

The Mysterious Stone Stacks of Exeter

In the quiet forest of the Beach Pond State Park in western Exeter, situated between Old Voluntown Road and Ten Rod Road, on several acres of sloping ground, lie dozens of peculiar stone constructions. These are not massive, glacially-deposited jumbles of boulders like the so-called Queen's Fort in the northeastern corner of



town. Instead they stand no taller than two or three feet at most and usually consist of an outer ring of carefully placed larger field stones that have been in-filled with a collection of smaller stones. Some are oddly shaped, incomplete, or less orderly. Most are circular or elliptical in outline, typically about 6-8 feet in diameter and spaced 20-30 feet apart. Otherwise, there is no discernable pattern to their arrangement and no obvious purpose for their existence. They do not serve as trail or boundary markers and

nothing remotely suggests any kind of alignment for celestial sightings. Many are located directly on ground, but some have been constructed atop larger boulders or base stones. Mystery surrounds their origin.

Throughout New England similar structures are relatively common and the total number may surpass 100,000. There are several sites elsewhere in Rhode Island; particularly well-known is one in the George B. Parker Woodland property of the Audubon Society of Rhode Island. Generally two morphological types have been described – 1) piles of loose rocks and 2) more elaborately built stacks of stones known as “cairns.” Many of the structures at this Exeter site are cairn-like. People often presume that



cairns were constructed by Native Americans as monuments or burial markers. Archeological artifacts and historical narratives support this hypothesis in some cases, although the evidence often is scant. More imaginative cairn enthusiasts speculate that some may have been built by pre-colonial Viking explorers, based on somewhat dubious comparisons to European structures.



Absent any markings or a reliably accurate method for dating their construction such ideas remain unproven. For most sites, only circumstantial evidence supports hypotheses about who built the structures and perhaps when they were erected.

A less romantic but more plausible supposition about the origin of the Exeter stone stacks is that they result from agricultural activities. There are several lines of evidence for this idea, the foremost being signs of

habitation nearby. This collection of structures is bounded by stone walls in good condition on the west and south sides. Outside the walls no stacks are found close by so it seems the two have some deliberate relationship. And within two hundred feet a large cellar hole clearly indicates that settlers had occupied the area. The building that once stood there was a house and not a mill since no streams flow nearby.

Besides evidence on the ground, there are clues in the census records. By 1782 the population of Exeter had grown to more than 2000 persons. The first State forest survey in 1767 estimated that only 31 percent of the State remained tree-covered and it is reasonable to assume that even in westernmost Exeter the land was being farmed. Historical documentation describes how farmers throughout New England at that time cleared stones from fields and pastures after the seasonal frost-heaves lifted them to the surface.



Piles would be collected in spring for hauling away the following winter when it was easier to drag a sledge over the snow. The stones then could serve as construction material for walls or foundations, as fill in low areas, or even offered for sale.

A question naturally arises about how old these particular structures might be. Certainly their construction is not modern as evidenced by the substantial veneer of lichens and leaf debris around some stacks. Digging or disassembly that might reveal datable artifacts is out of the question, so ways for determining an exact age are limited. However, there are several lines of indirect evidence that suggest a reasonable range of dates might be proposed for their creation.

One method, called dendro-chronology or tree-ring dating, is possible because several of the stone structures were found with mature trees growing out of them. An old maple nearly three feet in diameter was the most promising. Much of its trunk is now battered and broken – still solid, but deteriorating and no longer alive. Only a younger side branch sprouted from the base and about forty feet tall continues to grow. Because trees add a growth layer annually, cross-sectional cores were taken in three places with the hope of determining a minimum age.



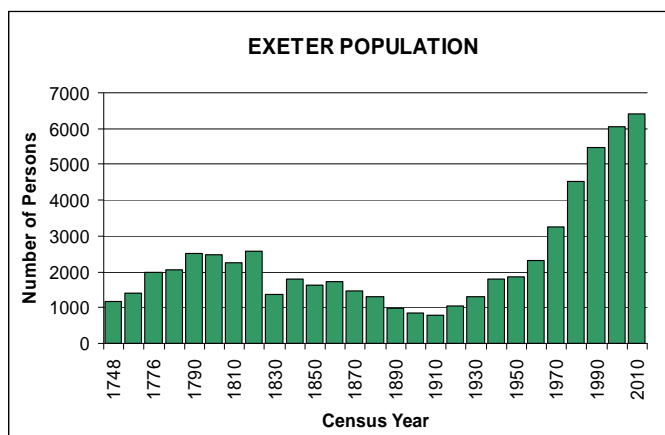
Careful examination of the cores revealed the maximum number of growth layers in the best one to be no more than 85, somewhat less than expected, but likely to be an underestimate of its true age. First, the core was taken from wood that had died an unknown number of years previously. Second, it could not be determined if the core penetrated to the innermost (oldest) growth layer. Finally, the core was taken two feet above ground level which would exclude all growth up to that point. Therefore it is reasonable to assume perhaps another 25

years are unaccounted for and give an age for the tree of approximately 110 years. Besides that, an allowance could be made for a number of years that may have passed between the building of the stack and when a seed germinated in it. Much of this line of reasoning is conjecture, but a modest estimate for the latest date of construction might be around 1890. Three other trees, all faster growing species (white pine and sweet birch), growing out of stacks were cored but found to be of younger age (estimated at 62 to 75 years) than the maple.

Another strand of evidence for a relatively young age is suggested by the general condition of the structures and their surroundings. There are few signs of disruption by the slow but steady natural forces of weather and gravity that work to disassemble an orderly stacking. And despite the accumulating layers of leaf debris that blanket the forest floor every year, even the shortest piles are not yet fully covered. The forest itself is mature with a limited under-story of shrubs, but the largest trees are not of particularly great age or size. However, that might result from wildfires that swept through in the spring of 1930 and perhaps again in the 1940s and 50s. Sheila Reynolds-Boothroyd, President of the Exeter Historical Association, says that “the land for the ‘original’ Arcadia/Beach Pond area was taken in the late 1930s by the Federal Government for a National Park and developed by the CCC (the Civilian Conservation Corps, a public works project promoting environmental conservation).”

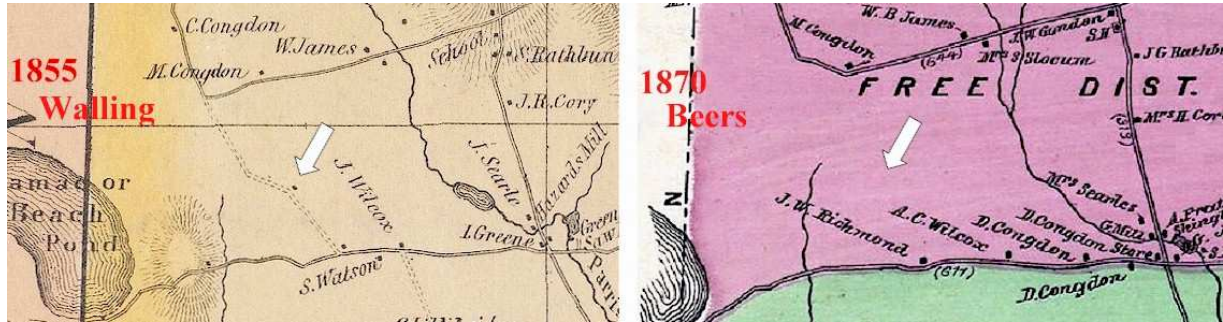


Holes drilled into embedded boulders in a trail leading past the site may be evidence of their surveying. When World War II started the project was abandoned and the State took over the land. More property was added with funds from the Pittman-Robinson Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937. This law directed the funds from an existing excise tax on firearms and ammunition to the Secretary of the Interior for distribution to the States for management of wildlife and habitat and the acquisition of land, among other things. Land is being added continually through State conservation and preservation programs as parcels come up for sale. With development out of bounds, the area now is used primarily for recreation. Yet even after decades of occasional visitation by conservation workers, hikers, and hunters, there appears to be no human-caused disturbance of the stone structures.



To estimate the likeliest early date of construction it is helpful to start with a review of colonial settlement history. Within a few decades of the 1636 founding of Providence by Roger Williams, the General Assembly of the Rhode Island colony began to subdivide and sell vacant lands. According to historian Sidney S. Rider, out of purchases in the southwest section during 1709-1712 “came the political divisions which we now call Hopkinton,

Richmond and a large part of Exeter.” The town of Exeter was created by separation from North Kingstown in 1742 and the official census put the population at over a thousand settlers just six year later. Deeds describing lots in the area at that time still exist in town land records. Eventually as the land became more settled, accurate maps gained importance for identifying properties and the routes of travel between them.



A tantalizing hint about occupation of the site in question is suggested by the difference in two maps draw fifteen years apart. The earlier one is from 1855, compiled by the painstaking work of civil engineer and commercial cartographer Henry F. Walling. It shows the symbol for a house in the right place but lacks the accompanying owner’s name, unlike the tags attached to other dwellings nearby. These neighboring houses continue to appear in subsequent maps from the 1870 Beers atlas and in an 1893 United States Geological Survey topographical map as well as the 1894 Everts and Richards atlas, but the unlabeled house symbol and the rough road leading past it have disappeared, suggesting its abandonment or destruction. Clearly the location of the house was of no more interest to these later mapmakers.

Finally, one more peripheral clue is found in a Rhode Island Historical Cemetery about five hundred feet south of the cellar hole. This family plot is typical of the era and at least 151 others in the historical record scattered throughout Exeter. Number EX072, known as the Ellet Lock lot, is a 30 by 40 foot stone-walled enclosure with seven burials. Four of the markers bear the following information:

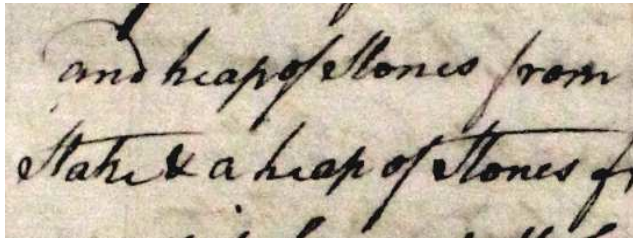
Ellet Lock	b.1769c	d. 23SEP1829
Mary Lock	b.1759c	d. 22APR1837
Sally Lock	b.1770c	d. 11MAR1830
William W Lock	b.1832c	d. 17AUG1833



Sheila Reynolds-Boothroyd says that “the younger Lock daughter Elizabeth (Lock) and her husband Charles Band lost two babies (sons) in 1832/33. Maybe they later abandoned the farm and moved west.” These birth and death dates bracket a period when the population of Exeter had been growing. Yet something unusual happened toward the end of that period because the number of residents was cut in half between the 1820 and 1830 enumerations. So great was the exodus from town that recovery took another 150 years. At this time the Ohio territory was opening and Rhode Island farms were abandoned for less stony soils out west. It is easy to speculate that as the elder Locks

passed on, younger family members moved away, leaving the property to others and eventual reversion to woodland.

A search of town records from the period reveals that the Lock family did in fact own property in the area, specifically a lot of about fifty-three acres, but locating it precisely is difficult because some boundaries are described relative to adjoining land ownership. The only two geographic boundaries referenced are the still extant Ten Rod Road on the south and a “two rod highway” on the east that may be the trail depicted in the 1855 Walling map. In the years following the death in 1829 of Ellet Lock, identified in one deed as a physician, the property changes hands several times, eventually ending up with an Alban W. Gallup in 1841. Other records from 1818



and 1819 refer to smaller parcels of land with boundary corners marked by a “stake & a heap of stones” and a house sold by Ellet to Charles B Lock. Another deed recorded in March 1832 tells of a Mary (Sweet) Lock, widow of Jonathan Lock, selling two acres in Exeter inherited from her father. Mary at

that time was living in Union County, Ohio. From these clues in the historical record, piles of stones clearly existed and at least some served the practical purpose of delineating property boundaries. Unfortunately the deeds do not tell much about how the land was being used.

After sifting these several lines of circumstantial but consistent evidence, a measured judgment would conclude that the stone stacks most likely were built as a farming activity sometime between the early 1700s and 1830, with a possible date as late as 1890. Their condition, frequency, and distribution, as well as the surrounding physical artifacts of stone walls, cellar hole, cemetery, map and census records, and tree-ring dates, all do not support a Native American or other origin. Whether or not any more information comes to light, the stacks will remain a silent testimony to the people who faced the challenges of this land and a way of life unknown to most of us today.

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