

THE CAIRNS IN OUR MIDST: HISTORIC OR PREHISTORIC?

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INTRODUCTION

Take a walk through the woods of the Northeast, and you will eventually encounter stone cairns of various shapes and sizes, probably the most ubiquitous geographical feature to be found other than stone walls. We know from historical documents, interviews with American Indians and farmers, and archaeological excavations that cairns were erected for purposes such as the vision quest ritual, at trail sides to commemorate warriors killed in battle, as burial sites, or simply to clear colonial fields. When cairns are suddenly encountered in the woods, it is more difficult to determine their purpose with any degree of certainty.

While cairns are features that interest many NEARA members, little research has been done on them, particularly here in the Northeast. However, within the past fifteen years they have become the focus of attention in the South because of recent NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) regulations that require archaeologists to determine whether cairns or stone mounds that are in the way of planned construction are historic or prehistoric. The written opinions of two Georgia archaeologists—one siding with an historical interpretation of particular cairn fields and the other opposing it—are the focus of this paper. We will review four cairn types and examine the points raised by the two archaeologists. We will then apply the cairn categories used by Patrick Garrow, one of the archaeologists, to a site in Vermont in order to distinguish historic cairns from prehistoric ones. The objective is to demonstrate what can be learned from such a site and to suggest avenues for further cairn research.

CAIRN TYPES

Vision Quest Cairns

That Indians constructed cairns during the vision quest ritual has been established by a number of writers in reference to features found in the West. In 1954, Caldwell and Carlson wrote about the stone piling practice among Oregon Indians. Chartkoff described the stone building traditions of the Yurok Indians of northern California, an Algonquian-speaking tribe, who constructed small cairns as part of the vision quest ritual. As suppliants approached prayer sites, they would make periodic stops. “The act of constructing the rock stack is part of a ritual or purification in the approach to sacred places. At the same time, the rock stack becomes a marker for the rituals performed there, so that passers-by will see it and understand what has taken place.” (Chartkoff, 1983:749-751).

Chartkoff distinguished between rock stacks and cairns, the former being “simple rock features consisting of one to four rocks piled one on top of another on a larger rock that was usually embedded in the ground.” In his terminology, cairns were simply much larger versions of rock stacks, and those found on peak-tops “were found principally in association with prayer-seat features.” Jett, in a response to Chartkoff’s article, emphasized that trailside cairns have been found among 35 ethnic tribes across the United States (Jett, 1986).

In eastern Canada, Noble found a large concentration of cairns in Algonquin Provincial Park, Ontario, which were probably constructed during the vision quest ritual (Noble, 1968: 58-59). The cairns, 42 in number and no more than 2 feet high, were grouped on a plateau within a 160 foot radius. More than 600 feet to the southwest were 31 stone-lined vision quest pits, which were tightly clustered on a rise overlooking Rock Lake. Noble also pointed out that many of the cairns were constructed on existing boulders.

Commemorative Cairns

Brush and stone memorial piles in Delaware were the subject of an article by Frank Speck (Speck, 1945), and this was followed one year later by a more comprehensive article by Eva Butler on New England cairns. Butler referred to a large stone cairn in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, which the Reverend John Sergeant saw with an Indian guide in 1734 (Butler, 1946: 3). He described the cairn as being “two cart loads” in size, and as Indians passed by the spot they would “throw a stone to it.” Ezra Stiles, the future president of Yale, described the same cairn in 1762 and drew a sketch of it. Butler claimed that “Monument Mountain was destroyed in the 1840s,” but undoubtedly she was referring to the cairn, which according to some sources was “heavily vandalized” (Brown, 1958: 46-47). The present cairn (FIGURE 1) is supposedly a replacement, but probably built on a core of stones of the original mound. In 1735, Sergeant wrote that the Stockbridge cairn was “raised over the first sachem who died after they [the Indians] came into this region. Each Indian as he goes by adds a stone to the pile. Captain Konkepot tells me it marks the boundary line agreed upon in a treaty with the Mohawks, the Mohecunnucks being entitled to have all the country for their hunting ground within one day’s journey in every direction from said pile. He also says a chief was buried there but the stone is added to keep distinct the monument.” (Butler, 1946: 8).

Burial Cairns

Stone burial mounds seem to have been first mentioned in *Smithsonian Contributions of Knowledge* (vol. II, 1851: 158-



FIGURE 1. COMMEMORATIVE CAIRN AT MONUMENT MOUNTAIN, STOCKBRIDGE, MA.
Photo: N. Muller

159). In 1960, Kellar wrote a comprehensive article on stone mounds in the eastern United States, and said that many are found on “high knobs, ridges, and mountainous regions in the upland sections.” (Kellar, 1960: 447). Some, too, are associated with geometric earthworks, and still others are found within the walls of hilltop “forts,” such as the huge one (12’x 129’) at Glenford, Ohio, which has been dated to 2220 ± 50 B.P. (Dutcher, 1988).

Stewart’s study of stone burial mounds in Maryland described them as generally being in a “high terrace/upland setting,” and nearly always near a water source (Stewart, 1981: 7). Many were from 12 to 20 feet in diameter and from 6



FIGURE 2. PROBABLE BURIAL CAIRN AT OLEY HILLS STONE MOUNDS SITE, PA.
Photo: D. Connelly

to 16 feet high. A number of these mounds also contained what are called “cist graves,” which are box-like structures of large flat stones set on edge, on top of which would be placed other flat stones, thus forming a rude stone coffin. A pile of loose stones then covered it. This type of structure was analyzed by Brown, who found it widespread throughout the South and Midwest extending into western Pennsylvania (Brown, 1981: Fig. 2, p. 10). An example has also been found in eastern Pennsylvania, not far from the Oley Hills site. On a flat spur of a low mountain, seven stone mounds were discovered, all measuring around 3 feet high, 12-15 feet in diameter, and constructed directly on the ground (FIGURE 2). The mound area is partially enclosed on three sides by a discontinuous low stone wall. One of the cairns had been torn apart at some time in the past, exposing a four-sided stone cist grave, no more than 4’ long and 1.5’ wide, perhaps originally containing the body of a child.

Field Cairns

While perhaps somewhat less exciting than the other three categories discussed thus far, field cairns make up a large percentage of the cairns we encounter. Daniel Leary wrote an excellent article on the subject for the *NEARA Journal* in 1988. Over a four year period Leary, together with other NEARA members, studied five cairn field sites in Atkinson, Windham, Epping, and at two sites in North Salem, New Hampshire. He found that the cairns at these sites appear “on uncultivated lands which are normally dry” and “in association with eighteenth and nineteenth century agricultural developments. The cairns are found on lands not suitable for cultivation, usually near water.” (Leary, 1988:39). Four of the sites (Atkinson, Windham, North Salem, and Epping) were settled mainly by Scotch-Irish shepherders (Leary, 1988:39). He raised an interesting point that herders may have allowed sheep to graze in the cairn field, since the cairns not only create tillable soil by concentrating stones in piles, but also conserve heat and moisture. Sheep will eat grass around the cairns—pulling it up by its roots—and deposit nitrate-rich fecal matter, thus enriching the soil and improving the development of the land. Various types of field cairns are illustrated in the article, and the 70 cairns found at the Atkinson site are described in detail. In a section titled “Other Possibilities” Leary addresses the fact that quartz is often found associated with cairns. “Remembering that quartz is a very common material in the East, I would not be surprised not to have seen any, though to find quartz stones *on the top of these stone piles, say in 90% of the cases, would be very convincing of the use and importance of quartz in these sites* [emphasis added].” (Leary, 1988: 39).

GEORGIA CAIRNS

Many of the same issues Leary raised in his article formed the basis of a subsequent article by Thomas Gresham in 1990 and a report by Patrick Garrow in 1994 on the subject of Georgia cairns. Both individuals are contract archaeologists.

The recent rules contained in NAGPRA (North American Graves Repatriation Act) have forced archaeologists to distinguish between historic and prehistoric rock cairns, and Gresham's article on this issue was very timely, particularly as it related to Georgia. He listed nine categories of rock features (piles, mounds, stacks, pitted rock piles, terraces, fences, walls, effigies, and caches), recognizing that sites often contain two or more of the listed types (Gresham, 1990:6). Early eighteenth century references emphasized that many cairns were memorials to slain warriors. Nineteenth century antiquarians and archaeologists shifted their focus to large stone mounds, many of which contained burials. Although historic rock piling practices are poorly documented, farmers today deny making rock piles, instead dumping unwanted rocks in gullies or along field margins. Gresham contradicted this view by examining four sites in which cairns often contained historic evidence in the form of fragments of broken pottery and other household debris. Addressing the most contentious issue, he concluded that carefully "stacked piles" of flat stones were meant for eventual sale, since they are suitable for construction purposes; he offered examples of this in North Carolina (Gresham, 1990:24). Toward the end of his article, Gresham listed what he felt were common misconceptions about presumed prehistoric cairns (Gresham, 1990: 30-32):

- That the land is too steep for farming and therefore the cairns cannot be farmer's piles.
- Farmers would not have stacked stone in fields that were to be farmed.
- Cairns are the "result of farmers clearing their fields of unwanted rock."
- "Farmer's rock piles are arranged linearly, along field or terrace edges."

In his conclusion, Gresham listed five characteristics of rock piles (Gresham 1990: 32-34):

- Rock piles are morphologically identical through three distinct cultural periods.
- Some sites can contain rock piles from "two cultural periods and relating to two functions."
- Most historic rock piling probably took place during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and it is doubtful if present day informants or

farm journals will provide evidence on why they were built.

- "Determining the cultural origin of a particular rock pile site based on pattern recognition is tenuous at best and can be very misleading".
- While rock burial mounds are prehistoric, rock piles have generally proved to be historic.

Gresham is aware that the issue is still cloudy, but he believes that further research should resolve it.

Gresham's article was critical of the Parks-Strickland site that Garrow had investigated in 1988 and which he had listed on the National Register of Historic Places in an attempt to prevent its destruction through development by claiming the cairns were prehistoric. As described by Garrow, "The Parks-Strickland Complex...consists of two clusters of stone mounds located on narrow benches on steep slopes overlooking the Little Mulberry River (in Gwinnett County). The Parks mounds...occupy two narrow benches between elevations of 1056 and 1068 feet AMSL. Thirteen mounds were identified on the lower bench, while 17 were found on the upper feature. The Strickland mounds are located approximately 300 feet east of the Parks cluster between elevations of 1060 and 1100 feet AMSL, and separated from the Parks mounds by a deeply entrenched stream that flows into a tributary of the Little Mulberry River...A total of 153 mounds have been described in this mound cluster." (Garrow, 1994:3-4). It should be emphasized that the mounds in this complex are of the stacked variety (FIGURE 3). In Garrow's 1994 report/rebuttal to Gresham, he listed five reasons why he believed the cairns were prehistoric; these are also found in his 1988 report:



FIGURE 3. STACKED CAIRN AT STRICKLAND MOUNDS COMPLEX, GWINNETT CO., GA. Photo: P. Garrow

- The complex was located on the only level ground in the area, one suitable for farming.
- The complex straddles a property line but is oriented perpendicular to that line. Historic piles, on the contrary, are invariably oriented parallel to property lines.
- The land on which the cairns are found was never cultivated, and hauling stones from cultivated land to the Parks-Strickland complex makes no sense.
- The stacked mounds were carefully planned and constructed, whereas field clearing piles are generally loosely stacked.
- The mounds were not randomly placed, but seem to conform to a pattern.

Since Gresham focused on stacked stones and how these would have been piled for sale, Garrow countered by listing reasons why the Parks-Strickland Complex cairns did not conform to Gresham’s ideas. First of all, amphibolite (the type of stone found in the Parks-Strickland Complex) has no commercial value. Second, the complex piles do not contain stones of similar size, a requirement for stone stacks meant for sale. Third, “There is no reason to assume that farmers would expend the labor needed to build the mounds if they were simply stockpiling the rocks for future use or sale.” Fourth, there was no historical documentation of an amphibolite industry in Gwinnett County.

Garrow’s defense of the Parks-Strickland Mounds site being prehistoric suffered a temporary setback subsequent to the publication of his report in 1994. A developer purchased the property that contained the Strickland Mounds and planned construction on it. The State of Georgia, however, had passed a burial law in the early 1990s “that included prehistoric burials, and under that law the local governing authority (the county in this instance) had to issue a burial removal permit under a specific plan before graves could be disturbed” (personal correspondence, 2004). Garrow took the position that the mounds could contain human remains and that a permit was necessary before the mounds could be opened. The County then hired Garrow as its expert and the developer hired its own archaeologist, who took a position contrary to Garrow and had some mounds opened without a permit. When Garrow found out what was happening, he notified a local judge who issued an injunction against the unlawful excavation until the issue could be resolved. The developer fought the injunction for awhile, but then gave up and sold the land to the county for a park.

R7-1 CAIRN SITE, ROCHESTER, VERMONT

A site somewhat similar to those discussed by Garrow, but consisting of mainly very large platform cairns—square to oval forms three or more feet high with flat tops—is desig-

nated R7-1 in Rochester, Vermont, off West Hill Road. It is on a portion of land formerly owned by Chester Smith, who settled here in the late 1830s. Until his death in 1903, Smith had cleared 250 acres, of which 100 were tillable. When Smith died, he left an estate that included 38 milk cows, 13 yoke of oxen, 18 hogs, and 200 sheep. He lived at the bottom of the cairn slope, where the ruined foundations for his house, barn and outbuilding can still be seen. From the house to the top of the cairn field, an area of approximately 41 acres, the slope rises at least 200 feet over undulating steep to rolling terrain. Second growth hardwood and softwood cover the slope, and there are rocky outcrops visible everywhere. Many of the 78 large cairns surveyed by the National Forest Service in early 1990 seem to have been constructed on exposed bedrock.

One of the first cairns one encounters if climbing uphill from country road FR61 is platform cairn #13, called the “turtle” on account of the head-like projection at one end (FIGURE 4). Constructed on a steep slope, it measures 21.5’ long, 12’ wide and varies from 2’ to 8’ high. Based on measurements I provided to Herman Bender, a colleague in Wisconsin, the cairn contains approximately 10,000 rocks.



FIGURE 4. PLATFORM CAIRN #13, SITE R7-1, ROCHESTER, VT.
Photo: N. Muller

They are of various sizes and shapes, ranging from boulders 10” in diameter to fist-size stones for the interior. The estimated total weight of the cairn would be around 80 tons.

I had Nick Aiken, a professional Scottish dyker or waller, estimate what it would take to build a cairn of this size. He pointed out that a good three to four months would be required just to find and gather the stones and bring them to the site, and another month would be required to build it (personal correspondence, 2003). Therefore we are talking about the good part of a year when outdoor activities were possible, meaning from late spring to early fall. We must also bear in mind that there are 78 cairns at the site, most of the platform variety, and some of which are much larger than the one pointed out. For example, of 71 cairns at the site, 35 have one side between 10’ and 20’ long, 22 are between 20’ and 30’ long, 9 are between 30’ and 40’, and five are more than 40’ long. The largest cairn measures 44’ x 35’ x 6’.

Farmers such as Smith had their hands full just to keep food on the table, and constructing elaborate cairns hardly seems like normal agricultural practice. It is quite obvious to the educated eye that they are monuments and not field clearing piles, resulting from deliberate acts quite apart from normal farming practices.

Quartz is found in quite a few of the large cairns, and one of the most spectacular examples (feature 8)—called the “boat” (although “crescent” might be more descriptive)—contains two flat slabs of quartz positioned in the middle of it (FIGURE 5). This flat-topped cairn measures 37’ long and 9.5’ wide in the middle, tapering to 4 and 5 feet at the ends. A piece of the same quartz type is found underneath the west end of the cairn. While quartz is a common mineral in this part of New England, the manner in which it has been incorporated in some of the cairns certainly seems to be more deliberate than accidental.

Another feature with a similar piece of quartz is F2, which consists of a huge rock slab propped up at one end by a white feldspathic chock stone (FIGURE 6). At the other end is a semicircular arrangement of stones, many of them quartz, that are laid like pavement (FIGURE 7). One of the quartz pieces bears the same color and structure as the ones found in feature 8 previously mentioned.

The source of the quartz for the two features mentioned above was a wide quartz vein or outcrop 150’ from the propped-up boulder and 250’ from the



FIGURE 5. QUARTZ SLABS ON CAIRN #8, SITE R7-1, ROCHESTER, VT. Photo: N. Muller



FIGURE 6. FEATURE F2, SITE R7-1, ROCHESTER, VT. Photo: N. Muller



FIGURE 7. STONE PAVEMENT AT NORTHEAST END OF BOULDER, FEATURE F2, SITE R7-1, ROCHESTER, VT. Photo: N. Muller

“boat” cairn (FIGURE 8). Here we not only have the source of the quartz, but also proof that this mineral was deliberately sought out and integrated into the two structures. The quartz vein needs to be cleared of leaves and other debris to determine how far it extends and how much of it was mined. Each of the cairns should then be carefully studied to see how many more contain similar types of quartz. Measuring the thickness of the quartz pieces and recording the plane orientation and the color should establish whether any other pieces came from the same source.



FIGURE 8. EXPOSED QUARTZ VEIN AT FEATURE F3, SITE R7-1, ROCHESTER, VT. Photo: N. Muller

To many aboriginal cultures around the globe, quartz often had spiritual and ritualistic significance. Dr. Paul Taçon, in writing about the Aborigines in Australia, describes how their quartz and quartzite tools seem to have an iridescent quality, and that this “iridescence and ‘brightness’ are associated with both life and Ancestral Beings.” (Taçon, 1991:198). Paul Devereux refers to quartz as “solidified light” that came from the sky (Devereux, 1999: 44), and Whitley, in his fascinating discussion of Sally’s Rockshelter in California, describes how quartz—not native to the area—was used to peck the petroglyphs at the site (Whitley, 1999:102). Further, Whitley mentioned that quartz was used “because of the shamanistic belief that the supernatural power in quartz (called triboluminescence) would enter the suppliant’s body and enhance his supernatural potency.” We are unsure why quartz was used for some of the cairns in Vermont, but that it was intentionally sought out and used, and that it did not have spiritual significance to the European-American settlers, seems undeniable.

While there are 78 recorded cairns on the property, there are many more unrecorded smaller stone features present,

such as carefully constructed terrace cairns that in their own way are just as fascinating as the large platform examples and serve to complement them, much like punctuation marks in a sentence (FIGURE 9). These accents, together with platform cairns, are found not just on the Smith property but at other sites far away, such as at Southbridge, ten miles south of Rochester, and at Newfane, a good forty miles farther to the southwest. Images of some of these have been posted on the NEARA website (Muller, 2003). Considered together, these features establish that they were part of a widespread cultural activity. Had they been constructed by colonial farmers, some mention of them and their purpose surely would have been made. But history seems to be mute on the subject, and we can reasonably conclude at this point that they were probably present before the land was first settled by colonists in the late eighteenth century.

A NEW APPROACH

Cairns and other stone features are often regarded as isolated objects to be studied independently of other considerations. But by being sensitive to the object and the landscape in which they are placed, we can often gain insight into the relationship between them. Within the past fifteen years or so, some of the focus on rock art (petroglyphs) has been on its relationship to the surroundings in which it is found, which are often quite spectacular. Some researchers, such as Steinbring (1992, 2000), Taçon (1991), Tilley (1994), and



FIGURE 9. TERRACE CAIRN AT SITE R7-1, ROCHESTER, VT. Photo: N. Muller

Klassen (2003), have begun to study the phenomenal aspects of rock art sites. Rock art is often found in caves, on spectacular outcrops, or on boulders having “presence.” But for “rock art” we might substitute any other unusual feature with related stonework that we find in the New England landscape. At the

Oley Hills site in eastern Pennsylvania, for example, a huge boulder on the ridge top appears to be the focus of a serpentine wall and a terrace (Muller, 1998, 1999), in that they were probably constructed in response to the boulder. A smaller boulder on the southern extension of the same ridge has donation stones placed underneath it, and short sections of stone wall connect it to other unusual boulders nearby (Muller, 1999).

At site R-2 off West Hill Road in Rochester, Vermont, is a large, potato-shaped glacial erratic with four cairns distributed around it (FIGURE 10). Two of the cairns on the west side of the erratic appear to have been constructed directly on the ground (although this needs further confirmation), and two are on boulder outcrops (FIGURE 11). There are no other



FIGURE 11. ERRATIC (LEFT) AND CAIRN ON BOULDER (RIGHT) AS SEEN FROM THE EAST, SITE R7-2, ROCHESTER, VT. Photo: N. Muller

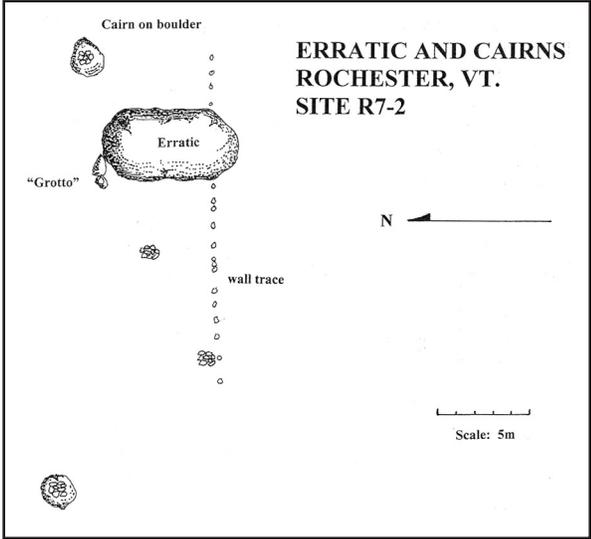


FIGURE 10. MAP OF GLACIAL ERRATIC AND CAIRNS, SITE R7-2, ROCHESTER, VT. Drawing by N. Muller

cairns such as these nearby or anywhere else on the site, and it is my contention that they were constructed in response to the phenomenal characteristics of the erratic. Within a mile of this site is a low quartz platform built against the west side of a large erratic, and two large spectacular boulders at two separate sites have rock caches piled against one side. In each case the size and shape of the boulders convey a “presence” that, to the Indians, was indicative of *Manitou* (Bender 2003). We look at landscape through twenty-first century eyes, full of scientific understanding of geological processes that formed the present landscape but lacking any wonder, any mystery. In order to truly understand landscape as the American Indians did, we need to rid ourselves of all cultural preconceptions and approach it as would a child, full of wonder at the curious shapes that beguile it, and imagining all kinds of mysterious processes that created these forms. By doing this, we might discover a deeper understanding of rock features as they were perceived by the Indians and also of the landscape in which they are found.

CODA

Six years ago, Bill Sevon, a geologist working for the State of Pennsylvania, sent me a photograph of two huge cairns he saw in Knoxlyn in north central Pennsylvania, plus a topographic map of their location. Several years transpired before I was able to visit the site. When I did about two years ago, I found both cairns to be more than seven feet high and constructed on existing boulders (FIGURE 12). The owner of the property said that his grandfather had built them in the 1960s upon his retirement, for reasons not explained. They are in very good condition, and a clue to their newness can be found in the thin patina of green lichen and moss covering the stones. The trip to see them could be considered a wild goose chase, but I came away convinced that any study of cairns should be based on sound research with the actual objects, and not on impressions obtained from photographs.



FIGURE 12. CONTEMPORARY CAIRNS, KNOXLYN, PA. Photo: N. Muller

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