around the piled rocks than within the direct vicinity of each cairn. The depth of the test excavations (generally 30 cm b.s. including about 10cm of sterile subsoil) should indicate whether the*

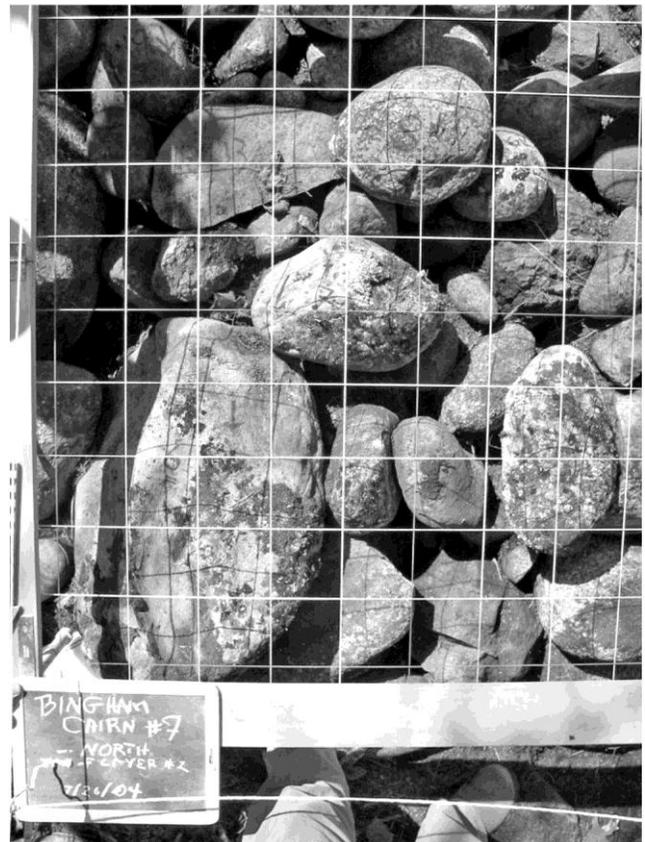


FIGURE 7. PHOTO SHOWING ONE METER GRID FRAME USED FOR SCALE IN THE PHOTOGRAPHS.

*cairn area had ever been plowed, and any other evidence of historic use of the area. Prehistoric sites tend to occur on level to moderately sloped ground surfaces. If prehistoric*



FIGURE 8. PHOTO OF CAIRN #7 AFTER EXCAVATION.

occupations or signs of other prehistoric activity were present around the cairns, any of the test pits excavated in and around the cairns stood a chance to confirm that presence. Verbal queries of the excavators indicated traces of charcoal present in the upper strata were not all recorded in the profile notes. If the charcoal was the result of the burning of brush, trimmed branches and unwanted timber during the initial clearing process, the cairns now present on the esker represent construction done after that initial clearing. It is equally possible, however, that the scattered charcoal resulted from a forest fire at some time in the more distant past.

Eight test pits of the ten proposed were actually excavated outside Cairn #7 and one test pit in the center of Cairn #7. The random test pits were tied into the baseline. The area of subsurface sampling included level to moderate slope surfaces, spaced 3.5 meters, more or less, away from the existing cairns as well as within 3.5 meters. The 3.5 meter distance represents half the average interval between existing cairns (7 meters).

All excavated test pits were culturally sterile and were very similar in stratigraphic profile. Rolled or water worn cobbles were found in all levels below the 5 or so cm of leaf-mold and organic duff mixed or embedded in varying proportions of silt, sand or pea-sized gravel. Some cobbles were sizable—up to 25cm long by 15 cm across (Test pit 5A).

Flecks and occasional lumps of charcoal were noted in the AB horizons, including Cairn #7, and some surficial disturbance and compaction from a woods road or logging activities was noted (Test pit 4A).

#### CAIRN #7 INVESTIGATION

A one meter swath was planned for excavation through the center of Cairn #7. The stones of the cairn were dismantled in layers with the larger stones each given a number marked on the surface with a marking pen. Before each layer was removed, Sue Carlson made a quick sketch of the numbered stones (FIGURE 9, 10, 11, 12) and took several digital overhead photographs that were keyed into the grid. More than sixty smaller cobbles of varying sizes were temporarily removed and laid in piles to one side. As the cairn was dismantled, it became obvious that larger stones formed a structural ring around the cairn exterior and these were left in place rather than try to cut through the mound during the deconstruction. After the stones were removed, a 50 x 50cm test pit continued another 30 cm below the soil surface.

Excavation of Cairn #7 revealed a construction pattern which involved rolling, leveraging or using a sled to drag large rounded cobbles (apparently from the foot of the knoll, or perhaps the river) into a closely fitted doughnut shaped ring nearly three meters across the exterior and a little more than one meter in the interior. Smaller cobbles were then

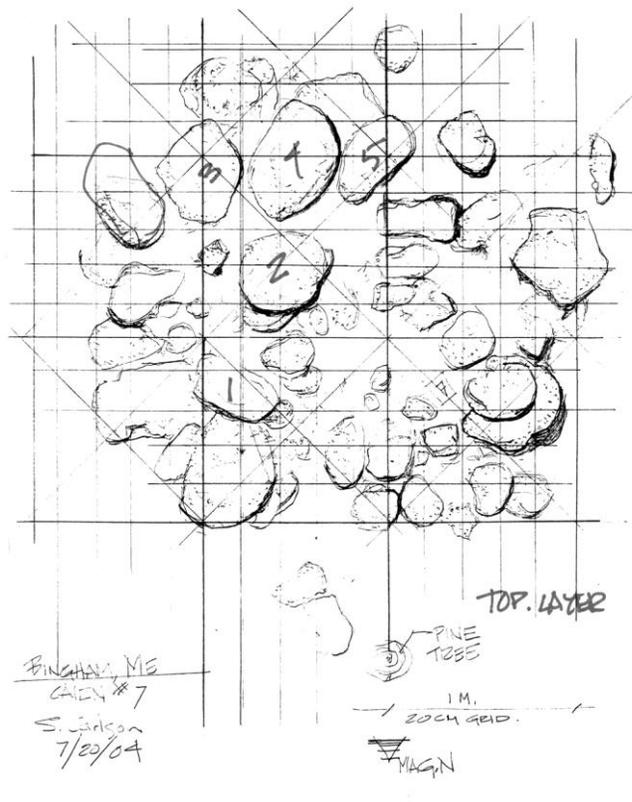


FIGURE 9. FIELD SKETCH OF TOP LAYER OF CAIRN #7.

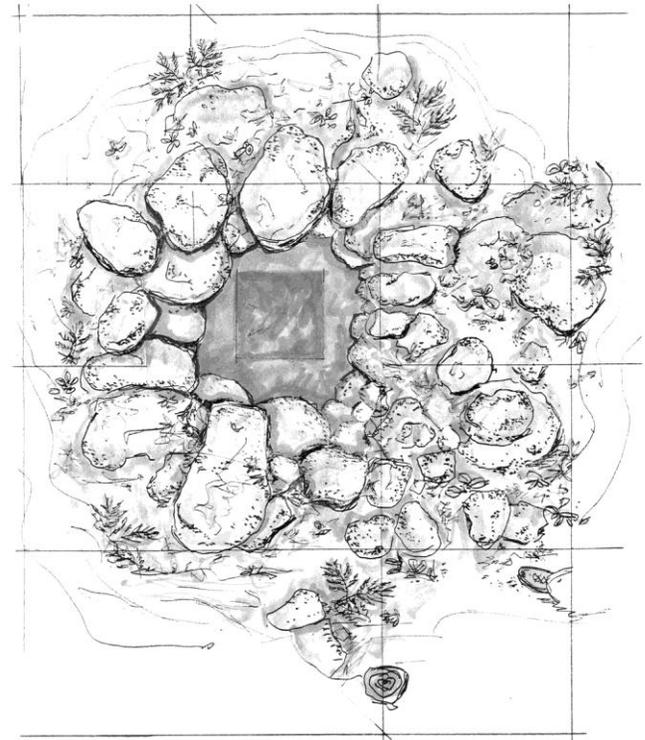
*piled into the hollow center and upward until all the larger basal stones had been covered and the center more or less rounded over.*

Surface inspection of the other cairns suggests indications that the same process had been used in their construction. When the excavation, photographs, and drawings of profiles were completed, the test pit was backfilled and stones replied more or less in reverse to the order in which they had been removed. The smaller stones were clearly deposited after the ring was built, but given the lack of accumulated

debris, it appears that the ring was backfilled shortly after its construction.



**FIGURE 10.** DRAWING OF TOP VIEW OF CAIRN #7 BEFORE EXCAVATION.



**FIGURE 11.** DRAWING OF TOP VIEW OF CAIRN #7 AFTER EXCAVATION.

## RESULTS

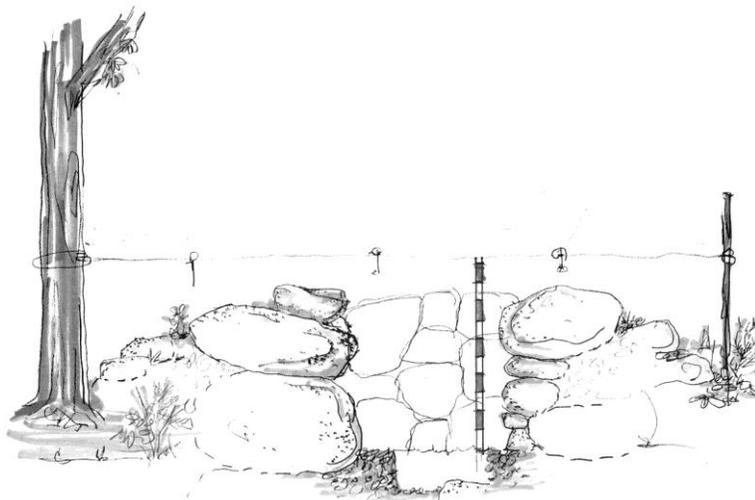
### NARRATIVE AND RESULTS OF FIELDWORK

The soils and stratigraphy were similar in all test pits. The soils found in glacial outwash were formed of rolled gravel and cobbles in a sandy matrix. Larger cobbles and boulders such as those composing the cairns were absent from the soils. No artifacts or other cultural material was found in any of the pits.

### INDICATIONS OF PRIOR AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITY

This land, like most settled land along the river, had no doubt been logged at least once in the past, as evidenced by numerous stumps in the cairns vicinity. Given the proximity of more arable soils nearer the river, crop cultivation seems unlikely. The cleared knoll could have been used as a pasture and, as noted above, was logged until fairly recently. There is a well-defined former logging road running along the westerly crest of the knoll.

In Cairn #7, the carefully constructed circle of large stones with an interior diameter of approximately 1.5 meters constructed in three or four random courses



**FIGURE 12.** SECTION THROUGH CAIRN #7.

is unusual and unrelated to other documented Maine masonry construction systems. Although non-directional, an observer sitting in or on the cairns would tend to face the westerly downward slope facing the river. Now blocked by trees, in an unforested environment the cairns locale would afford a panoramic view of the Kennebec River and the horizon.

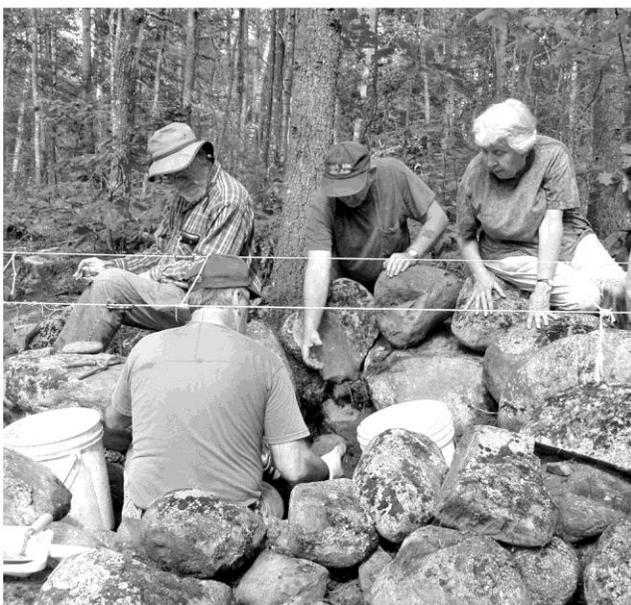
The dowsing experiment produced no verifiable results, although the dowsers suspect that a cairn once may have existed at the location of test pit # 1A, which could have been destroyed by the now faintly visible woods road.

*The thin scatter of charcoal in the upper strata could be a random result of natural forest fires; however, speaking from years of digging test pits in all parts of Maine and studying the stratigraphy, I can say that the charcoal distribution in the upper soil strata under the rocks of the single cairn we excavated resembles the pattern of scattered charcoal I have noted in fields (and second growth woods) containing historic settlement period artifacts or otherwise known to have been initially cleared by settlers in Maine between 1790 and 1840.*

#### ASTRONOMICAL ALIGNMENTS

The accuracy of the solar north-south alignment was verified by the NEARA team in November, 2004, but without a detailed survey and on-site confirmation it is difficult to verify other possible alignments.

*The astronomical orientation presents another line of investigation. The cairns were constructed an average of about 40 feet apart with two set more or less on the spine and the remaining six piles split on either side. Is the true north orientation between Cairn #1 and the Center Cairn #8 a*



MARK, CLAYTON, and ROS ADVISING RICK WORKING INSIDE CAIRN # 7.



DEB WILSON EXAMINING ONE OF THE TEST PITS.

*fortuitous accident or intentional? Is the spacing between the cairns a product of convenient distances to carry stones for piling or a deliberate arrangement? If so, why? The original Nichols-Robinson survey clearly marked both a solar and a magnetic north-south alignment.*

*This leaves us with negative evidence for human activity in the limited area tested in and around the cairns. This picture could change with the find of a single authenticated artifact, prehistoric or historic.*

*To these three questions, we have only tentative conclusions based on negative findings from two days of subsurface testing with several NEARA volunteers. Beyond the cairns themselves, a thin scatter of charcoal in the upper strata above subsoil, there were no indications of cultural activity in the test units excavated. No culturally altered lithics (i.e. "artifacts", "debitage" or "fire-cracked rock"), bone, subsurface pits or other features of human origin were encountered.*

#### CONCLUSIONS: WHO AND WHEN?

Without specific artifacts as evidence or any documented historical reference to the cairns, we can only consider a variety of hypotheses for further testing.

The possibility of random natural placement was abandoned quickly as each factor, the transporting of the large boulders used in the construction from the base of the hill, the sandy nature of the soil, and the lack of "randomness" in the placement and construction of the piles, pointed to human intervention on the top of the hill.

#### NATIVE AMERICAN CONSTRUCTION

*The prehistoric use of stones in piles, linear arrays or other constructions has been identified with Native American handiwork from Paleo-Indian to Late Prehistoric in North America, particularly in areas where the scarcity of wood makes them more visible, and where food caches and burials*

*needed protection from scavenging animals. Various stone constructions have been identified as memorials with no extant evidence of actual burials included.*

Another intriguing and plausible suggestion was offered by archaeologist Ralph Coffman. He wondered if the constructed stone circles were built as vision quest sites and filled in soon after their ritual use was finished to keep in the good spirits or alternatively, to keep out the bad spirits. The lack of domestic artifacts and the astronomical/calendrical alignments contributes to the possibility of this “high place” being used as a ritual site. In addition to practical use for storage, another suggestion was the use of the cairns as trading platforms to display furs.

#### **EVIDENCE OF EUROPEAN CONTACT**

Without any documented sources, oral tradition, or recorded artifacts, any theories on pre-Columbian penetration so far up the Kennebec remain pure speculation, although one intriguing riddle is posed by the dragon etched among the Embden petroglyphs, whose arrow-tipped tail is unique to the depiction of Celtic dragons.

#### **17<sup>TH</sup> LAND SURVEYING, INDIAN WARS, BLACK ROBES**

Morse Payne, in several NEARA Journal articles, discussed the evolution of British land strategy. In essence, the King granted substantial lands to his favorites who, as investors, divided the distant, unvisited land into tidy map-defined parcels. Key to these claims, we can assume that surveyors were sent into the wilderness as early as possible. The 45<sup>th</sup> parallel was consistently used as a base or bench mark for boundaries. Could these piles, so close to the 45<sup>th</sup>, have been part of a surveying datum plotting British (or French or Dutch) land divisions? Lacking artifacts, more research is needed on English land surveying methods to test this hypothesis.

The first black robed Jesuits traveled lightly, with only the minimal necessities for their mission. Their goal was to build churches, and there is no precedent in France or Canada for considering them as our builders.

The sad demise of Jesuit Father Rale’s settlement at Norridgewock, on the Kennebec about 20 miles south of the cairns, is well known in Maine. The mission, with its church surrounded by Indian dwellings, was burnt by the English with help from native sympathizers in 1724 during the first French and Indian War. Father Rale was killed, but many of his flock escaped and fled northward. Once more, the Embden glyphs show a crude house that may have been inspired by the native’s southern neighbors.

If fur traders were our candidates, could they have been building caches for equipment or supplies, or trading platforms for displaying furs. In that case, one might hope to

find the ubiquitous pipe stem or bowl, or trade goods such as beads.

#### **EIGHTEENTH CENTURY FARMING, PASTURING, MILITARY ACTIONS, THE ARNOLD EXPEDITION, MILLING**

It is illogical to consider land clearing if the bulk of the construction material is hauled in from some distance. Or on the other hand, is it sensible to construct cairns on otherwise useful land when dumping the material to be cleared over the steep edge of the knoll? “Manuring piles” were effective in promoting growth around sun-warmed stones and used in pastures. In that case, one would expect the stones to be evenly spaced over the whole hill top.

*The possibility that the cairns are the result of clearing operations was investigated by comparing the quantity of stones within a 20’(6.6m) radius of the outside perimeter of the plotted cairns on the ground, with one or more random samples from similar areas beyond the 20’radius. Subsurface testing failed to indicate a significant difference in the quantity of large cobbles encountered below the surface (however, large stones were noted over the edge of the steep drop-off towards the river).*

*The size of the cobbles incorporated into the cairns and the locations of the cairns at intervals indicate human agency in the placement. The questions at issue are when and why. If the stone piles were the result of Settlement Period (1790-1820) clearing operations, averaging of measurements between each cairn surveyed by Nichols and Robinson gives us an area cleared of stones covering a radius of approximately 20’(6.6m) around each cairn. The heaping of stones into spaced piles to create pasture for sheep is a documented practice of homesteaders, particularly those bearing Scotch or Scotch-Irish names (such as, for example, “Hamilton”). However, a deed search for names of early landowners did not identify an early settler with a clearly Scotch name.*

*At this point, we have not found or been able to define a motivation for constructing the cairns that is more than merely plausible or conjectural.*

#### **THE NEW DAWN: INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT, RAILROAD CONSTRUCTION, LOGGING, ICE HARVESTING**

Although industrial activity spread along the river during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there seems to be no identifiable industry-dependent function or association for the stone piles. In the immediate area, the railroad was the only development. Though we might fantasize a scene of storing reserve dynamite used in railroad construction or stashing away “moonshine” during prohibition, no proof is in the offering for such activities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to provide a comprehensive overview of the site and its significance, we recommend the following steps be taken:

- Completion of survey of the area showing features and elevations, as well as follow up verifying measurements and horizon elevations sufficient for additional analysis of solar, lunar and stellar astronomical phenomena.
- Additional field work which would include more test pits and the investigation of another cairn, examining footing or foundation depth and construction.
- Consider laboratory analysis and dating of material found, if appropriate.
- Additional research on historical background covering all periods of settlement, and research associated with industrial, agricultural, river and forest products uses.

*The potential for finding something more definitive by further testing and research is present. Another cairn could be excavated. If this is done, a particular effort should be made to collect enough lump charcoal, uncontaminated by other organics, for a radiocarbon date with financing for laboratory dating. The date that is determined should represent a period that precedes or is contemporary with the construction of the cairns. More test pits mean a greater chance for a significant find and, conversely, if negative, more weight to the preliminary conclusions laid out above. Further documentary research on Wilson, his son Joshua and the period in which they lived, including the Bingham and Solon Historical Society, would flesh out the little we presently know.*

After all the planning, digging and hauling, bug bites and mental gyrations, we were left in pretty much the same place as we were when we began. In our search for the “who, how, what, where, when, and why,” we remain confounded except by the “where.” The builder—farmer, hunter, shaman, soldier, shepherd or priest—labored with measured purpose and intended a unique result for his efforts. (Although possible, this does not appear to be women’s work from any culture.)

In the true NEARA spirit, the mystery only beckons us to work harder and search deeper for an answer. Perhaps in another year, we will have written another chapter in the story of the stone piles in Maine. We’ll be back on the Kennebec next summer and we invite you to join the new round of Maine mound hunters in probing the cairn mystery.

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