

A Mystery in Stone *by Brennan Gauthier*

Deeply set into the woods of a rural farm on the Border of the Massachusetts/Connecticut line lays a mystery in stone. Situated far from any modern (or ancient) structure can be found a curious hobbit-hole of stone. Shrouded in local legend, the structure resembles a combination of root cellar and burial vault. Scholars and Archaeologists have spent the last few decades attempting to tease out clues to its interesting history.

The stone chamber is a structure most commonly associated with the green hillocks of Ireland and Scotland. Known as a “beehive cave” to some and as a “corbelled vault” to the art historians, this mass of stone is most easily comparable to an igloo. Numerous examples exist from all around New England, but the majority are centered in Massachusetts. Towns such as Upton, Acton, Petersham, and Littleton are all well-known examples. But one would be surprised at the number of relatively unknown sites that dot the New England landscape. This stone chamber tucked away in the town of Southbridge is one example that has eluded the curious explorer for quite sometime.

With a 6 foot entrance passage, curving slightly to the right, this chamber provides an example of a rarely seen construction. Stone chambers come in all shapes and sizes, some with squared rooms, others with wholly rounded features. Some are extremely tall, like the Upton example, and others seem more suited to sheep and goats, like the Pomfret chamber. In Southbridge, the construction is vernacular when compared to more common versions.

There are questions that immediately flood the mind of the casual visitor to these sites. Who built these stone structures? What were they used for? Where did the builders go? These inquiries are hard to answer in an archaeological setting. There is a distinct lack of written history referring to the building and use of these assemblages. Most academic scholars claim a recent historic use, although they refuse to document and conserve these relics of the past. While these pillars of academia dismiss any prehistoric (pre-contact) provenience, many amateur researchers are providing strong evidence to the contrary. Numerous publications, websites, and archaeological excavation reports lean towards a more astounding, and history changing, context.

The Southbridge chamber is a beautiful example of stone masonry. Without any mortar, this igloo of stone was created by the hands of a nameless mason. The construction methods are unknown, and the culture will remain anonymous. Artifacts can be seen scattered along the dirt floor; a broken beer bottle, chicken bones, and rusted bits of iron are all present in this menagerie or artifacts. The logical conclusion, and the one promulgated by academic archaeologists, is that the Southbridge Stone Chamber is nothing but a simple root cellar. Without the creative minds and enlightened theories of fresh-blooded scholars, ideas such as these will always be accepted as true. And without the hard work of enthusiasts such as members of the New England Antiquities Research Association, these sites would be lost to history, only a remnant of a past quickly being destroyed.

For the adventurous explorer, another chamber can be found with a little bit of searching, in the town of Webster, only about ten miles to the east. Located on the Eastern shore of Lake Chaubunagungamaug, the chamber is a beautifully constructed example of a stone chamber. Referred to as the “Webster Chamber”, this dry stone chamber represents a vernacular form of construction from both examples in Upton and Southbridge. The differing styles of construction can easily be seen upon close inspection. The corbelling is toned down, and the roof and entrance rely upon slabs instead of smaller, overlapping stones. A visit to this chamber is important to understand the varying forms of stone construction present on the New England landscape.