

The Corbelled Stone Chambers of Kent

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The hills and valleys of Kent are dotted with abundant evidence of our predecessors on these lands. Perhaps the most engaging of these relics are the stone chambers, or corbelled stone chambers to be precise. These chambers are usually found built into hillsides, near water sources, on the old colonial farm sites. Corbelled chambers were built by overlapping stones to curve the interior side walls toward each other, forming an arch-like structure. A lintel stone, usually about six feet in length, would be placed across the top of the entranceway. Then large capstones would be dragged on top to span the space between the side walls, forming the roof of the chamber. Dirt and sod would be placed on top and around the sides to seal the chamber.

An ongoing survey being conducted by Highlands Historic Preservation, has counted 62 such chambers to date within the town of Kent. It is believed that more exist, hidden away from view, on some of the private properties within the town, so the actual count may eventually reach approximately between 65 and 70 in total.



Figure 1: Corbelled Stone Chamber on the old Nichols Farm

The typical characteristics of these chambers include the corbelled walls, lintels and capstones, as mentioned above, and the following additional traits:

- Proximity to water: Most of the chambers surveyed to date are adjacent to or near water sources, including wetlands, springs, streams, brooks, ponds and lakes;
- Proximity to colonial farm sites: Most of the chambers identified to date are on or very near colonial farm sites. These farm sites have been identified through the use of the old maps of Kent dating back to the late 1700s;
- Orientation: Most of the chamber openings are oriented toward the south, southeast or southwest;
- Dirt floors: Almost all of the chambers appear to have dirt floors, versus rock or poured concrete. However, this may be the result of silting over the years;
- Humidity: The majority of the chambers surveyed to date have a lower interior humidity level as opposed to the exterior humidity;
- Temperature: At least during the warmer seasons, the interior temperatures of most of the chambers tend to be lower than the external temperature.

The original purpose of these stone chambers has been the subject of much debate over the years. Nearly all historical researchers believe they were the local equivalent of the root cellar or ice house, useful for storing food in a time before refrigeration was available. Early results from the chamber survey indicate that the majority of the chambers have lower temperature and humidity levels inside versus outside the chambers. This finding supports the use of most of these chambers as appropriate for food storage, although that does not necessarily point to the original purpose of the chambers nor the identification of those who built them and when.

According to the historical root cellar position, the early European farmers built them in the 1700s and 1800s, or hired construction gangs to build them. Many of Kent's chambers are found where the earliest colonial farms were located.

Lucas Barger, a Putnam Valley farmer who was born in 1867, wrote an account of how the chambers were built, describing the digging of a hole in the side of a hill in advance of the stone placement. Once the hole was dug and cleared of rocks, the side, back and front walls were constructed. The stones were placed so they couldn't shift, and the doorway was topped with a lintel stone over it. Then, large capstones would be dragged over the top by teams of oxen pulling on chains tied around the capstones. Sometimes logs were used as rollers to facilitate the placement of the capstones. Once the stone placement was completed, about four feet of dirt was used to cover the entire structure. Finally, sod was placed over the dirt to complete the insulation of the chamber. A door would be fitted over the entrance to help regulate the interior temperature and humidity.

Another interesting aspect of the stone chambers has been proposed by authors John Burke and Kaj Halberg. They theorize that the stone chambers were conducive for producing higher yield seeds used by the farmers. These authors claim that these structures were overwhelmingly sited at locations where the local geology magnified naturally-occurring electromagnetic fluctuations in the earth's crust and, further, that pyramidal and corbel-roofed stone structures erected at these locations enhanced this effect. Additionally, they indicate that indigenous seeds, when placed at these locations (for various periods of time, depending upon the type of seed) show significant increases in growth rate and yield when subsequently planted—as well as increased resistance to plant stressors.

However, a small group of researchers believe these structures pre-date the arrival of the colonial farmers, or are “prehistoric.” The Vermont Historical Society, in discussing the origin of their stone chambers, quoted a 1654 letter written by a Thomas Pyncheon of Springfield Massachusetts, in which he indicated he had a “report of a stone wall and a strong chamber in it, all made of stones, which is newly discovered at or near Pequot.” Retired Vermont farmers allegedly “recounted stories of their great-grandfathers’ plows uncovering stone huts which ‘looked like they’d always been there’.”

Critics of the root cellar theory point to the fact that these structures are found in one of the worst areas for farming. They also point out that some of the chambers were located on slopes that would have made it impractical for ease of access.

In addition, some point to the megalithic enigma known as “Mystery Hill” in Salem, New Hampshire to support the prehistoric theory. Running across the 30 acres of hillside are a series of low walls, cave-like primitive buildings, and tunnels that are spread about. Pottery fragments located there have been tested and found to go back as far as 1000 BC. Charcoal from one fire pit, measured by radiocarbon dating, was found to be 4000 years old. Some have dubbed the site “America’s Stonehenge.”

The following prehistoric theories of the stone chambers’ origins are as follows:

1. Native American: Some believe that our Native American predecessors are responsible for at least some of the stone chambers in the Town of Kent. The local Native American tribe, the Nochpeem, was known to have built winter forts. According to the late Stephen Kenneth (Ken) Townsend, an eyewitness to history on Mt. Nimham (where his family owned the “Fairview Farm” for many years), the Nochpeem forts on Mt. Nimham were built partially with stone. It is possible that the Nochpeem would have fully adapted to their environment, living in the ‘land of granite’, and constructed these stone chambers. These structures could possibly have been used as winter burial chambers or as sweat lodges.

Support for the Native American theory has been provided by Salvatore Michael Trento, a former National Geographic employee who studied ancient monoliths all over the world, and who conducted an excavation of 12 chambers throughout the northeast in the mid 1970s. He concluded that the chambers of this area were Native American in origin, and that the chambers represented true Native architecture.

Others believe that although the Native Americans may have used these structures as winter burial chambers, they believe the chambers were built by others;

2. Celts: The orientation of the openings of a few of the chambers has suggested to some that they may have been constructed to celebrate the seasonal solstices and equinoxes. According to this theory, the Celts and their Druid priests constructed the chambers for their solstice and equinox celebrations in honor of their sun god, Bel.

According to Professor Barry Fell, a former marine biologist from Harvard University, inscriptions in an early form of Ogam script dating back to the period 1000 B.C. to 300 B.C. have been identified in some chambers located in Vermont. Fell wrote that “both on-site investigations and historical research” demonstrated “that Celts from the Iberian Peninsula were responsible for the Ogam inscriptions we find on ancient stone buildings in New England. In all probability,” he continued, “the same Celts were the actual builders of the structures on which their inscriptions occur” and “that Celts in considerable numbers did in fact settle here, particularly in New England.” Professor Fell felt “it became clear that ancient Celts had built the New England megalithic chambers and that Phoenician mariners were welcome visitors, permitted to worship at the Celtic sanctuaries and allowed to make dedications in their own language.”



Figure 2: Corbelled Stone Chamber Found on the Brown-Barrett Farm, with sunrise on the solstice shining through the opening.

Fell and others have cited as further evidence in support of ancient European settlement the existence of rocks carved in the shape of animal figures, standing stones with symbolic markings, and archeoastronomical data suggests that the location of certain specific stone chambers “had been carefully selected for prominent horizon features that would align with the sunset and sunrise during solstices and equinoxes.”

The survey has identified some stone chambers that are not suitable for food storage, such as the one pictured above on the Brown-Barrett farm (see Figure 2). This particular chamber has water seeping from its ceiling. Also, this particular chamber does align with the winter solstice. In the late 1980s the New England Antiquities Research Association (NEARA) studied this chamber and its alignment.

Some local Wicca followers have been seen holding ceremonies at the chambers, most likely because of their astronomical alignment and the belief that they may have been used by the ancient Celts. But it is important to note that no archaeological evidence has been found to date to support this theory;

3. Vikings: Some believe that the Vikings, in search of timber for their ships and houses, and pelts for clothing, came to the New World and set up outposts here. It is believed that the stone chambers were built as religious observatories, but, again, no archaeological evidence has been found to date to support this theory;

4. Extraterrestrial Contacts: In the 1990s, Dr. Bruce Cornet, then a staff geologist at the Lamont Doherty Observatory, brought a proton procession magnetometer, used to measure variations in the earth’s magnetic field, when visiting four local chambers. Dr. Cornet said he recorded “the strangest readings I ever got in this area. It was strong enough to reverse a compass. Each stone chamber had a significant magnetic pull right in front of the door. This magnetic anomaly is a true clue that they are much older than the early colonists.” He speculated that the builders of these chambers placed metallic material below the entry ways either to aid in finding the chambers with early compasses, or to assist religious leaders in performing magnetic tricks to convince the people during ritual ceremonies of their unique powers. Dr. Cornet theorized that the chambers could be “sensing platforms to search for extraterrestrial visitation.” Cornet’s work, and his association with discredited UFO theorist Phil Imbrogno (see below), is now considered invalid and has been dismissed by current researchers.

Despite one’s personal opinion, every honest researcher can agree that they are important historical sites that deserve protection and preservation.

Today, these stone chambers are being threatened by time and encroaching development. Approximately 37% of the chambers surveyed to date have damaged lintels, capstones and/or partial cave-ins. The chamber pictured in Figure 3 has a cracked lintel stone, and a partial cave-in toward the rear. Others have trees growing out of their roofs, with their roots wrapped around their capstones, which threaten to harm the chambers when they eventually topple over. Still others have been bulldozed to clear the way for the construction of new homes in our community. A more recent threat involves some vandals who have moved, or removed, stones

and other artifacts from these sites. The most notorious of these is Phil Imbrogno, an individual with ties to the UFO field, who can be seen on various YouTube videos boasting of his vandalism. Imbrogno, who fraudulently claimed to have a doctorate from MIT, undergraduate degrees from the University of Texas, and military credentials including service in Vietnam as a Special Forces Green Beret, has been in hiding since these revelations were made by researcher Lance Moody and others in the UFO-paranormal field. But his followers are still active in Putnam County, including his protégé, Renee J. Fleury, who heads a group known as “KEPRI” operating out of the Brewster area.

Highlands Historic Preservation has been working with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation to formally designate these sites as New York State inventoried archaeological sites, providing them with more protection under the State Historic Preservation Act.



Figure 3: Corbelled Stone Chamber with Cracked Lintel Stone

Highlands Historic Preservation is cataloging and studying the stone chambers of Kent, and has worked with the Kent Master Plan Committee to develop proposals to have these important historical resources protected from future development. This way they’ll be around for people to debate their origins for many years to come.

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