



THE SPIRIT POND SOD HOUSE

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Foreword

"The primitive shelters of the early colonists, in all the European settlements of North America, have long since been swept away." This statement hallowed by time, authority and rapid urban development seemed almost self-evident. The architectural and historical literature seems to bear out the above contention, for no single reference to existing primitive shelters can be found. The fact that none had yet come to light did not, however, preclude the possibility of their existence.

In 1972, a unique opportunity arose to investigate the remains of two unusual structures at the northern end of Spirit Pond, Phippsburg, Maine. The existence of these structures was reported by Mr. Harold Brown of the Bath Marine Museum, Bath, Maine. A preliminary survey of these structures was conducted by members of the New England Antiquities Research Association which revealed their unusual nature and construction and the decision was made to excavate one of them. This work was prompted by the discovery in 1971, at Spirit Pond, of three small stones bearing runic or Norse inscriptions. The purpose of the excavation, therefore, was to scientifically uncover evidence of Norse settlement and exploration in the Spirit Pond area; and thus support the authenticity of the three runestones.

With the approval and cooperation of the Maine Department of Parks and Recreation, which administers the Spirit Pond property, archeological excavations were begun in August 1972, and continued into 1973. The field crew consisted of members of the New England Antiquities Research Association as well as Mr. Harold Brown of the Bath Marine Museum and Mr. John W. Briggs of the Department of Parks and Recreation. The field work and recording was supervised by Edward J. Lenik.

A total of 16 full days was spent in the excavation of the West Structure or Sod House which was designated as Site Number 4, at Spirit Pond. An average of six people participated in the excavations each day. At the conclusion of the excavations in 1973, the site of the Sod House was completely backfilled and landscaped as much as possible to its original form.

This paper presents a complete report of the archeological work, features unearthed and artifacts recovered, along with the conclusions and interpretations as indicated by the finds. This work represents a unique, as well as complete record of an early primitive dwelling or Sod House. Much labor has gone into the effort to recapture the scenes and details of this early dwelling. This report will provide new source material for future excavations and research.

INTRODUCTION

Spirit Pond is located within the borders of the historic old town of Phippsburg, Maine. Phippsburg, a long bony peninsula, juts southward into the sea at the mouth of the Kennebec River. The town is bordered by the Kennebec River on the east, Casco Bay and the New Meadows River to the west, and a mainland approach from Bath to the north. Spirit Pond, a wild and undeveloped area, is very near the popular resort area of Popham Beach.

Spirit Pond is a tidal body of water at the head of the Morse River. Its waters rise and fall with the tide as it comes in and out from the sea. At high tide the area appears totally different than at low tide. At high tide it is a beautiful, placid pond that can readily support a shallow draft boat coming in from the sea. At low tide it becomes many acres of mud flats with small pools of water. The pond is also fed by several small fresh water streams or inlets at its northern end.

It is apparent that Spirit Pond was a much deeper body of water years ago than it is today. Considerable silting has taken place with the result that the pond is not, at present, very deep at high tide. The construction of a stone dam across the entrance, around 1830, appears to have contributed to sedimentation in the pond. This dam was built to hold back the tide and converted Spirit Pond into an ice pond from which ice could be harvested in the winter. Furthermore, there is considerable evidence of erosion along the banks and beach at the northern end of the pond.

Many acres of marshland surround both sides of the Morse River as it leaves Spirit Pond. These extensive stretches of salt marsh provide refuge for a variety of wildlife. In early days, the marshes were highly valued as a source of fodder for cattle.

The topography surrounding Spirit Pond is typical of Maine in general. Many outcroppings of ledge are found along its shores. The woodlands vary from scrub growth of pines and other low lying plants to the high majestic oak trees. The physical scene today is probably little changed from that of several hundred years ago.

A reconnaissance survey around Spirit Pond revealed evidence of many generations of man and his activities. Evidence was found of stone walls, rock piles, foundations, apple trees, and farming activities that have been long abandoned.

THE EXCAVATION OF THE WEST STRUCTURE AT SITE NUMBER 4

Site Number 4 consists of the remains of two (2) distinct structures located at the northern end of Spirit Pond, Maine. (See Figure 1 for location.)

plete bowl. This tobacco pipe bowl can be dated from 1620 to 1650, based on its shape and stem bore diameter of 9 sixty fourths. (See Noel-Hume 1969:298;303.)

One stone plummet of Indian origin was also recovered from the soil that had fallen into the center chamber. Also, a "millefiori" type glass bead was found on the surface of the west wall. This bead was examined by Karlis Karklins of the Canadian National Historic Sites Service and determined to be a type used only in the African trade and probably 200-300 years old. (Karklins 1973.)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The excavation of the west structure at Site Number 4 clearly establishes it as a sod house of European origin. The archeological evidence reveals the following construction details of the Spirit Pond Sod House:

Interior Chamber:

The interior chamber measured 21 feet long by 7 feet wide. The estimated height would be approximately 6 feet up to the top of the plate log on the side walls, and higher at the peak of the roof. The interior was dug out of the ground down to subsoil, thus making it a semi-subterranean structure.

The floor of the interior chamber was earthen, a gray hardpan subsoil. We found no evidence of floor covering such as boards or straw, but we did find some traces of clay. A circular bowl-shaped hearth, measuring 3 feet in diameter and 6 inches deep, was located in the center of the structure, along the east wall.

A possible bench or sleeping platform was located along the west wall opposite the hearth. The base of the platform was a built-up area of soil and small stones measuring 6 feet long by 2 feet wide.

Walls:

The exterior dimensions of the Spirit Pond Sod House are 32 feet long by 21 feet wide.

The walls were constructed of earth, which was dug out of the center chamber and piled up on the outside. Stones were carefully laid at the entrance to the structure to provide structural strength to the walls and to prevent slumping and erosion of the walls down the bank. Stones were also laid up along the top of both east and west walls in order to level them off.

The walls were "half-moon" in cross-section and measured some 7 feet wide at their base and sloped upward toward the top. Their height above ground level varied, depending on the contour of the ground. However, elevations were taken at various points along the center line of the side walls and also at the bottom floor level. These measurements indicate a probable height of 5 1/2 feet. The walls have eroded and collapsed considerably as indicated by the amount of earth and stone removed from the interior during the excavations.