

Princess Pine Stone Pile Site (Website)

Description

Stone piles at the Princess Pine site are arranged linearly across a wooded slope that levels out toward the bottom into a boggy area. This arrangement is quite different from the stone pile array at the Plantain cluster site, located about a quarter mile along the Trail to the east. This difference in the way piles are grouped is seen throughout these conservation lands.

Although a few of the piles in this grouping have been constructed on the ground, most have been arranged on the tops of large glacial boulders—called ‘erratics’—which either sit on the ground or protrude from it. This construction style is unusual among the stone piles plentiful throughout these conservation lands. It is not known whether there is any difference in the ceremonial significance or purpose between ground-placed stone piles and boulder-placed stone piles. See Figures 1 and 2.

Ceremonial significance

Marking this site as one of possible ceremonial significance to tribal people is the presence of a spring, or seep, at the lowest elevation of the slope, where the land levels out. The presence of fresh water, either as a seep, a natural small pool, or a small flowage, seems to have increased a site’s attractiveness to Indians for their memorial places. To them, all nature was sacred, and the presence of numerous natural elements within a small area would define it as particularly appropriate for a ritual center.

Stone rows

Adding to the interest of this group of piles, especially to researchers, is the roughly C-shaped stone enclosure in which it is located. In 1989, James Mavor, Jr. and Byron Dix published *Manitou*, a seminal and comprehensive discussion of their extensive research findings on Native American ceremonial sites in New England. They concluded that many of the stone structures which New Englanders refer to simply as ‘stone walls’ were not built by English settlers to function as walls, but by Native Americans either to indicate astronomical alignments, or as markers of some other aspect of ceremonial function. Mavor and Dix first suggested that the term ‘stone row’ be used to refer to these usually linear stone structures of indeterminate purpose.

Our New England woodlands are crisscrossed with these structures, and many were, without doubt, built as property boundary markers, or as agricultural or pastoral field enclosures.

However, a not insignificant fraction of these ‘walls’ seem to have no obvious purpose, at least to the Western mind. They neither intersect with other walls, nor go anywhere. They just begin and end. Some cross swampland. They are of different lengths. Some are dead straight; others seem to have a slightly sinuous design. See Figure 3.

As an example, in Boxborough, along the edge of the large esker named for the town, four separate stone rows emerge in different directions from Muddy Pond—located along the easterly edge of the esker— and either head off in the direction of Rt. 495, or ascend the near side of the esker, wander along its axis for a distance, and then either descend the opposite side into a swamp, or end at man-made earthen platforms.

C-shaped stone row enclosure

The Princess Pine stone piles are situated within just such an enigmatic set of stone rows. With three connected legs, each oriented to a different compass reading, they form a roughly C-shaped enclosure which is open at the bottom of the slope where the spring is located. Near the spring, the distal ends of the enclosure just stop. One portion of the enclosure is curved.

Astronomical alignments

Often, stone rows such as the ones that comprise this enclosure have astronomical alignments with solstice sunrise or sunset, the equinoxes, or the rise or set of significant constellations or planets. One astronomical event, commonly marked with stones or by natural topography throughout Indian sites in the U.S. and Mesoamerica, is the setting of the sun on August 12. The significance of this date to northeastern Native Americans is not certain, but it matches the beginning of the short cycle of the complex Mayan two-cycle calendar, and it is also coincident with the maximum of the August Perseid meteor shower. The Perseids were seen as the souls of recently departed tribal members. Native Americans of this region continue to hold a significant festival about this time in August.

Until tested in the field—which would be hampered by the extensive forest in which these features are located— it cannot be known for certain what possible alignments are represented by the legs of the C-shaped enclosure.

Princess Pine Information Panel – NEARA

Most of the stone piles at this site are arranged linearly across a wooded slope. Some piles have been constructed on the ground, but many have been arranged on top of glacial erratic boulders. This construction style is unusual for the piles scattered throughout these conservation lands, but so also is the location, on sloping terrain which levels out into a boggy area. In addition to the two dozen piles in the linear grouping, a few piles are scattered within the upper portion of the stone row enclosure that surrounds the site.

This stone enclosure (qusuqaniyutôk) is also unusual [Figure 13]. It is comprised of one straight stone row, perpendicular to the gradient of the slope, and a second, curving stone row which connects with the first at its highest elevation. The curving row wraps around the east side of the slope, separating it from an extensive glacial boulder fan beyond. The lower end of the

curved row meets the flowage at the bottom of the slope. This large stone structure is open along the flowage.

The straight stone row, on the west side of the slope, aligns with the sun's summer solstice rise and winter solstice set. An 'embrasure' (shwiwákuwi), a purposely constructed bulge in the axis of this row, would have served as an observation post for an astronomical event or other distant feature. At the lower end of this row, there is a marker stone (sunsh nipámu). There also is an enhanced split boulder pair (sun catcapinumut) within the enclosure that marks this site as important.

The seep, or spring, at the slope's bottom also suggests that this site was of ceremonial significance to tribal people. Fresh water, either as a seep, a small natural pool, or a small flowage, was almost always present at Native American ritual sites. To them, all nature was sacred, and the Earth was regarded as their mother. Springs and other natural sources of water were the places where the spirit of the Earth emerged. The presence of several distinctive natural elements within a localized area would have enhanced its suitability as a sacred center.

In 1989, Mavor and Dix published *Manitou*, a seminal and comprehensive discussion of their research into Native American ceremonial sites in New England. They concluded that many of the stone structures which New Englanders refer to as 'stone walls' were not built by English settlers as walls, but by Native Americans as markers of ceremonial/astronomical function. The authors suggested such structures be termed 'stone rows' (qusuqaniyutôk) to indicate their non-European purposes.

New England woodlands are crisscrossed with these structures. Many were, without doubt, built by settlers as property markers or agricultural field enclosures. However, many others of these 'rows' have no obvious purpose, at least to a western mind. They may just begin and end without intersecting other rows. Some cross swampland. Many are dead straight; others are slightly sinuous.

Besides the solstices, other astronomical events commonly marked with stones and natural topography at Indian sites throughout the U.S. are the equinoctial sunrises and sets, the rising or setting of significant stars or constellations, such as the Pleiades, and the August 12 set (or 13th rise) of the sun. The significance of this date to northeastern Native Americans is not known, but it marks the beginning of the August Perseid meteor shower and, in Maya cosmology, was the date of Creation of the current world cycle. Local Indians hold a weeklong festival at this time each year.

Princess Pine inset on the panel:

Princess Pine, also known as Ground Pine *lycopodium obscurum*, is native to northeastern North America. Related to the club mosses, it is a lowgrowing evergreen ground cover used by Native Americans to relieve stiffness in the joints.