

“As pioneers moved across the Great Plains, treaties were being made with numerous large tribes that inhabited the great western lands of the United States, and it was these tribes, with leaders like Red Cloud, Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse and Geronimo, that captured national interest and consumed the public’s imagination. As far as the public was concerned, they (the eastern tribes) were indeed, as Melville was justified in observing, quite “extinct” as Indians.” Revenge of the Pequots Eisler, Kim Isaac. New York: Simon and Schuster. 2001

SIGNS OF THE EARLY DAYS THAT SURROUND US

By Anthony D’Abrosca

Although densely developed with shopping centers and housing plats, the land now known as Rhode Island abounds with artifacts from a simpler civilization – that of the Native American people who settled here thousands of years before the Europeans.

Those with a sense of adventure can have a field day seeking out these widely scattered reminders, most of which are made of stone – the only material able to withstand the elements over the centuries. Many are buried and inaccessible, some are discovered by chance, a few are well-known landmarks, and the origin of others remains a mystery.

One of the most visible of these relics, Drum Rock, has been immortalized in a children’s book, *Daniel and Drum Rock*, by the late Florence Parker Simister. The rock – a huge stone on a rock “dish” off Gilbane Street in the village of **Apponaug** – is said to have been used by the Indians as a means of communicating with the surrounding area. When the stone, delicately balanced, was made to rock back and forth, the resulting booms could be heard for miles. In nearby Cowesett, an Indian settlement believed to be 3,000 years old, was uncovered during the late 1980s when workmen were excavating on Lambert Farms, preparing to build a housing development. The contractor agreed to delay the project until the site – thought to have been used by ancestors of the Narragansett Indian – could be thoroughly researched. During a two-year period more than 10,000 artifacts and skeletal remains were recovered before the developer resumed building.

What happens when such archaeological treasures are stumbled upon? State law requires anyone who uncovers such finds must notify the appropriate tribe; and as a matter of courtesy, sacred items such as ceremonial pipes are usually returned to the tribe.

Indian settlements dotted what is now the City of **Cranston**. The eastern part of that municipality has been so heavily developed that very few signs of its earliest inhabitants remain. However, the western end includes the site of an ancient soapstone quarry where generations of native people fashioned many stone utensils, including bowls, pipes, arrow points and tools for skinning and cooking game.

Evidence indicates that the use of the quarry, off Phenix Avenue in **Oaklawn**, was communal, with many tribes sharing not only the quarry but the tools as well. Exhaustive studies of the quarry were made by the Narragansett Archaeological Society. Its research director at the time was the late William S. Fowler, a renowned scholar of American prehistoric studies. He was

also curator of the Bronson Museum of Archaeology, in Attleboro, Massachusetts, where numerous treasures from the Oaklawn dig are on display.

In nearby woods is a rock shelter used by hunters spending the night, and those caught in sudden storms – further evidence that this area was heavily used and shared by many tribes. Other rock shelters have been identified in the Town of **West Greenwich**: Rattlesnake Ledge lies hidden in Wickaboxet State Forest, and Witch’s Rock can be found off Hopkins Hill Road.

The Town of **Coventry** contains several interesting mementos of a people who roamed the land for millennia. One of the most recognized and controversial is a collection of stone cairns in the Parker Woodland Refuge.

Folklore says that 4-5-foot high cylindrical mounds were built by the natives to honor the dead; other theories speculate that they may have served as a type of astronomical computer. After much study, their origin and purpose are still in doubt.

One of the most intriguing but least accessible relics of Indian times is a V-shaped fish weir (trap) that lies at the bottom of the south branch of the Pawtuxet River in the village of **Anthony** in Coventry. It can only be seen when the level of the river is lowered during periods of drought or for maintenance of the dam and millrace. The wooden portion of the weir disintegrated long ago and now only the stonework remains.

The **Black Rock**, about a mile and a half away, is a huge boulder which has lent its name both to the road off which it sits and the village surrounding it. It is believed to have been used for tribal ceremonies.

In **West Warwick**, the most prominent reminder of a bygone era is not manmade, but a natural outcropping known as Indian Ledge. Situated on Wakefield Hill, it commands a sweeping vista that includes Narragansett Bay and is said to have been used as a lookout post against warring parties.