
From the Archivists

The Preservation of Cape Cod Stonework

James W. Mavor, Jr.

New England is famous for its stone walls and fences. On Cape Cod, many of these follow the land boundaries that were laid out by the early English settlers and some are mentioned in their seventeenth century records. These are probably the most extensive and oldest structures remaining from colonial Cape Cod. This role in history alone should justify their preservation, but there are more profound reasons as well.

The history of New England records that most stone fences of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were built by Native Americans either for their own purposes or in the employ of farmers of European origin. These works of man, which I prefer to call stone rows to avoid prejudging their purposes, vary greatly in design and construction and embody subtle and not so subtle features used in spiritual ritual which reflects the Native American's respect for the natural landscape. These Native American features are frequently present whether or not the rows were built for boundary or sheep fences or other such reasons. Some stone rows were built by prehistoric Indians and a few have been dated to a period several thousand years ago. The stone rows are accompanied by other stone structures, such as stone mounds and enclosures. The stone rows contain not only ritual details but are located with respect to hills, valleys, rivers, ponds, marshes, the seacoast and other rock formations in ways that sometimes facilitate observing the sun, moon and

stars, at other times aided the natural flow of water or modified it, and at others complemented the annual clearing and burning over of the land.

In Cape Cod's glacial geology, the stone structures are found almost always on the terminal moraines and built using only natural boulders because there is no accessible bedrock; the stonework on these moraines has been found in patterns which follow the knob and kettle topography. Cape Cod's structures are not as massive and complex as those in other parts of New England where bedrock is not only accessible but plays a major spiritual role. Cape Cod offers a unique environment in which to learn about the structures and the ways in which they may have helped their builders to live in tune with the natural world. I urge that the following simple steps be taken wherever possible to preserve the structures.

1. If a stone row must be broken for a roadway or a building, it should first be photographed. Any break should be made in the place that is least destructive to Native American ritual features. These features are often loosely placed stones, rocking stones, lintels, standing slabs, markings and unexplained drill-holes. If a row is broken temporarily, it should be rebuilt exactly as it was before.
2. Preserve all V-shaped diversions, called embrasures in stone rows, and acute angle intersections, meetings of rows, and serpentine sections of rows.
3. Preserve pyramidal standing stones in stone rows, often found on hilltops.

4. Preserve groups of stone mounds of any size. One or two small stone mounds are often boundary markers, but groups that may number five to two hundred are not. In general, there are no burials, projectile points or treasure within or beneath a stone mound so that there is no point in excavating for the purpose of finding these things. The stone mound and its component stones are the artifacts. Every stone has a spiritual role.

5. Stone enclosures, usually 5 to 10 feet in diameter or square and open to the east, are frequently Algonquin tsekstels, sometimes called "prayer seats." They were and sometimes continue to be used in the vision quest or dream fast.

Please notify the Falmouth Historical Commission, Town Hall Square, if you have any information about or photographs of local stonework of unusual historical interest. It may be helpful to refer to *MANITOU, Sacred Stone and Earthen Structures Reveal New England's Native Civilization* by James W. Mavor, Jr. and Byron E. Dix, a book to be published in the fall of 1989 by Lindisfarne Press. It describes the stone structures and their place in New England history.

James W. Mavor, Jr. contributed "Voyagers and Settlers" to *Woods Hole Reflections* and "Stone Mounds and Stone Rows" to *The Book of Falmouth*.



Circular Algonquin prayer seat on east side of hilltop, used for vision quest. Photo by James W. Mavor, Jr.