

Informational Panel for the Pipsisewa Stone Piles and Quarry Stone

At first glance, this site—named Pipsisewa for a small ground cover that grows here—appears as a relatively level upland dotted indiscriminately with many small to medium-sized boulders, a few stone rows overgrown with brush, and trees of varying species and ages. Look again, though, and you will see stone piles (káhtôquwuk) of different sizes and shapes popping up here and there. The uniqueness of the site lies in its extent— 2 to 3 acres—and the variety of stone structures within an oddly shaped stone enclosure (qusuqaniwutok) shown on the map.

Following the green arrows leads towards a low-lying quarry stone [Figure 14]. As one walks along a slightly curving path, many stone piles can be spotted to the right and left.

Also, on the left, is a linearly arranged stack of similar-sized stones tumbling down at either end. This structure is curious: It does not connect with any stone rows, and, being short, it seems unlikely to have been either a colonial boundary or agricultural field marker. Field clearing piles are seldom linear, and the surrounding land has obviously not been cleared.

More likely, the stack is of Indian origin and served a sacred ceremonial/astronomical purpose for tribal people. Many Indian ‘donation’ piles—which commemorate an important person or event—do have structure, as these stacked stones do. Native peoples would have left a stone whenever they passed by, or a ceremony was held. It may also have served as a marker (sunsh nipámu).

In the vicinity of this site, especially in contiguous Spring Hill Conservation Land, there are also a few terminal stone rows that begin and end abruptly with no evidence on the ground that the row either fell over or was torn down. The map shows the placement for one such a stone row. One end is located at the edge of a wetland. The other end, located near the informational panel, ends abruptly. Such features, together with a sinuous curve along its length, suggest that it may have been a serpent effigy (nunokôtôkansh). Serpent effigies most often originate in, or near, water.

The quarry stone, situated at the end of the path, lies in an area so cluttered with scattered stones and boulders that walking becomes difficult. Many of these are embedded in the ground where the glacier dropped them many millennia ago. Others have been constructed into piles. Central to this upland stone field is a seasonal seep and small flowage. Such a natural source of water, together with the plethora of stones, would have made this location attractive to tribal people for significant ceremonial purposes. The height of this upland relative to the surrounding land would also have made it ideal for observation of astronomical events.

The quarry stone is of special interest. Identifiable by its two vertical faces at right angles to each other, it was originally a smooth, gently curved and partially embedded outcrop of bedrock. At least two large stone slabs, about 6 feet in length, have been split off the longer, left-hand face. Careful examination of the top edges of the two faces reveals slots made by a metal chisel.

While metal chisels were among the earliest metal objects Indians were eager to obtain through trade with the colonists, Native Americans did not commonly use large stone slabs for building their structures. The colonists, on the other hand, did use large straight slabs as sills set on stone foundations for the support of wooden structures, and as support lintels.

In New England, beginning in the 18th century, a technique called “feathers and wedges” was commonly used to quarry stone. The chiseled slots on this quarry stone likely were used to hold protruding thin metal “feathers” between which sturdy wooden wedges were inserted. Repeated blows with a hammer or stone on the wedges would eventually split off a slab of stone.

This upland area as a whole would have been attractive to either cultural group as a natural source for stones for a variety of purposes. It seems to demonstrate uses of the land by two separate cultures with very different world views—one reverent and ceremonial; the other more practical and utilitarian. The intent of the Trail Through Time is not only to raise visitors’ awareness of the cultural resources lying obscurely in this woodland preserve, but also to demonstrate the overlap of two cultural groups in their use of these resources. Pipsissewa is just such a place.