

James L. SWAUGER, Pittsburgh

THE STONE STRUCTURE OF MYSTERY HILL, NORTH SALEM,  
NEW HAMPSHIRE, USA

“Mystery Hill” is the name applied to a group of stone structures spread over a little less than one-half of a hectare and a surrounding series of stone walls, piles of stones, single boulders, and stone outcrops, covering between 8 and 12 hectares (estimates vary), at North Salem, Rockingham County, in southeastern New Hampshire, United States of America.

Mystery Hill is also known as “Pattee’s Caves” because of an old and persistent legend in the North Salem area that the structures were built by a man named Jonathan Pattee who lived on the site from 1823 until 1849. “Caves” is a misnomer, for the structures are not caves but stone huts of a sort plus ancillary structures, stone walls, grooved stones, cut-outs in rock, single stones, and so forth, associated with the structures.

Mystery Hill is operated as an historic site and travellers’ attraction by the Mystery Hill Corporation, Robert E. Stone, President. He and the members of his staff could not have been more courteous, helpful, or open to me when I visited the site in 1963 and again in 1976, and I regret that I caused them disappointment because my conclusions regarding the *possible* (for I do not *know* who built the structures, nor when) builders and the time of building are at variance with theirs.

The oldest known written record of the site except for deed lists dates to 1907 (Gilbert: 1907). The earliest recorded excavations I have been able to find began in 1933, the year the site was purchased by William F. Goodwin of Hartford, Connecticut, who devoted much time and effort to excavating, renovating, reconstructing, and stabilizing the structures at the site.

There is much published material about Mystery Hill. At intervals Stone issues a “Mystery Hill Bibliography” (Stone: 1975) in which are dozens of titles. Many of them deal with hypotheses concerning builders of the structures and the time of their building. Candidates from antiquity include Norsemen, Irish Culdee monks, migrants from the Bronze Age Mediterranean, Phoenicians, Iberians, and Irish Celts.

Nearer our own time are nominees from the 17th to the 19th centuries including clandestine metal smelters or fur dealers and, as noted, Jonathan Pattee. Some have said the huts were used as hiding places for slaves in the days of the Underground Railway, but none holds they were built for that usage.

The outpouring of articles in newspapers, magazines, and journals continues. Most such are concerned with speculation about the chronological and cultural associations of the site, but some are short reports on the continuing minor excavations at the site.

Goodwin’s 1946 *The Ruins of Great Ireland in New England* (Goodwin: 1946), the only major work published about the site, was based in some part on excavations

he supervised at the site. Stone's bibliographies list many excavation reports. Such accounts include those by Hugh Hencken (1939, 1940); Junius B. Bird (1945); Gary S. Vescelius (1945, 1955); Frank Glynn (1957); and a continuing stream from Stone, his brother, Osborne, Edward J. Lenik, and James P. Wittall, II, in more recent times.

Osborne has recently been working with what he believes to be astroarcheological alignments. Others, Hapgood (1961), one of his classes (Anthropology Class: June 1961), and Fell (1975), have been using what they believe to be inscriptions in Tyrian Phoenician, Iberian Punic, and Celtic Ogham, an animal form petroglyph said to be a bull or a ram, and the 1513 Piri Reis map, in their efforts to determine chronological and cultural associations of the site.

Other source material includes photographs, drawings, and maps of the site, and radiocarbon dates. The *Mystery Hill Tour Guide Map* (hereafter *Map*), n. d., lists the latter as A. D. 1690, A. D. 1550, 173 B.C., 1045 B.C., 1525 B.C., and 2000 B.C.

The site itself, and the artifacts recovered from it, are the prime physical evidence on which I based my conclusions. During my visits in 1963 and 1976, I observed the structures and their surroundings in light of the published literature at my command nearly all of which was furnished by Stone either directly or in articles in his bibliographies that I obtained so I know my library on the site is reasonably complete.

For many elements of the site, a great grooved slab called a "sacrificial table", cut-outs in the bed-rock, a crude circle incised in a rock with a hole drilled in its center called a "sun dial rock", single rocks protruding above the general level of the stone walls, all of which are deemed significant by Stone and his people, I have no reasonable explanation. I know only that they exist. I have no idea why they were made or installed.

Many of the artifacts are on display at the entry lodge at the site, and I inspected them there. I have not seen the artifacts Vescelius recovered, a major gap in my personal observation, but his five-page catalog of descriptions is clear, and his accounts and charts of discovery are lucid and professional (Vescelius: 1955). The artifacts listed are of the sort concerning which there can be little ambiguity in description or chronological assignment. I have seen a lot of site reports over the last forty years, and Vescelius' report is so well done, so accurate in terms of structure when I compared them with it, that I accept his artifact listing as accurate.

I drew on discussions and correspondence I've had with the Stones and other students of the site over the years.

Of published material I leaned most heavily on the *Map* and the 1955 Vescelius report (Vescelius: 1955). The *Map*, the information given to modern visitors to Mystery Hill as an explanation of the structures, is the latest general interpretation of the site by those who champion it as the work of visitors from Europe in antiquity. The Vescelius report is the most complete record I know of controlled excavation at the site by one whose conclusion was that the site was not the work of immigrants from across the Atlantic in ancient times. The *Map* and the Vescelius report provided opportunity for comparison of contrasting interpretations from like or the same physical evidence in light of my own observations.

My approach to any site is that archeology is a body of techniques for assembling data that can then be interpreted in various ways according to the expertise and discipline of the interpreter. In attempting interpretation of data from the site, I am unable to judge the validity of the inscriptions in various languages that are alleged to be associated with the site, and I am yet to be convinced Osborne Stone's astroarcheological arguments are sound because of some doubt as to positioning of stones at the time of discovery. The evidence I feel competent to work with is the structures, the artifacts, the historical accounts, and the radio-carbon dates.

The *Map* lists 38 features at the site. As I read it and the text that accompanies it, 16 of these are man-made, hut-like stone structures of one kind or another. The rest are paths, single stones, excavation areas, well, clay deposit, courtyards, and the like.

Study of the structures is hampered by the fact that they have suffered a considerable amount of rearrangement, restoration, renovation, and at least partial destruction. Stone was salvaged from the structures and taken away for use in nearby towns. Lawrence and Andover are cited, and in amounts ranging in estimates from 40% to as much as 90% (Vescelius: 1955, 1; Glynn; 1957, 2; Whittall: 1975, 15–19; *Mystery Hill—A Brief Outline*: n. d.). That Goodwin did a great deal of renovating and reconstruction is known from his account mentioned above although he did not alter two of the more important features, the Y Cavern and the Cellar (Vescelius: 1955, 17, 18). Glynn interpreted the architecture of the structures as having Bronze Age Mediterranean prototypes which is curious because he said the site as he saw it in 1957 was not the original site but its rubble aftermath (Glynn: 1957, 2). George Woodbury writing in 1961 said that the site had been substantially altered since he had visited it in 1937 (Woodbury: 1961). Both he and Glynn questioned the feasibility of restoring or interpreting a site whose original configuration was unknown (Glynn: 1957, 2; Woodbury: 1961), although, as noted, Glynn did go on to interpret it.

The structures do not resemble American Indian structures of my knowledge nor that of any other persons in American Indian archeology with whom I have discussed Mystery Hill.

Men with experience in Europe and the Near East find in the Mystery Hill huts no resemblance to European or West Asian structures. Hencken said there was no resemblance of the structures to Norse buildings or Irish monasteries he had seen and that any resemblance between the structures and anything in his experience during his work in Europe was fortuitous and no more than to be expected between rude buildings of dry masonry erected in different localities. He said he had seen stones as large as those at Mystery Hill being moved by Cornish workmen with rollers, planks, and crowbars. He believed that no matter who built the structures, and he knew neither who built them nor when they were built, that they were all built at about the same time (Hencken: 139, 7, 9–10). His judgment is the judgment of other working excavators with experience in the Old World and the New who have studied the site.

Glyn Daniel, a specialist on European stone structures of the general genre of the Mystery Hill construction, said the structures had no morphological or construc-

tional resemblance to European megalithic buildings other than those coincidental when people build with dry stone walling and large stone roofing slabs (Daniel: 1972, 1).

These opinions that these structures have no direct relation to the megalithic structures or peoples of Europe or the Mediterranean basin in ancient times is the opinion of Woodbury as well, not a man with specific interest in megaliths but whose professional experience and observation includes work in the Old World.

My intensive preparation for studying dolmens in particular but allied megalithic structures as well in Jordan, Israel, Yemen, and Sweden, and the field work, leads me to the same conclusion as that reached by the men mentioned just above: the Mystery Hill structures are not really like those of the Old World, of Malta and the Iberian peninsula, Scotland, or the Orkneys and the Shetlands, as has been claimed.

Vescelius agreed with Hencken's opinion that all of the structures were built at about the same time (Vescelius: 1955, 21), and so do I. The structures are within themselves of a pattern homogeneous, as Vescelius noted (Vescelius: 1955, 47), but they resemble primarily only themselves.

The radio-carbon dates are of no help. Each date is associated with a separate feature, and there are no sets of dates for any feature. The 1045 and 2000 B.C. dates, according to the *Map*, are from the same level.

When attention is shifted from the structures to the small finds from the site, there is another homogenous picture. I must agree whole-heartedly with Bird as quoted by Vescelius:

“No structure could have been so thoroughly cleared or disturbed in recent times as to completely obliterate the evidence of several centuries of abandonment if it was constructed in pre-colonial times. Even if the builders left no artifacts . . .”

(Vescelius: 1955, 5).

According to the *Map*, pottery and stone tools that are not Indian but are identical with European types of 2000 B.C. have been found and are on display (*Ma*: 1). In his 11 May, 1976 answer to my query as to exactly what types of stone tools and pottery of 2000 B.C. used in Europe the Mystery Hill tools equated, Stone said he could not say but that a person he knew would be in Europe in the summer of 1976 to locate and photograph them.

Tools found by Edward J. Lenik under the wall of the upper processional path were identified by him as American Indian (Lenik: 1972, 62–63). Whittall identified artifacts he excavated at the site as American Indian tools of Archaic times (Whittall: 1975, 17). These could easily date to before 2000 B.C. Objects I saw at Mystery Hill in 1976 that I accepted as tools were American Indian according to my experience and, again according to my experience, probably Archaic.

This is not to say the structures were built by American Indians. As I wrote above, they do not, according to my experience, resemble structures I know were built by American Indians here in the east. But it does mean that American Indians were on the site at least as long ago as 2000 B.C.

The next certain occupation according to physical evidence that can be coordinated with that from other sites and corroborated by comparison with artifacts from dated sites was no earlier than the late 18th century and probably no earlier than the 19th century A.D. Although he set the stage for consideration of known Pattee farm elements as parts of Bronze Age buildings, as an experienced field archeologist, Glynn should have known better from his own statement that early 19th century artifacts were found in every soil strata at the site including glacially deposited till and rotting bedrock (Glynn, 1957, 2). Every experience Glynn had had in his many years of field work should have taught him that the preponderance of early 19th century artifacts meant the site had been constructed or at least lived in at that time, and that the absence of non-American Indian artifacts datable later than Archaic meant that the site had not been occupied after Archaic times until the early 19th century.

Vescelius found more than 8000 artifacts, not one of which could be dated to earlier than the late 18th century (Vescelius: 1955, artifact lists and descriptions). The clinching argument in my opinion was that furnished by Vescelius' Excavation C at the Y Cavern:

“The work progressed slowly, and it was a number of weeks before we were able to attack the wall itself. Our efforts were well rewarded, however, for as we took up the rocks, one by one, a considerable number of artifacts were found *in situ* (Fig. 7: Plate IV, D). In our opinion, these artifacts, by virtue of their position within the wall, constitute incontrovertible evidence of its age, and, in view of the fact that the wall itself seems to form an integral part of the Cavern as a whole, we feel that they serve to date the entire structure. These objects—brick fragments, potsherds, nails, and chunks of plaster-like substance—can in every case be matched with other specimens from Pattee's cellar. There can be no question but that they date from the early nineteenth or very late eighteenth century (Vescelius: 1955, 30; Fig. 7, Plate IV, D). Though the identity of the architect may remain in doubt, and though his motives may never be fathomed, it has, I think, been established that he lived during the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century (Vescelius: 1955, 46).”

No one who studies the Fig. 7 cited above can come to any conclusion other than that Vescelius' claim is correct: the Y Cavern wall was built in the early 19th century. His argument that not only does the wall date the Y Cavern but the other structures as well because the structures at Mystery Hill are a homogeneous group built at approximately the same time, an opinion I share, is acceptable.

Hencken said he had seen no evidence that would lead him to believe the site earlier than the early 17th century, but that he didn't know who had built it. Bird was more cautious in suggesting a date, but as I read his report, his opinion was close to that of Hencken's for chronology, and it was exactly the same respecting the builder or builders. He didn't know. Vescelius, as quoted above, said he didn't know who had built the structures but whoever he was, he lived during the late 18th or early 19th centuries (Vescelius: 1955, 46).

I conclude from the record of physical evidence considered above that the structures date to the early 19th century.

The next question is: Who built the structures?

I do not know.

I would like to leave the subject at that, but it is obvious that people expect an effort at hypothesis.

According to the guides to reliable journalism taught me in high school, there are six steps to be taken in considering any proposition: *Who* did *What*, *Where*, *When*, *How*, and *Why*.

My guess as to the *Who* brings me into harmony with the local North Salem legend. My candidate for the probable builder is Jonathan Pattee. He is the only person of whom we have record known to have lived on the site, and he lived there during the early 19th century. It may be that there were some structures there prior to his move to Mystery Hill and that he simply added a goodly number to them (Hencken: 1940, 2), for the homogeneity of the site leads to the conclusion the buildings were built according to one man's idea of how they should be built, but my candidate is still Jonathan Pattee.

The *What* is easy: the structures and associated artifacts. The *Where* is the site. The *When* I accept as the early 19th century.

*How* is unknown from evidence integral to the site beyond the chance that Vescelius' remark that some of the ramp-like structures may have been devices enabling structural elements to be moved to their places (Vescelius: 1955, 15, 16) may be correct. Techniques such as those Hencken observed in Cornwall (Hencken: 1940, 9, 10) could have been used in conjunction with the ramps. As for manpower, Pattee boarded the town paupers at Mystery Hill (Vescelius: 1955, 1), and it is possible he drew upon them in building the structures. But these are guesses. There is no physical evidence to prove how the stones were moved.

And now for the *Why* . . . Convinced the structures were built by somebody in the early 19th century, I rule out association with any ancient creed, ceremonies, or migrations, and come to relatively modern man in a relatively modern world. There being no satisfactory physical parallels between Mystery Hill and other sites in either the Old or the New Worlds, I suggest we seek mental parallels.

And we have them.

Vescelius pointed out that while Frederick J. Pohl said it would have been possible for five men with crowbars to lift the stones used at the site but it was unlikely a practical colonist would have done so (Vescelius: 1955, 15). The early

19th century builder at Mystery Hill was not a colonial in the pure sense of the word, but he was impractical.

He was, however, no more impractical than a host of his fellow beings, and I suggest that to theorize that he who built Mystery Hill did it for a reason we cannot fathom except to believe he had an inner urge that drove him to such a monumental task is supported by actions of people in our own time.

Prime examples have been assembled in an exhibit, "Naives and Visionaries" organized by Martin Friedman of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota (Walker Art Center: 1974), that is now touring the United States. The exhibit celebrates the constructions of nine people of our time driven by just such an urge as I suggest impelled the builder of the Mystery Hill structures to his prodigious task (Friedman: 1976, 32–43).

The foil-wrapped constructions of James Hampton's "Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly" in Washington; the towering wire and cement and glass-ceramic mosaics of Simon Rodia's "Watts Towers" in Los Angeles; the cement and wood and light bulb "Garden of Eden" of S. P. Dinsmoor in Lucas, Kansas; the wood and tar and glass and paint of Clarence Schmidt's "Journey's End", "Mark II", and "House of Mirrors" at Woodstock, New York; the "Concrete Park" figures of Fred Smith in Phillips, Wisconsin; the painted signs of Jesse "Outlaw" Howard in Fulton, Missouri; the cement and stone and barrel hoops and shells of Herman Rusch's "Prairie Moon Museum and Garden" in Cochrane, Wisconsin; the glass and dolls and pencils of Grandma Prisbrey's "Bottle Village" in Santa Susana, California; and the granite and sandstone and cement monumental towers of Louis C. Wippich's "Molehill" in Sauk Rapids, Minnesota; are to my mind of the *genre* of Mystery Hill.

Their builders are known eccentrics who marched to a drum beat only they could hear, and they are of our time, indeed, five of them still live, and three continue building at their sites.

The time and labor involved are incredible. Hampton is known to have spent 14 years building his "Throne" in the solitude of a Washington garage. Rodia is known to have spent 33 years on his "Towers."

Were no records kept about these structures, and had we to explain them a hundred years from now, we would probably come to conclusions little different in tone from those advanced to explain Mystery Hill in terms of Iberians, Irish Celts, or Phoenicians.

Schmidt's are the only figures with ordinary connotations. What would we make of the Biblical-oriented exhortations of Howard, Dinsmoor's Labor crucified as a Christ, the bottles and impaled dolls of Prisbrey, or the great stone towers of Wippich? Friedman noted that did we not know who is building Rusch's concrete arches that we might well believe them inspired by ancient Near-Eastern astrological forms. Hampton's "Throne" and surrounding glittering furniture have elements suggestive of Byzantium, Tibet, and India. Rodia's spires have been compared with those of the La Sagrada Familia cathedral in Barcelona, and its ornamented surfaces are much like those of the holy grottoes of southern Italy (Friedman: 1976, 32–43).

I suggest that the Mystery Hill structures were built in the early 19th century by an eccentric, driven seer and visionary like those who produced the constructions of the exhibit "Naives and Visionaries", and that the visionary was Jonathan Pattee.

## LITERATURE CITED

- Anthropology Class. "The Piri Reis Map; Phoenicians in America; the North Salem Ruins; Evidence at Mechanicsburg." June 1961. Typed report furnished by ROBERT STONE.
- BIRD, JUNIUS. "Trip to Sites near Raymond and North Salem, N. H." 1945. Typed report furnished by Mrs. Junius Bird.
- DANIEL, GLYN. "Editorial". *Antiquity*. Mar 1972.
- FELL, BARRY. As reported in "North Salem Mystery Has Been Solved," *Salem Observer*, 3 Sept 1975; "Mystery Hill Site Featured on 'Good Morning'", *Plaiston News*, N. H., 13 Sept 1975; and in an invitation issued to me to attend a 30 Aug 1975 lecture to be given by Fell to report he had come to the conclusion that the Mystery Hill builders were Irish Celts who used Ogham writing.
- FIREDMAN, MARTIN. "Naives and Visionaries." *Museum News*. Mar/Apr 1976.
- GILBERT, EDGAR. *History of Salem, New Hampshire*. 1907.
- GLYNN, FRANK. "Field Report 1975—North Salem, N. H." *Work Report, Early Sites Research Society*. Jan 1976. Cited as "1957."
- GOODWIN, WILLIAM F. *The Ruins of Great Ireland in New England*. 1946.
- HAPGOOD, CHARLES H. "Scientists Battle Over Salem Caves." *The New Hampshire Sunday News*, Manchester, N. H., Sunday, 9 July 1961.
- HENCKEN, HUGH. "'The Irish Monastery' at North Salem, New Hampshire." 1939. Typed report furnished me by Robert Stone.
- "What are Pattee's Caves?" *Scientific American*. Nov 1940.
- LENIK, EDWARD J. "Excavations at Mystery Hill's Upper Processional Path." *New England Antiquities Research Association Newsletter*. Dec 1972.
- Mystery Hill Tour Guide Map*. Obtainable from Mystery Hill, North Salem, N. H. n.d.
- Mystery Hill—A Brief Outline*. Obtainable from Mystery Hill, North Salem, N. H. n.d.
- STONE, ROBERT. "Mystery Hill Bibliography." 8th ed. Updated as of October 1975. Mimeographed.
- VESCELIUS, GARY S. "Excavations in New Hampshire." *Journal of the New York Scientific Association*. Nov 1946. "The Antiquities of Pattee's Caves." 1955. Typed report furnished by Robert Stone.
- WALKER ART CENTER. *Naives and Visionaries*. 1974.
- WHITTALL, JAMES P., II. "Megalithic Stone Construction, North Salem, New Hampshire." *Early Sites Research Society*. May 1975.
- WOODBURY, GEORGE. "Scientists Battle Over Salem Caves." *The New Hampshire Sunday News*, Manchester, N. H., Sunday, 9 July 1961.