

Update for Upton stone chamber

Save the Cave Project

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The Upton Stone Cave is a man made stone structure with a 14-foot entrance tunnel leading into a corbelled stone domed area with a large capstone. The mystery of the cave has captivated many over the years. Malcolm Pearson, a former resident, was totally immersed in its possible connection to ancient Ireland. A neighbor similarly believes of its pagan Irish past. Others believe it was part of the tannery that was an important part of the early industry of the region. Scientist in the 1970's noted the astronomical alignments between the cave and Pratt Hill, as the Pleiades setting as well as the summer solstice sun set is marked here. In addition, a film by Ted Timrick shows it is part of a strong solstice alignment that goes across the entire state of MA. Others look at old Indian trails and see that Elm Street was part of a longer trail going from the harbor of the Atlantic in Boston to the Connecticut River that included many more stone chambers along the path.

The Upton Historical Commission, using Community Preservation Act (CPA) money, completed an archeological investigation at the site in September of 2011 with Marty Dudeck of James Milner Associates. There were five one-meter by one-meter investigation pits dug and examined.

Part of the archeological investigation involves researching all the information about the site. Correspondence saved by the Upton Historical Commission told of another stone chamber behind this one that had collapsed. An historian from Franklin told of two tunnels coming out of the back wall of the cave in a 1990's article. Malcolm Pearson, the former owner, also used to speak of finding stonewalls beneath the garden plot when he was just a boy.

The Upton Historical Commission furthered the investigation by approving use of ground-penetrating radar for the area surrounding the famous stone cave with David Gutbro.

The archeological investigation was followed by masonry repair to the front entrance. The Save the Cave Project was undertaken to save the falling apart front entranceway to the structure. The repair job took longer than initially proposed. David Stuart Smith and Peter Wiggins formed a wooden crib to hold up the front stone while they reworded the two sides and then pulled the front stone up and back. They felt the repair job was timely in that the slippage happening was of great concern and the continuing slide would have brought more damage to the structure and was a real safety concern. The large front stone was flaked on the sides and fit into the back stone like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

The masons were also going to work on the drainage problem but due to the unusually wet weather and resulting high water table, the drainage project was not carried out. The archeologists noted that the fourth time they drained the chamber which took most of the day, the chamber filled up in less than 45-minutes and brought in an alarming amount of silt. There was concern with the overall geological area in that if the silt continually came in, the area above would become drained of soil and might be an overall concern for the stability of the structure as well as the general area. In addition, the Narragansett Historical Office sent us a memo wondering if the water in the chamber was a feature versus a flaw of the site. Ken Leonard showed the possibility of the reflected sunlight at summer solstice as a possible enhancing feature from within with the chamber with a drawing.

The masons did an outstanding job figuring out the intrinsic structure of the entrance, and most importantly stabilizing it. The front stone was on a dangerous tilt and safety was a concern. The two masons spoke of how they were thankful we did not wait any longer for the repair job as the costs would have gone up

dramatically, and the structure compromised substantially if we had waited much longer. David Stuart Smith and Peter Wiggin have worked on many chamber sites including a site in Acton. Before any masonry work could start, the MA State Historical Commission asked the Upton Historical Commission to complete an archeology dig in places where there would be some disturbance.

The UHC approved investigating the date of the structure using optically stimulated luminescence (OSL), which measures when a soil sample last saw daylight. Fred Martin brought a proposal forward to use OSL during the time the masons would be taking apart the front entrance walls, and the commission approved having Marty Dudeck of JMA supervise the project. Sharon A. Mahan of the Crustal Geophysics and Geochemistry Science Center of Denver CO agreed to date one of the 10 samples at no cost. In addition the UHC approved radio carbon dating for a piece of wood that was found near the OSL samples.

Preliminary data suggests the stone chamber is at least 400-years old and possibly older. More samples need to be looked at and the UHC is presently fund raising for this, as each sample to be tested costs \$1,000. Sharon A. Mahan suggests four more samples be looked at.

In October 2011, the Upton Cave Property and Pratt Hill were designated to be on the Federal Register as a Discontinuous Historic District by Stephen G. DelSordo, the Federal Preservation Officer for the Federal Communications Commission. The federally recognized tribes of the Narragansett, Wampanoag Aquinas, and Mashpee surveyed the top of the hill and were able to determine a relationship between the two sites.

The Land Stewardship Committee collaborated with the Historical Commission and wrote a Trails Grant this fall to develop historical signage in the town to show Colonial as well as native places. There will be collaboration between the tribes and the Commission to develop the meaning and words. We will find out about this funding sometime in July 2012.

There will be a report from JMA coming which will included a summary of the research, the field dig, and the dating. David Gutbrod reported for the Ground Penetrating Radar in February before the commission. His work was presented in digital form with a paper report accompanying it. It includes extensive files of the data, interpretation and recommendations for further study. There were intriguing clues reported of some interesting anomalies.

The Heritage Park opened on April 15, 2012. The famous cave and a trail around the property are now open to visitors. The trail takes you from a neighborhood, into a meadow, over a stream, to view a millpond. There is a bench donated by a family whose mother grew up across the pond there. Then you go up a small hill to a large catalpa tree with a beautiful overlook of the millpond. We are hoping for another bench in this location. Then the trail goes into the woods, and you can see the steep incline down to the water. You walk around to the top of the hill where a few cedar trees are waiting.

A park dreamed up by the Upton Historical Commission becomes a reality. The Save the Cave Project is completed. The town using Community Preservation monies bought the property that was once in danger of being developed. Through donations of money and time, the rubbish and the house were removed, the invasive plants eliminated, and finally through some additional CPA funding, the cave entrance was repaired just in time for the park opening. It has truly been a joint effort by so many. The cave in its mysterious ways calls on people to help, and even more amazingly, they do.