

America's Stonehenge: New Hampshire rocks history or hoax?

September 20 2015, by Rik Stevens



In this photo taken Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2015, Marie St. Onge, right, and Carol Stevens examine the rock formations inside the "Oracle" chamber at what is called America's Stonehenge, in Salem, N.H. The 1-acre grouping of rock configurations has drawn believers to say it is thousands of years old. Skeptics say the evidence suggests it was put together by a 19th century shoemaker. (AP Photo/Jim Cole)

Using the astronomical chart on a table in the covered tower, visitors aim their gaze along worn arrows to huge, upright stones hundreds of feet away. Beyond each slab of granite, clearings stretch the eye to the horizon on a dazzling day in late summer New Hampshire.

On Wednesday's autumnal equinox, people will flock to the woods near the Massachusetts state line, watch the sun rise or fall over the massive chunks of granite and decide for themselves whether they're standing amid relics of ancient history or pure hooey.

This is "America's Stonehenge," a weird, one-acre grouping of rock configurations named for the mysterious formation on England's Salisbury Plain. It has drawn believers who say it's a thousand or more years old and skeptics who say the evidence suggests it was the work of a 19th century shoemaker.

For \$12 visitors get to meander along well-trod footpaths through walls of stacked granite, some overtopped with slabs that weigh several tons to form cave-like enclosures like the "Sundeck" chamber and "V-hut." The spooky centerpiece is the "Oracle" chamber, complete with what is billed as a secret bed and a speaking tube where words spoken from inside the chamber could be heard outside at the equally eerie "Sacrificial Table."

Owner Dennis Stone firmly believes the site—called "Mystery Hill Caves" when it opened in 1958—is as much as 4,000 years old, the work of Native Americans or perhaps ancient Europeans who arrived millennia before Columbus.

"They actually did shaping to these. It's like shaping an arrowhead," Stone said in a rapid-fire voice, pointing to the giant slabs. "Stone against stone. So the technology used to take them off the bedrock and shape these stones was a stone-age technology, not a metal age technology."

Stone said three carbon dating efforts indicate the site was used about 4,000 years ago and one fire pit is 7,300 years old (scientists say the research proves only that there was a fire and that none of those dates is linked to human activity).



In this photo taken Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2015, Marie St. Onge, left, and Carol Stevens walk through what is called America's Stonehenge, in Salem, N.H. The 1-acre grouping of rock configurations has drawn believers to say it is thousands of years old. Skeptics say the evidence suggests it was put together by a 19th century shoemaker. (AP Photo/Jim Cole)

"We think the design of the site looks more like a spiritual site," Stone said. "It has a huge amount of work that went into quarrying each building but there isn't a lot of room."

Anthropologists and archaeologists believe America's Stonehenge was more likely the homestead of shoemaker Jonathan Pattee, who settled here in 1823. In his 2006 book "The Archaeology of New Hampshire: Exploring 10,000 Years in the Granite State," Plymouth State University archaeologist David Starbuck called America's Stonehenge "unquestionably provocative, puzzling and, above all, controversial."

Starbuck notes the 19th century quarrying marks on many of the stones and said the site has been altered so many times over the decades—particularly by owner and researcher William Goodwin starting in 1936—that there will never be a way to settle the argument over its genesis.

"There is probably no serious, trained archaeologist who believes that it was created thousands of years ago," Starbuck said this week.

"There's a huge burden of proof when you make controversial claims," he said. "They've always had that problem. That doesn't take away from the inherent interest in that site. It is a curious place and it is worth visiting."

Invoking Stonehenge can automatically boost interest in a place. Witness the stir caused earlier this month when researchers announced they had discovered evidence of standing stones believed to be remnants of a major prehistoric monument two miles from Stonehenge. And then there's Carhenge: The junk-car tribute to Stonehenge that has been an attraction in the Nebraska panhandle since 1987.



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Like Starbuck, Meghan Howey, an anthropological archaeologist at the University of New Hampshire, also thinks the site was a colonial dwelling and said there are commonplace explanations for some of the more fantastic features. For example, the "Sacrificial Table" bears the same sort of drainage channels that would be found on a rock slab used to make soap. Still, she understands the desire to impart meaning where none may exist.

"People in England have an attachment to Stonehenge because it was built by their ancestors," she said. "We don't feel a connection so we're

always looking for a connection."

Pausing during a recent visit, retirees Marie St. Onge and Carol Stevens said they believe America's Stonehenge means something—even if they don't know exactly what.



In this photo taken Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2015, a rock formation is seen at what is called America's Stonehenge, in Salem, N.H. The 1-acre grouping of rock configurations has drawn believers to say it is thousands of years old. Skeptics say the evidence suggests it was put together by a 19th century shoemaker. (AP Photo/Jim Cole)

"With the caves that are dug and the way things are laid out, I would go with it 99 percent that it's original," said St. Onge.

Stone doesn't know for sure the who, when, how or why of America's Stonehenge but he says the evidence points to something greater than skeptics believe.

"They're kind of ignorant of all the facts of the site," he said of critics. "I'm not saying they're stupid. Just that they don't know the facts."



In this photo taken Tuesday Sept. 15, 2015, a stone rests at a clearing at what is called America's Stonehenge, in Salem, N.H. The 1-acre grouping of rock configurations has drawn believers to say it is thousands of years old. Skeptics say the evidence suggests it was put together by a 19th century shoemaker. (AP Photo/Jim Cole)

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