

THE CALIFORNIA QUARRY & NEARBY STONE CAIRNS OF WOODSTOCK, NY

BY GLENN KREISBERG WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM DAVID HOLDEN AND NORMAN MULLER

Low on the southeastern slope of the Overlook Mountain in Woodstock, Ulster County, New York, there stands an abandoned bluestone quarry, once a busy venue contributing to early American industry and commerce. The purpose of this paper is to document and contextualize the quarrying activity and its influence on the region, as well as to document and help account for numerous stone cairns which are presently associated with the site. Much evidence exists to support the contention that the California Quarry contributed greatly to the quarrying trade and regional industry, and that the events associated with the quarry contributed significantly to the broad patterns of local, regional, and national history. The numerous stone cairns in the vicinity of the quarry and beyond present a greater mystery that warrants further research to reach a consensus as to their origins. Various theories abound regarding the origin of these stone constructions as well as many others throughout the region. We hope to also shed some light on the merits and pitfalls of these theories.

SITE DESCRIPTION

The California Quarry—one of the largest nineteenth-century bluestone mines in Woodstock—is found on the southeastern face of the Overlook Mountain (Figure 1). Extensive views of the Hudson River Valley are afforded from its ledges. The present condition of the site is that of a completely intact abandoned quarry located on relatively flat terraces between steep slopes of woodland uplands. The site consists of numerous bluestone ledges that have been mined above and below, as well as large piles of bluestone mining rubble, or slag. Many quarry roads crisscross the site and ascend the slopes that lead from ledge to ledge. A gravel road leads into the quarry from its entrance at the west end of the property and traverses along the base.

The flora in the quarry area is composed of maple, hemlock, cedar, birch, various species of oak, as well as hickory and black cherry. Ground cover consists mostly of grasses and ivies. At the time of the quarrying activity, localized but large amounts of forest were removed to

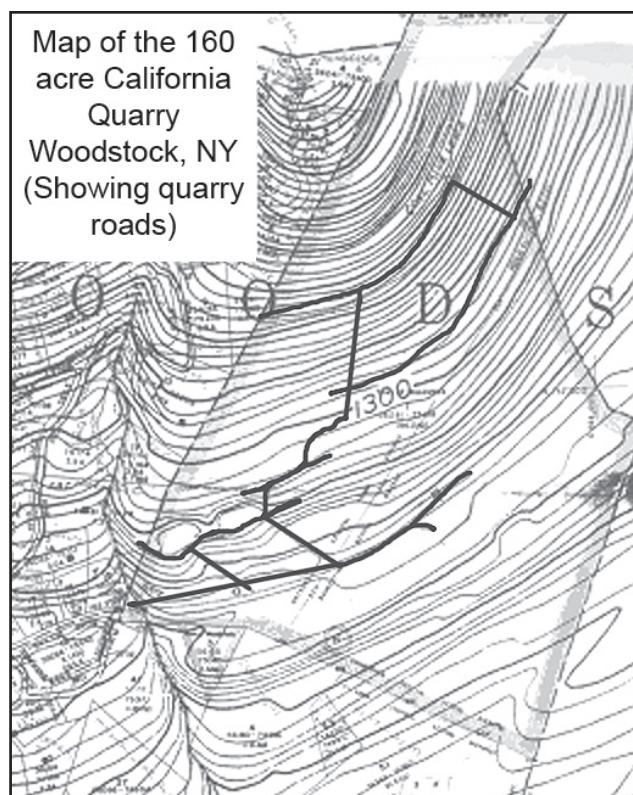


FIGURE 1. CALIFORNIA QUARRY MAP.

gain access to the stone. The quarry slowly re-vegetated with tree species requiring much sunlight, such as white birch. Today, from a distance, a discerning eye can determine the extent of the differing vegetation.

Natural features that contributed to the selection of the site for the mining activity include the fact that all of the bedrock in the area is feldspathic greywacke, known locally as bluestone, and it is for this resource that the area was quarried in the nineteenth century. Bluestone is a high quality product due to its silica content, compact nature, and fine grains. It is extremely durable, and the quality of the product is not found anywhere else in the United States or Canada. The sand-sized grains from which bluestone is constituted were deposited in the Catskill Delta during the Middle to Upper Devonian Period of the Paleozoic Era, approximately 370 to 345 million years ago. The Catskill Delta was created by run off from the Acadian Mountains (ancestral Appalachians) which covered the area where New York City now

exists. This Delta ran in a narrow band from southwest to northeast and today provides the base material for the high quality bluestone which is quarried from the Catskills and Northeast Pennsylvania.

SITE HISTORY

A blue and gold sign located on Plochmann Lane in Woodstock names the California Quarry as an historic resource for the State Education Department. The marker is dated 1935. It states, "BLUESTONE QUARRY, The California Quarry, on Overlook Mountain, North, was one of the largest of these industries, which flourished 1839-1900."

The marker application was submitted on December 21, 1934, by Mr. Raymond H. Torrey, Secretary, American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, 287 Convent Avenue, New York, N.Y., and received three days later by the former New York State Office of Archives and History. Under the section on the application in which to provide further documentation, there is listed, "Sylvester's History of Ulster County," "Picturesque Ulster," "Local Residents and Land Deeds." The fact that the application was filed by the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society suggests the possibility that further description and documentation was in their possession at the time.

While researching the documentation for the State Historic Marker, I came across an article, "Woodstock Markers Unveiled at Rites Saturday" from the May 18, 1936 *Kingston Daily Freeman*. The article reads in part, "...exercises in Woodstock Township were held to commemorate the placing of 14 historical markers. Seven of them were formally united with a man's effort to make a living...which lasted 40 or 45 years, the blue stone quarrying years, which ended precipitately in the late 'nineties with the invention of Portland cement and which we shall today mark with our visit to the California Quarry on the slope of Overlook, one of the greatest of all blue stone quarries."

In historian Alf Evers' books, *The Catskills: From Wilderness to Woodstock*, *Woodstock: History of an American Town*, and *Kingston: City on the Hudson*, the author writes extensively of his research into the bluestone industry of the Catskill Mountains in southeastern New York. He documents and explains in these works how important bluestone quarrying was as an industry

and as a source of trade and commerce in the region. These works also wonderfully illustrate the techniques and tools utilized in the bluestone quarrying trade, the backbreaking nature of the work, and the spirit in which the task was undertaken by the hardy immigrant quarrymen.

Much of the bluestone mined from the Catskills and the California Quarry was used in paving and curbing New York City's first sidewalks starting in 1811, when the street and avenue grid system was first overlaid onto Manhattan Island. It made ideal sidewalks because it was not slippery when wet and could be quarried in large flat layers. Bluestone from the California Quarry was used in building and repairing the sidewalks and curbs of New York City until concrete was patented and came into wide use after 1870. It was also used in countless municipal and private construction projects, including architectural facings, fireplaces, sills, sidewalks, and other features, and was a basic building material for churches, institutions, homes, and businesses.

In the California Quarry, stone loading docks were constructed to ease the loading of heavy slabs onto wagons. Using natural features, ledges were used as loading docks so that slabs were lowered into waiting wagons rather than lifted into them. During the time the quarry operated, transportation needs were met with animal drawn wooden wagons, carts and sleds. Stone sleds were utilized year-round until sturdy wagon wheels, which could stand extreme loads, were developed. Hemlock plank roads were improved with stone tracks to carry the heavy loads of bluestone from the mountains to Hudson River docks, where they were "dressed" and shipped to their destinations. Previously, roads only had to accommodate lighter loads from the glass and tannery industries. Road ruts remain visible on portions of old roadways as evidence of the heavy bluestone loads that once passed over them.

The quarrying which began in 1736 accelerated and continued to grow in the nineteenth century with the increase in New York City building needs. The success of the bluestone quarrying industry also provided impetus for the growth of shipbuilding on the Hudson River. Between 1815 and 1839, Nyack shipyards turned out a sloop a year, making the town the shipbuilding center of the Hudson. Nyack was later succeeded by Newburgh and Rondout, which continued shipbuilding activities through World War II.

HOW QUARRYING WAS DONE

Bluestone was initially mined using pry bars, hammers, and wedges. Techniques were developed to include manual percussion hammer drills and the use of dynamite to clear quarry rubble. Clear evidence of chisel and hammer marks, as well as blasted areas, are still present on the mined stone, rubble, and ledges in the area.

To begin, quarrymen would remove a few feet of topsoil and cut a chasm about thirty feet deep by twenty feet wide. This cut revealed the layered bluestone on either side. (Bluestone mining was a great gamble, and many a small operator lost everything from the big investment needed to get to this point in quarrying if the stone quality was ultimately poor.) The workers would then mark off the surface area needed and drill a series of holes which they plugged with feathers (two pieces of iron half-rounds), which were driven into the holes and then separated by a wedge forced between them. The resulting pressure moved the bluestone slab (Figure 2).

As quarrymen cut forward into the vertical wall, lifting off layers of stone and throwing unusable fragments and refuse behind them, a huge pile of rubble would rise. Each piece was cut from the face, and swung by horse drawn derrick to the top of the rubble pile, where stonecutters would shape it and send it away for use.

The quarry's appearance today is a result of this process. In places, the vertical excavation is so deep that as many as fifteen layers of geological strata are visible, and the vertical grooves of the drill holes cover many surfaces. Old diggings are everywhere in the surrounding forest. The deep working spaces between sheer cliffs and rubble piles can still be seen throughout. Several quarry remnants are visible on the slopes of Overlook Mountain.

Quarrying was a tricky business that quarrymen had to know well. The bluestone was beneath layers of soil, clay, and stone. This overlay material had to be stripped. After stripping down to the block of good stone, the

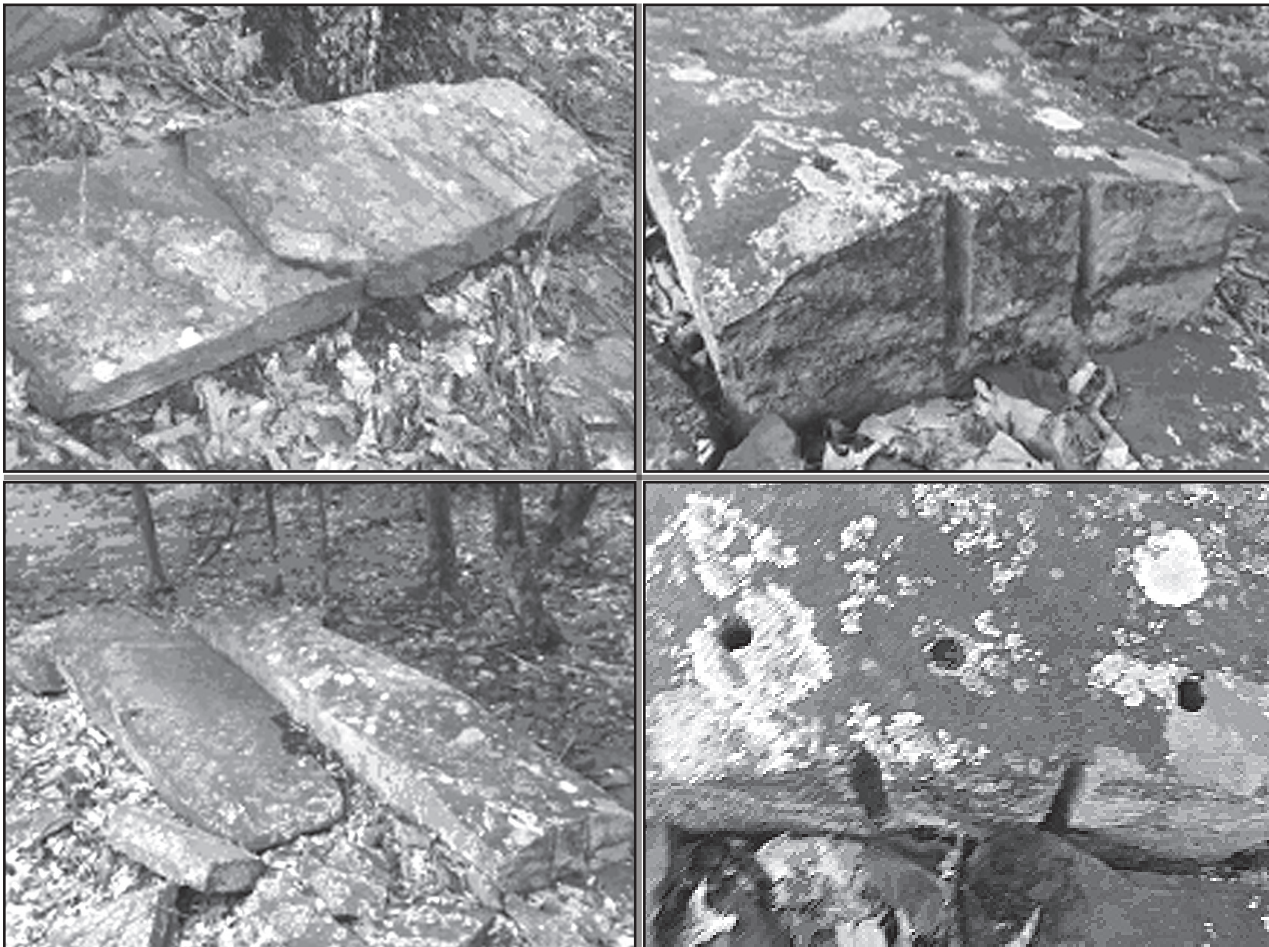


FIGURE 2. WORKING BLUESTONE (CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT): UNWORKED STONE, DRILL MARKS AFTER CUT, CLOSE-UP OF DRILL HOLES AND MARKS, WORKED BLUESTONE.

quarrymen then looked for the natural vertical joints, called side seams, running north and south, and then east and west joints, called head-offs. They then had to know how to delicately tap wedges into the horizontal seams so that they could pry up perfect slabs, called lifts. It was a precise operation. They had to know how to use their tools well: the hammers, points, drills, wedges, crowbars, plugs and feathers, shovels and picks. The quarrymen were always taking a gamble, as they never knew if they would get a good block, or, if they did, whether or not their stone boats (wagons), would make it down the side of the mountain. The quarrymen also had to pay quarry rent—generally five percent of the selling price—to the landowner. Cartage, tolls, and rent were deducted at the time the stone was paid for at the stone dock. Around 1869 intense competition and cut-throat operations, coupled with a slowing of the canal economy (which being challenged by railroads), began to have impact on the bluestone workers.

THE QUARRYMEN

The opening of the New York quarries coincided with the advent of heavy immigration from Ireland. Newly arrived Irish were recruited in New York and brought up the Hudson. In Woodstock, a community of Irish families became established to work the California Quarry. It was mined for many years by the inhabitants of what was known as Irish Village, located above Lewis Hollow and just to the east of the quarry (Figure 3). Remains of the village can still be found in several locations.

The following excerpt captures the flavor and flair of the quarrymen, and is from Alf Evers' book, *Woodstock: History of an American Town*.

...much of the rough, often hazardous quarry

labor was being done by Irish refugees from social injustice and famine. The large families in Lewis Hollow which Bide Snyder remembered were Irish and the Hollow was known by a new name – the Irish Village. The men of the Village worked the enormous California quarry, Keegan's, Elliot's, Magee's, Murray's, and other quarries strung along the long ledge on the lower slopes of Overlook known as the Quarrybank. These lively, often boisterous people lived intensely, danced on a wooden platform in the woods, drank heavily at their shebeens and produced their large families. Some single men lived in large and ill-built boardinghouses. One of these stood a little below and to the east of California quarry, where its sketchy foundations may still be seen....

“Woodstock's Irish Village resembled other Irish quarry settlements located not far from the Woodstock boundary line in the valley below. These settlements acquired political importance when the City of Kingston was formed from the village of Kingston and Rondout in 1872....



FIGURE 3. A PORTION OF AN “UNAUTHENTIC” MAP OF WOODSTOCK, NY DATED 1926 SHOWING THE LOCATION OF THE INDIAN CAVES (A), THE CALIFORNIA QUARRY (B) AND THE IRISH VILLAGE (C) IN LEWIS HOLLOW ABOVE GLASCO TURNPIKE.

“Much bluestone was processed in dusty sun baked stone yards by derby-hatted, red-shirted workmen spread out along Rondout Creek shipping points concentrated in Wilbur. The derby hats were used to protect workmen’s eyes and heads from flying bits of stone (known to them as spalts) by their use of chisels, hammers, and mallets.

“The bluestone industry, from a small beginning in the 1830s, underwent an astonishing expansion until about 40 years later. It left large regions of Kingston’s hinterland resembling hard fought battlefields given a desolate quality of their own by irregular mounds and walls of quarry waste with here and there a quarry pool in which frogs spawned and children bathed – these pools marking the places where a promising ledge had led a quarryman to strike a spring. It also created around the quarry settlements of sometime shanty homes slapped together by quarry workers of rough hemlock boards, or in a few cases neat cottages built by the owners to standard design and rented to workers.

“The growth of the bluestone industry as it responded to the growth of American cities and towns reached by water on boats able to bear the bluestone weight forced Kingston to reach out beyond its official boundaries. It reached out to localities such as Jockey Hill, Hallihan’s Hill, Stoney Hollow, Lewis Hollow, and the huge California Quarry above the base of the Overlook Mountain in its search for salable upper strata stone. In the ledges located about 1000 feet above sea level along the base of the mountain and known as the Quarrybank (pronounced “bonk”), erosion of softer deposits of red shale had left shallow caves once known to the Dutch as jadg houses (meaning hunting houses or shelters), in which Natives had camped out on autumnal hunting trips. Now some of these former Native and Dutch hunting shelters were recycled as small blacksmith shops for sharpening and repairing quarrying tools using huge bellows to fan the fires of their forges. All of the above quarries usually shipped their products via Rondout’s waterfront stone yards. Each quarry area had its ‘Irish Village’ or ‘New Dublin’....

“As the bluestone industry grew in size and profitability, shabby settlements of workmen

made their appearance right beside the suburban quarries from which they wedged and split their stone. Bluestone quarry villages such as those in Woodstock which housed California Quarry workers, featured shanties or rough boardinghouses for single workers; married men might add to their incomes with the help of a wife and children by doing a bit of hillside or mountainside farming on the steep rocky slopes above the quarries and hunting and trapping to eke out a meager income. The quarry settlements, such as the Irish Village serving the California Quarry, were outposts or suburbs socially and economically of Kingston and would eventually become the scene of battles for political control.”

THE DECLINE OF THE INDUSTRY

The bluestone industry began to fail with the development and widespread use of concrete as a construction material. Other factors contributed to the decline as illustrated in the following excerpt from the *Kingston Daily Freeman* in May, 1876:

“There seems to be a general feeling among the stone men in the quarries that the stone business in a few days will entirely collapse. Last year an arrangement was made between the buyers at the dock with the quarrymen, but no price was agreed upon. Since then the buyers have taken the stone, but have gradually cut down on the price, dropping a cent at a time, until now there is scarcely anything left after the cartage is paid. For instance, ten cents is paid for curb, while seven must be paid out of this for cartage, one cent for rent, and therefore remains but two cents with which to pay the laborers. The result is that the quarryman who used to hire ten or fifteen laborers are now discharging their men, being unable to pay them. A few days ago a man disposed of a large load of stone and after the wholesale dealer at Wilbur had deducted the cartage there was remaining just sixty cents. He refused to take the money telling, the buyers he would donate it to them. It certainly is hard on the laborers, but there does not seem to be any help for it at present. There was a time when quarrymen could get rich in couple of years, but the money was spent as fast as it was earned in some cases. There was a great demand for stone

at that time and men could command almost any price. We know of one man who opened a quarry and sent out one load a day, receiving clear from \$50.00 to \$70.00 a day and the same stone would not clear more than \$15.00 if it could be sold.”

After the bluestone industry failed completely by the turn of the century, many of the out-of-work stone workers who remained eventually found work building the Ashokan reservoir, part of the system to provide drinking water to the New York City metropolitan area.

RECENT EVENTS

In August, 2005, an iron spoke and rim bluestone wagon wheel were discovered on the site. They were photo-documented and tagged for conveyance to the Historical Society of Woodstock by Town Historian Richard Heppner. As research continues, it is likely that the site will yield further information and artifacts important to its history and prehistory (Figure 4).



FIGURE 4. REMAINS OF IRISH VILLAGE.

The following excerpt from *The Woodstock Times* (August 10, 2006) provides further validation of the lasting effect the California Quarry, Irish quarry workers, and the quarrying industry have had on our history.

“On Sunday, October 8, come to the Third Annual Bluestone Festival. There will be demonstrations of stone craft, exhibits that recount the industry—which attracted garrulous Irish laborers to this area—and home-cooked food, according to event director Dennis Connors. Bluestone masons will demonstrate their craft before your eyes. ‘Some of these guys are in their 70s,’ Connors told Almanac. Local historical societies will be on hand, urging membership so that they can preserve local

bluestone lore and quarry artifacts of the past for future generations.”

The California Quarry, in its past and present state, represents a tangible link to the bluestone quarrying industry, and as such should be recognized, further researched, and protected as a valuable cultural resource and tribute an important human endeavor and tradition. Due to cultural remains that indicate the probable serial occupation of the area by several groups over a very long time span dating back several thousand years, the New England Antiquities Research Association (NEARA) has knowledge and interest in the California Quarry site. They believe the site is worthy of further investigation. NEARA has supported nomination of the California Quarry to the National Register of Historic Places and was consulted for the application process.

THE OVERLOOK MOUNTAIN STONE CAIRNS

(with contributions by Norman Muller and David Holden)

Also in the vicinity—within one mile of the California Quarry—there are prehistoric rock shelters. The shelters are referenced by New York State Historic Marker No. 6769 at the entrance to California Quarry Road in Woodstock with the text, “Indians used nearby rock shelters, 2000 B.C. – A.D. 1750 as autumn hunting bases and there prepared game for food and clothing.”

Cultural remains and other man-made evidence of significant human activities near the California Quarry include many stone walls and mounds that exist on the quarry property and nearby. These walls and cairns were apparently used, in some cases, to delineate property boundaries and surveyed land claims. Pre-existing stone mounds, or what local land deeds and survey maps refer to as “ancient stone monuments” or “ancient monuments” abound in the area and further research is needed to determine if these are the result of land surveying, agricultural activity related to land clearing for grazing and planting, bluestone mining, or if they are Native American in origin. While most likely non-contributing to the quarrying activity, no evidence has been discovered that would lead one to believe the cairns are the result of Pre-Columbian European contact, but this also cannot be ruled out.

The area has as many as several dozen stone cairns of various sizes and configurations. Many are smaller, 2-3 meters in diameter (Figures 5 and 6). Some are scattered



FIGURE 5. CAIRN #1.



FIGURE 6. CAIRN #2.

while others appear aligned in rows. Several larger cairns are present that are considerable in size, ranging up to 100 feet in length. Many of the constructions are well organized and appear assembled with thought and purpose. Many exhibit quartzite or river stone featured prominently on their surface structure. All are located relatively near a water course and configured along ledges and slopes facing south/southeast. Additional characteristics of the large cairns include:

- ▶ The retaining wall does not appear to encircle the mound, but only runs along the front or lower edge (facing southeast).
- ▶ The overall height is perhaps two – two and a half meters at the tallest and no less than one meter all around.
- ▶ The rough shape of the mound is somewhat like a kidney bean or crescent.
- ▶ The overall length could be as much as 80 to 100 feet (Figure 7).

There is a second similar sized and shaped mound located on the ledge just below the first. The upper large cairn has a row of smaller cairns (maybe nine or 10) extending off to the west.



FIGURE 7. GREAT CAIRN #3.

Cairns as Survey Markers?

Early deeds to this land and nearby parcels make mention of certain “ancient stone monuments” as survey markers. These are referenced many times in numerous deeds. I’ve researched back to the mid 1800s, but many deeds that are handwritten are indiscernible to me. My cousins, Rita and Sherwin Allen, own a 40 acre parcel adjacent to and just east of the California Quarry property. Many cairns are present on their land. In researching their deed, I found their property was once part of the 1500 acre Claremont Subdivision of land belonging to Robert Livingston, and that the “ancient stone monuments” are mentioned. It has also been suggested that the “markers” could originally be part of a Great Lot subdivision of the Hardenberg Patent lands. The Hardenberg Patent was a land grant from colonial times.

In my opinion, too many of the cairns are too scattered about to have been constructed and used exclusively as survey markers or property boundaries. If the presence of “ancient stone monuments” were found mentioned in deeds prior to the quarrying activity, before the 1830s, then quarrying and quarrymen could be ruled out as sources of the stone structures. Another possibility is that they are related to agricultural activity such as field clearing or farm beautification. The sheer number and size of the Overlook Mountain cairns would suggest a fairly large population was drawn upon to construct the structures. Until the quarry work and workers arrived, the area was relatively sparsely populated by settlers, and the land is generally not well suited to be cultivated and planted. Much better farming land exists nearby, lower to the valley floor.

Nearly all known quarry roads appear to bisect the apparently older stone walls present in the area.

Because many quarry workers lived in the vicinity of the quarry and mounds in the Irish Village, some farming and animal grazing did in fact take place on the lower southern facing slopes of Overlook Mountain. However, the cairns continue up the face of the mountain for quite a ways beyond where obvious farming activity occurred. One could argue that those located higher up the slope, which clearly resemble those lower down, are also not related to agriculture.

To me, based on existing evidence, ruling out quarrying, agriculture, and survey markers seems much easier than ruling out Native American or Pre-Columbian European contact origins. Others may disagree, since it would be difficult to confidently confirm any of these proposed theories. Short of finding Celt-Iberian artifacts, attributing the cairns to Pre-Columbian European contact could be next to impossible.

Norman Muller, a conservator for the museum at Princeton University, has been studying stone cairns up and down the eastern United States for the past decade. He has examined the Overlook Mountain cairns and offered the following comments:

“With the early deeds mentioning ‘ancient stone monuments,’ it implies to me that they had the look of age about them and had been around for some time. Since your cousins have cairns on their property being identified as ‘ancient,’ might it be possible to see if any of them are at the boundaries of their property?”

“Of course, various hypotheses can be presented to explain the cairns, but having studied these features for the past ten years all along the East Coast, I’ve long moved beyond thinking of them as the result of field clearing or farm beautification. The latter term was applied to a site in Killingworth, CT, but the archaeologist who was called in to examine the cairns, Curtiss Hoffman, placed very little credence on their being part of an aesthetic beautification movement. If this were the case, he wrote, ‘Piles should be located on bedrock outcrops for aesthetic reasons. They should be clustered in areas of flat slope and high visibility, and be internally organized into pleasing pattern. Aspect, orientation, and distance to water should be random. They should cluster around the house foundations, as this area is the most visible to the public, and also along the access road...’ As he

studied the cairns at Killingworth, they did not fit the criteria he listed. I do not ascribe to a pre-Columbian or Celtic explanation for the cairns. Never have, never will.”

As suggested by Mr. Muller, I examined the survey map of the Allen property, and note that two corners of the property are marked with “ancient stone monuments” notations that match the description in the deed. However, the large majority of the cairns on their property are not along the boundaries, but located within the interior of the lot. This is why I consider the survey marker theory unlikely, although some mounds may have been conveniently located for that purpose.

The large mounds and many of the smaller ones have a concavity to their upper portion, as if they have caved in on themselves. Do to the friable nature of Catskill Mountain bluestone, it is not unlikely that the edges of some of the stones used for construction might have broken or cracked over time under weight, and in freezing and thawing conditions year in and out. Is it possible that some of these mounds, including the larger ones that also display the collapsed upper portion, may have been built with small chambers, tunnels, or passageways for access to their interior? Further investigation could confirm if that were the case.

Cairns as Burial Sites?

Ms. Sherry White, Tribal Preservation Officer for the Stockbridge Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians, examined the cairns in February 2006. She was interested in using ground penetrating radar to settle the questions surrounding whether these were burial markers. Although she felt there might be some merit to the idea that the cairns marked burial sites, there is no current evidence to back up such claims. More from Mr. Muller:

“Yes, the problem would indeed be resolved if remains were found in one of the cairns, but cairns of the barrel shaped variety probably were not used as burial sites. At various sites in Georgia, for example, only very large cairns contained faunal material; smaller cairns that surround the larger cairns seem to have been commemorative in nature. So, it is a hit and miss prospect by digging into the cairns. And once they are dismantled, they are essentially destroyed. I am currently involved in the study of a very large cairn site in central

Vermont, about which we have an exceptionally large amount of documentary information, including the original daybooks of the owner from the 1840s to 1900, and nowhere in the daybooks is there any mention of constructing cairns. When Smith purchased the property in 1847, supposedly only five acres of land had been cleared, yet the cairns extend over some 50+ acres, implying they must have been preexisting when he bought the property. To me, this kind of information is just as good as finding diagnostic artifacts in the cairns.

“I have seen Indian burial sites, and often they are on ridges overlooking river valleys. One in eastern Pennsylvania consists of about eight mounds about 15 feet in diameter and three feet high constructed directly on the ground. One had been opened in the past by pot hunters exposing a stone cist (this consists of four slabs of stone placed on end in the ground forming a box-like structure). Cairns on boulders or outcrops I don’t believe are graves. Also, ground penetrating radar would not reveal faunal material; it might, however, reveal if there is any cavity beneath the cairns. The large cairn/mound (No. 3) at the Woodstock site reminds me of a similar one in Rhode Island, and that, I believe, could be a burial site.”

So, a great mystery exists on the slopes of the Overlook Mountain. The challenge is to hear the tale the silent stones speak, so it can be remembered again and not remain lost from our knowledge forever. The Catskill Mountains, it is said, were referred to by the local Indian tribes as the “wall of the Manitou” (wall of the spirits). Considered sacred ground by the Natives, the Catskills were seldom penetrated deeply, and then most likely only on travels to the “other” or “spirit” world. Note: 2007 brought the first documentation of an apparent serpent monument or snake effigy at the California Quarry site (See Figures 8 and 9). The curving serpentine structure has what has been identified as having quartzite and chert present along its spine.

NEARA member, local Woodstock resident and woods wanderer, Dave Holden, who first introduced me to the cairns on the Overlook Mountain, considers this legend further.

“The Hudson Valley is widely known as an area rich in folklore and legend. Woodstock, which is both of the valley and the mountains, seems to have



FIGURE 8. SNAKE EFFIGY.



FIGURE 9. SERPENT’S HEAD OF SNAKE EFFIGY.

a particularly rich folk history. There are many ghost stories featuring Indian spirits, as well as numerous tales of witchcraft, white and black (see Woodstock, *History of An American Town*, by Alf Evers). Some stories are well known and somewhat documented, like the tales of the Old Doctor, Dr. Jacob Brink, a noted white witch of the 1800s. Also from that period is the poignant tale of the Elm Tree Grave. The Woodstock oral tradition that I find most fascinating is just that — purely oral. So far as I know, this will be the first time this ‘story’ has been written. Over time, and in the course of my explorations of backwoods Woodstock, this tale has come to strike an increasingly vibrant and sensible chord.

“According to this legend, the Woodstock Valley was an uninhabited buffer zone separating the three dominant local Indian tribes — the Mohawk (north and west), the Mahican (east), and the Lenape, or Delaware (south). It was uninhabited because it was where all three tribes buried their dead and was, therefore, considered too sacred a place to live. Each of these tribes were ancestral enemies and warred with each other over territory

and trade, yet would suspend hostilities when access was needed to this area. Remember, this is all according to legend. I think there may be much truth to this story. Woodstock is literally peppered with thousands of cairns, which are mostly located in specific locations and in particular patterns. It seems that our valley may indeed have been a vast funerary complex.

“Most cairns here are of the small to medium, six-to-ten foot wide variety. They are all drystone, built on bedrock, and have some kind of quartzite built into their south-facing aspect. The vast majority of them are built adjacent to springs, which may be important since many ancients considered springs, as the source of life, to be sacred. Alignments of cairns are not uncommon, and one cairn circle is known to exist (keep in mind that the predominant stone locally that is stackable is bluestone, which is friable. It is problematic to make a corbelled structure with bluestone because it will not last in our climate). By far the ‘crown jewels’ of our Sacred Precinct are what I call the Great Cairns. They are a series of five slightly concave, horned cairns, aligned north-south. Each has multiple entrances that face east, from inside their lateral concavity. East is also slightly downslope. Each structure also appears to have had a (once corbelled?) stone roof, which is now collapsed, creating a concave roof. There are also quartzite stones still embedded in their vertical walls. Just as astonishing to me as their structure, is their relatively immense size. All of the five cairns I refer to here range in size from approximately eighty feet long to one hundred feet long, with a width ranging from approximately thirty to forty feet.

“As to their provenance, I will let others more qualified judge. I can tell that they were not casually built by farmers with lots of spare time — an oxymoron. Nor do I believe they were charcoal kilns, or the huts to house charcoal burners (which are not uncommon locally). There are numerous, smaller cairns nearby. I’m fascinated by the Great Cairns’ mere presence and their sense of great antiquity. These cairns have some great ancient story to tell, a human tale echoed in their lichen-encrusted stones which are, like us, returning inexorably to the earth from which they came.

Perhaps some day, if we’re lucky, we’ll be able to learn a small part of their story.”

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