What are the purposes and origins of cairns in New England, as well as the feature located in the Hockomock Swamp?

Elizabeth Jurgilewicz
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Introduction
A cairn is a manmade pile of stone and their use is often ambiguous. Cairns are a very old concept, dating far back and occurring worldwide. New England is home to many types of cairns which span time periods and cultures. Current issues revolve around identifying Native American monuments from that of European farm clearing. A feature such as this lies deep in the Hockomock Swamp of Southeastern, Massachusetts. What were its purposes? Who built the low heaping of stone? How has it sat untouched in the largest system of wetlands in the state? With the word cairn being so encompassing, defining this feature further would require field study, research, and collecting local testimony.

Cairns
The history of cairns can be difficult to get a handle on because they are so universal among cultures. In terms of New England, this history can get complicated and confusing. The cairns of this area can be characterized by either being Native American or Colonial. It has been noted that Native Americans make cairns for various reasons, including but not limited to: ritual, memorial, burial, and astrological purposes. Colonial cairns are primarily from farming and field clearing, and those stones usually ended up in stone walls. The easiest way to determine the origin of a cairn is by its geography and the historical record.

Methodology
By identifying the history, geography, and local testimony, this cairn’s origin would be plausible to decipher. Measurements were taken of the feature and the orientation of its direction noted. It was found to be six feet wide by twelve feet long, and faced west to east length wise. The land around the feature was also analyzed. September in the Hockomock brings dense underbrush and briars, in the photograph below one can see that the area surrounding the feature is cleared of trees, and the existing trees are all of a small to medium size.

Results

History
In the seventeenth century, King Phillips’s War would wage in the area, and the swamp would be used by Native Americans as hiding grounds. This area has seen much activity over the centuries, and creates a challenge in identifying the origins of this cairn. In the nineteenth century, this area was heavily logged for the white cedar trees which grew in the area, and the position of the feature places it in one of the most heavily logged part of the swamp.

Geography
In a dense area of cedar swamp which was heavily logged. As a result of this remote location, it was found unlikely to have been created from field clearing. In consideration of logging, it was found that this was the only cairn of its type in the vast area which was logged. This swamp was originally an inland sea, and the cairn sits on a high spot which would have been above water. Currently, during the wet season this spot is only accessible by going through water. The water eventually drains and left behind this vast area of wetlands.

Possible Origins

• Logging
  • Unlikely
    • No reason to stack stone
    • No other cairns of the type in the surrounding area

• Farming
  • Highly Unlikely
    • Area is too wet to grow in
    • Evidence of forest succession but not field succession
    • Stone walls do not exist in the location

• Native American
  • Likely
    • Many other small cairns in the area
    • Area which linked two high activity areas for Native Americans
    • Common among Native American cultures to create cairns for memorial or astrological reasons
    • No other large stones in the area
    • Had to be carried in

Conclusion
It has been concluded that this structure is most likely Native American in origin. Most likely the purpose of this cairn was to mark a specific event or person. The age of the feature would be almost impossible to date without excavation. Even then, an artifact of some variation would have to be present within or around the feature. This feature has stayed seemingly untouched for, assumingly, centuries because in order to access it one must travel through deep swamp. Much of the trail is underwater in the wet season, and underbrush in the dry season makes the obstacles plentiful. In summation, the cairn in the Hockomock is most likely a memorial stone pile created by Native Americans.

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