

The Enigma of Turtle Mound

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Native Algonquians. Irish Monks. An unlikely pair of 19th-century men. These are the possible architects of an Andover mystery that has puzzled academics and amateur archeologists for more than a century. The place – Turtle Mound.

On a small hill in West Andover, not far from Haggetts Pond (on private property), sits a structure, the provenance of which remains hotly debated. It is a 300 foot long collection of rocks, clearly collected and arranged by human hand to create a subterranean shelter. Rough steps lead down 15 feet to a main chamber, flanked by alcoves. Beyond lies a second room. Sometime during the 20th century a past owner of the property mortared this room and created a shrine to the Virgin Mary (since removed).

Who originally constructed the site and why? This is the stuff of an Agatha Christie mystery?

Suspect number one: Native Americans. Turtle Mound is so named because of its resemblance to a snapping turtle if viewed from the air. Effigy mounds, constructed by tribes to resemble an animal or human, are common throughout the Americas. The snapping turtle is a particularly important symbol in the culture of the Algonquin tribe that populated the Merrimack Valley. A team of researchers conducting a dig in the 1950's claims to have found human bones, stone chips and a stone javelin point in the main room. The suggested dating of the site is 300-400 years old.

Surely this served as a Native American holy site.

Enter suspect two: Irish Monks. The European exploration of the American continent before Columbus is one of great speculation. Stories of Nordic Rune stones, Basque fishing villages, Arthurian knights and the like on our shores are many.

One story in particular captured the interest of a Connecticut archaeologist and historian named William Goodwin. His early 20th century research identified a group of Culdee Irish monks that fled by boat the predations of the Norse invaders. Icelandic sagas describe their arrival there in the 1300s. About 80 years later they were forced to leave. Goodwin concluded that they sailed to the Merrimack Valley, establishing a village along the Spicket River – what we know as America's Stonehenge.

Goodwin investigated the mound in the 1930s and wrote in his book, *Great Ireland in New England*, that it was related to the monks' settlements. The construction resembled the Neolithic cairns of the Celtic lands, vague resemblance to a turtle notwithstanding.

Our final suspects actually confessed to the act, but did they do it? In the early 1800's a man named John Follensbee and a seafaring partner claim to have constructed the mound.

Follensbee and his unnamed friend were a remarkable pair - in their appearance, if nothing else. The former, who owned the property in question, was a small man, measuring 5'2". By contrast, his partner, a giant at 6'8", was known to have traveled far and wide, reportedly returning with rare and exotic plants intended to establish a nursery or botanical garden.

Follensbee claimed to have built the mound with his partner around 1832 as a homage to his Scottish heritage – the cairn reminded him of his homeland and served as a center for their collection of rare plants.

As credible as this claim might be, there are holes in this story. The fauna around the mound are not exotic. The stones, particularly the flat stone that forms the roof of the mound, are massive. It is questionable that the two could move the stones themselves.

So Turtle Mound remains a puzzle. Who built it and why may forever remain an Andover mystery.

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Word Count: 598

Image: Turtle Mound