

Historic Iroquois and Wabanaki Beadwork

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The Abenaki and the Bellows Falls (VT) Petroglyphs

By Gerry Biron

I'm privileged to live in Southern Vermont, just a short distance from the cascade known as the "Great Falls," located in the village of Bellows Falls. This was a venerable site to Vermont's First People. Today, most of the rapids that once rushed through this Connecticut River cataract have been diverted to a nearby hydroelectric plant and all that remains of the Great Falls is a mere trickle of its former self ([fig. 1](#)). In times past, the splendor of this natural wonder attracted large numbers of Abenakis and it was considered one of the finest locations for fishing in northern New England.



Figure 1

In the meadow across the river from the falls is the village of North Walpole, New Hampshire, where local residents have uncovered copious amounts of stone implements over the past two centuries.

Since the first settlements in Bellows Falls, numerous Indian graves have been inadvertently dug up throughout the village and near the falls. There is a tradition among longtime residents that the section of town located on the west side of Main Street, across from the Square, was once an Indian burial mound (Hayes 1907:29).

Additionally, two centuries of excavations for roads and building construction near the petroglyphs have uncovered numerous skeletal remains throughout the village and on the island leading to the bridge that crosses the Connecticut River. Lyman Hayes interviewed the late Dr. S.M. Blake who indicated to him that "the whole distance across the island had, in a much earlier period, been used for an Indian burial-ground. The bodies were uncovered sitting upright, having been buried in a sitting posture with the knees drawn up to the chin, in a circular hole dug deep enough so that the top of the heads came within a foot or two of the surface of the ground" (Hayes 1907:29). Even the mound just to the west of the petroglyphs, where a power substation is located today, was once an Abenakis burial mound. It would seem that the village was erected upon what could be one of the largest burial sites in all of Vermont, and perhaps in all of New England. This was and still is a very sacred place to the Abenakis.

Up from the river's edge, along the rocks that run contiguous to the west bank of the Connecticut River, and just south of the Great Falls, are located some of the most enigmatic petroglyphs in all of New England. Here we find a curious assortment of faces chiseled into the granite outcropping just above the spillway (fig. 2, 3 & 4).



Figure 2 - North panel of petroglyphs at Bellows Falls, VT.



Figure 3 - The north panel of petroglyphs at Bellows Falls, Vermont with the Connecticut River below and Mount Kilburn, in North Walpole, NH in the distance.



Figure 4



Figure 5 - 19th century logging image at the site of the petroglyphs.

Ever since their discovery over two centuries ago, writers have suggested numerous interpretations. The first written account of the petroglyphs appears in the writings of Rev. David McClure, in 1789, who noted that the English colonist who had settled the area some fifty years earlier had observed them. Their age has been estimated from as little as 300 years to as much as 3000. Descriptions of their origin and function are as varied as the people who observed them. The Rev. McClure was of the opinion that the site marked the location of "evil spirits." Edward Kendall, another Englishman who traveled through the area in 1808 believed they were nothing more than an activity the Indians engaged in during their "idle hours." The ethnologist Henry Schoolcraft wrote, in 1857, that the petroglyphs marked the site of an important battle that took place sometime in the past. Other accounts describe the faces as representations of people who had drowned in the rapids below.

Impressions of the site by Native people suggest there is a connection between the faces on the rocks and a nearby burial mound. Since the faces are looking west, toward the traditional direction an Abenakis' soul travels after the body's physical death, it has been suggested that the faces could be there as markers, pointing the way home to a newly departed spirit.

Today, there are only two known panels of rock carvings at the site. They are situated north and south of each other and both are just south of the old Vilas Bridge that connects Bellows Falls, Vermont with Walpole, New Hampshire. During the nineteenth century many of the petroglyphs were destroyed when dynamite was used to free up log jams in the immediate area (fig. 5). This would lead us to believe that what exists today may be just a small sampling of the carvings that were once there.

One of the earliest representation we have of the petroglyphs is drawing by the artist A.C. Hamlin that was published Schoolcraft in 1857 (fig.6). This drawing may be of a panel that was destroyed as it is quite different from the existing panels or from one depicted in a circa 1860 photograph (fig. 7) that was illustrated in the History of the Town of Rockingham (Hayes 1907:31). Hayes only shows one panel with not even a mention of the other so the existence of two panels today is a mystery. Hayes also illustrated two other drawings of presumably now destroyed panels (figs. 8 & 9).



Figure 6 - 1857 drawing of the petroglyphs from Schoolcraft.

Around 1890, a large retaining wall was built just west of the existing rock carvings and between then and the 1930's, the petroglyphs were subjected to periodic wear from several sources. Snow filled with road grit from snow-plowing as well as mill ash from local factories was routinely dumped over the wall and onto the petroglyphs. Delabarre reported that in 1921 the faces were barely perceptible and that they were almost totally obliterated by 1928. In the early 1930's, in a well-meaning attempt to rectify the situation, the Daughters of the American Revolution hired a local stone cutter to chisel out the lost images from the rock and he no doubt took liberties with his work. A study of the 1860 photograph (fig. 7) reveals that this panel has the identical cracks in the stone as the existing south panel (fig. 10), yet the north panel (figs. 2, 3, & 4) has at least two groupings of images that are identical to those on the 1860 photo of the south panel. So why was the north panel not mentioned in 1860, considering how prominent it is today? I believe the stonecutter used the 1860 photo to create a new panel, the north one, on the assumption or the knowledge that there were more faces there at a former time. Or perhaps the work went quicker than he estimated so he may have added additional faces to the project to justify his salary.



Sculptures at Bellows Falls.

As they looked about 1860.

Figure 7

The current academic explanation for the petroglyphs is that they were shamanistic in origin. Professor William Haviland of the University of Vermont has written that tribal people from around the world consider unusual geographic features such as rock outcroppings, cliffs and waterfalls as places where one can commune with spirits. Many of these sites across the planet have rock art associated with them. Haviland believes that places such as these were conducive to the trance activity of shamans and that the spiritual trance experiences of these individuals are at the heart of this art form. The faces represent spirits that the shaman encountered in his trance experience. Though numerous explanations have been proposed for the rock art, Haviland believes that those interpretations "reveal more about the cultural preconceptions of their European and American authors than they do about the petroglyphs and what motivated their production." He concludes by saying, "the rarity of rock art elsewhere in northern New England suggests that this must have been an exceptionally sacred place" (For more information on this, see: *A New Look at Vermont's Oldest Art: Understanding the Bellows Falls Petroglyphs*, by Professor William Haviland and Marjory Powers in *Vermont History*, #62(4) Fall issue, 1994).



Indian Sculptures at Bellows Falls.
Early in the 19th Century.

Figure 8

Hayes' 1907 *History of Rockingham, Vermont* records an account of a group of Abenaki who early in the summer of 1856, made their annual pilgrimage to the petroglyphs and set up a summer camp on the banks of the Connecticut River. It gives a rare glimpse into the life of one family of Abenaki who earned their living by selling their arts and crafts during the early nineteenth century. There are pejorative terms and concepts used in Hayes account and the unnamed chief was certainly not the last of his tribe. Such comments are signs of the times in which they were written and not my personal sentiments.



Figure 9

"During the first half of the last century small parties of more civilized and peaceable Abenaki Indians used to visit Bellows Falls nearly every summer, coming from their homes in Canada and New York state. They came down the Connecticut in their canoes, usually bringing supplies of baskets and other trinkets which they had manufactured during the previous winters, which they sold to citizens of Bellows Falls and the then large number of summer visitors. They usually encamped on Pine hill, which was then north of the village and extended as far north as the residence of the late F. E. Proctor at the extreme north end of Green Street. Sometimes they built their wigwams on the beach south of the falls, at times on the Vermont side, at others on the New Hampshire side. The men spent much time fishing in the river and

hunting on the hills on both sides of the river, while the squaws carried on the mercantile branch of their business.



Figure 10 - South panel of petroglyphs at Bellows Falls, VT

The last remnant of this tribe came to Bellows Falls... in their birchbark canoes. The party consisted of a chief who was very old and infirm, a young wife and their sons, one about twenty and the other about nine years old, and others... They built their wigwams in true Indian fashion, of poles, covering them with bark and the skins of wild animals, and during the whole summer the place was of much interest to all in this vicinity....

The older son spoke good English and was a manly appearing youth. He was an expert in the use of his rifle and shot gun and collected considerable money from visitors by giving exhibitions of his marksmanship ... The chief himself was very intelligent and conversed interestingly with his visitors. He had fought with the English in different wars and gave many startling incidents connected with his early life and wild mode of living. He had been to England three times and he wore a large silver medal presented to him by King George III, in acknowledgement of his services. He was very proud of this, and lost no opportunity to exhibit it to his callers. It bore the king's profile in relief and an appropriate inscription....

Late in the season the weather grew cold and the party prepared to return to Canada before the river was frozen over, but the old chief wished to die beside the "Great Falls," and be buried with his fathers. After long continued discussion, his wife left him in his wigwam with his two sons, and went north with others of the party. The wigwam was removed to the higher ground near River Street about opposite the present location of Taylor's livery stable....

In his last hour he called his elder son to his side and with his finger on his wrist showed how his pulse beat slowly and unsteadily. "I'm going to the Great Spirit," he said, feebly. He gave to his son the medal and the old rifle he had carried in the wars and charged him to wear the one and keep the other as long as he should live... and this last local representative of the original tribe of Abenaki Indians was buried in what was then the Rockingham burying-grounds, and now known as the old Catholic cemetery, on the

terraces in the west part of the village of Bellows Falls. No stone was erected to mark the spot, and the old representative of the proud tribe of Abenakis rest in a grave, the location of which cannot be pointed out" (Hayes 1907: 48-51).



Figure 11 - Abenaki beadwork artist
Rhonda Besaw.

Today, there is a developing craft tradition among the Wabanaki and perhaps the most accomplished beadworker among them is Rhonda Besaw (fig. 11). Rhonda is a consummate artist who is producing some of the most intriguing beaded bags made by a Native artist today (fig. 12). "I have been doing beadwork for about fifteen years," says Rhonda. "I was initially encouraged to try beadwork by a Mi'kmaq woman who showed me the classic stitches I still use to this day. Over the years, other Native beadworkers have shared tips and pointers, but the majority of what I have learned has been by trial and error. I believe my ability to do beadwork is a direct result of my genes and my connection to my beadworking ancestors. When I sit down to bead, I invite my grandmothers to join me; those who crossed over long ago and like them, many of the designs I use come from dreams and reflection."



Figure 12 - Some of Rhonda's exceptional purses.

"I am of both Eastern and Western Abenaki descent," says Rhonda. "My ancestors lived in southern Quebec, northern New Hampshire, and along the Connecticut River valley for hundreds of years. By doing beadwork in a similar style as my ancestors, I honor those that came before me and leave something for future generations. Through these tiny beads, the story of our survival can be shared and my relatives can recognize a piece of who they are. My hope is that my work will inspire one of them to learn more about their culture and take up a needle and thread to relate their own narrative of survival. By sharing the story of these tiny beads, it may be known that the indigenous people of New Hampshire are still here."



Figure 13 - Rhonda's Petroglyph bag

Rhonda, depicted here in my portrait of her (fig. 14) created a beaded bag (fig. 13) to honor the site of the petroglyphs. She says "many of those ancient rock carvings show faces that are gender neutral. Some have rays around their heads. This gave me pause to think of how I might make a modern day petroglyph in beadwork." Rhonda says she used dark blue cut beads to outline the rays so as "to give them an interesting and random sparkle and a roughness that you see on these rocks. The copper colored beads

in the center of the stars and along the seed pods signify the spark of life. The blue wavy line along the border symbolizes the river. The dark blue silk ribbon edge binding also represents the river. The grey face denotes the male; the multicolored, dark blue face, the female. The grey beads have a radiance about them that reminds me of our granite rocks when the sun is shining down on them. In my beaded petroglyphs, the rays above the male's head signify male power/energy; the light of the sun and fire. I have been taught that in the Abenaki culture, man is the keeper of the fire and the protector of life. The female is done with matte finished, dark blue/purple beads. This is also how some of the wet river rocks appear to me. In addition to being providers of life, women have a strong connection to water. From the top of the female petroglyph comes the curled-up fiddle head motif (a very old design). It signifies new life in the plant world. The white and copper colored beads along the fiddleheads are seeds; around the head of the female are blossoming flowers. Her mouth is an open circle; the circle of the life force in keeping with the giver of life theme. The white tubular beads are an expression of energy. The stars on the other side represent the realm of our ancestors; where they originated and where we will return when we pass on. The design on the bag symbolizes physical life on one side and spiritual life on the other."

Rhonda said she wanted people to know that the placement of every bead was a conscious choice and not a random act. "When creating a work of art, everything has a meaning and a place."



Figure 14 - My portrait of Rhonda with one of her beaded bags.

You can see more of Rhonda's exceptional beadwork on her website:

<http://rhondabesaw.com/>

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Gerry Biron is both an artist and an independent researcher of historic Northeast Woodland beadwork. He lectures frequently on the topic through the New Hampshire Humanities Council and other organizations. He authored the publication *Made of Thunder, Made of Glass: American Indian Beadwork of the Northeast*, in 2006. Additionally, he has written two feature articles about Northeast Woodland beaded bags: *A Cherished Curiosity: The Niagara Floral-style Beaded Bag in the Victorian Era*, in the Fall 2010 edition of *American Indian Art Magazine*, and *Made of Thunder, Made of Glass: Niagara Falls and its Influence on the Production of American Indian Beadwork* in Vol. 36, No. 4, 2007 edition of *Whispering Wind Magazine*. His artwork combines his passion for history, art and the historic beadwork produced by the tribes from the Northeast. His artwork and a sampling of the *Made of Thunder* collection can be seen at www.gerrybiron.com