

WARNER'S STONE STRUCTURES PROJECT

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The Warner Historical Society has established a program to locate and research the kinds of stone features that are found in every New Hampshire town, and to work with the local conservation commission to preserve many of those sites.

Farms located in the 14,000-acre Mink Hills section of Warner had slowly been abandoned by the 1930s, and the fields had long since grown to forests. Because access to the area is limited by seasonal and Class VI roads, human impact had been restricted to such recreational uses as snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, hiking, and the use of ATVs. But the intensity of timber harvesting has increased steadily in the past few years. People have become concerned about the stone foundations in the area and the impact of trash, logging, and future development in and around the old farm complexes.

About five years ago, the Warner Historical Society appointed a "Stone Structures" subcommittee. The committee wanted to document not only farmhouse and outbuilding foundations, but also stone culverts, stone walls, mill sites, sugaring arches, school locations, watering cisterns and any other unusual stone formations.

We have discovered that a family might settle in one location on a property and later move to another site which was more conducive to their operations. Buildings were often taken down and moved or turned around. Barns were often built from recycled buildings. Wells dried out over the summer and new wells were dug. Properties were exchanged with neighbors. Families were large, and oftentimes children moved onto other areas in the neighborhood through marriage, or even left the area altogether and moved west. The discovery of gold, the Civil War, and the ease of farming in the Midwest all lured families to seek their fortunes in other regions.

Many times, the older generation was left behind. Unable to maintain the farm, old folks often moved into the village or went to live with children who had gone to the cities to find work.

Farms were abandoned, fields grew up, and the houses and barns either fell or burned. But their stone outlines remain to tell a story.

Documentation involves locating each site, taking measurements and photographs, locating outbuildings and wells, and researching the associated family history. The 1858 county map and the 1892 New Hampshire atlas have helped us in our initial surveys of cellar holes, but we have discovered that these maps don't show every house.



(photograph by James L. Garvin)

We compare historic sites with current town tax maps, and fill out a form indicating the map and lot number, location, and current owner. We complete a description sheet indicating the function of the structure and such evidence as the marks of drills used to split the stone. Is it a center chimney cape? Are there stairs leading out of the cellar? What is the relationship of the barn to the house? Is it attached or unattached? Where were the well and outhouse? We take photographs and record their dates, with roll and frame numbers. We take measurements of the foundation layout and transfer them onto graph paper. We encourage landowners, who may know their property intimately, to walk their lands with us and share any information they have compiled.

Luckily, the files at the Warner Historical Society are rich with research. Several people took the time at some point to write down who used to live in their neighborhood and what they did for a living besides farming:

blacksmithing, operating a cider mill, mending people's shoes, peddling wares, teaching school, being a seamstress, etc. The Society has vital record files, genealogies, diaries, cemetery records, school records, and my personal favorite, a large file of scrapbooks compiled mostly by women from the 1860s on. Obituaries often reveal a wealth of information. All these details add dimension and richness to the lives that were led on these abandoned farms.

The Warner Conservation Commission has received a grant to help conserve and protect the natural and historic resources of the Mink Hills area and to maintain the traditional working landscape, including agriculture and forestry, recreation and open space. The Warner Historical Society will work with the commission to identify and locate the historic resources. The commission will create a comprehensive, GIS-based database of the natural and historic resources, including a digital map of all parcel ownership boundaries. A conservation plan based on this information will identify acquisition priorities and other resource management actions. Public acceptance will be sought by involving various partners and residents as the plan is developed.

I first entered this area in the wintertime on skis and found it very beautiful and remote. Returning in the fall of the year, I was amazed to see numbers of cellar holes. I wanted to know who these people were. Now when I walk there I can hear their stories that were waiting to be told, and I want to share these stories with others. I have developed a series of five slide shows of the cellar holes and existing houses in the Mink Hill area. The Warner Historical Society presented an exhibit, "Ballad of the Hills: The Minks," during the summer, and the Society's "Stone Structures" subcommittee sponsored autumn walks in the Mink Hills in September and October.

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