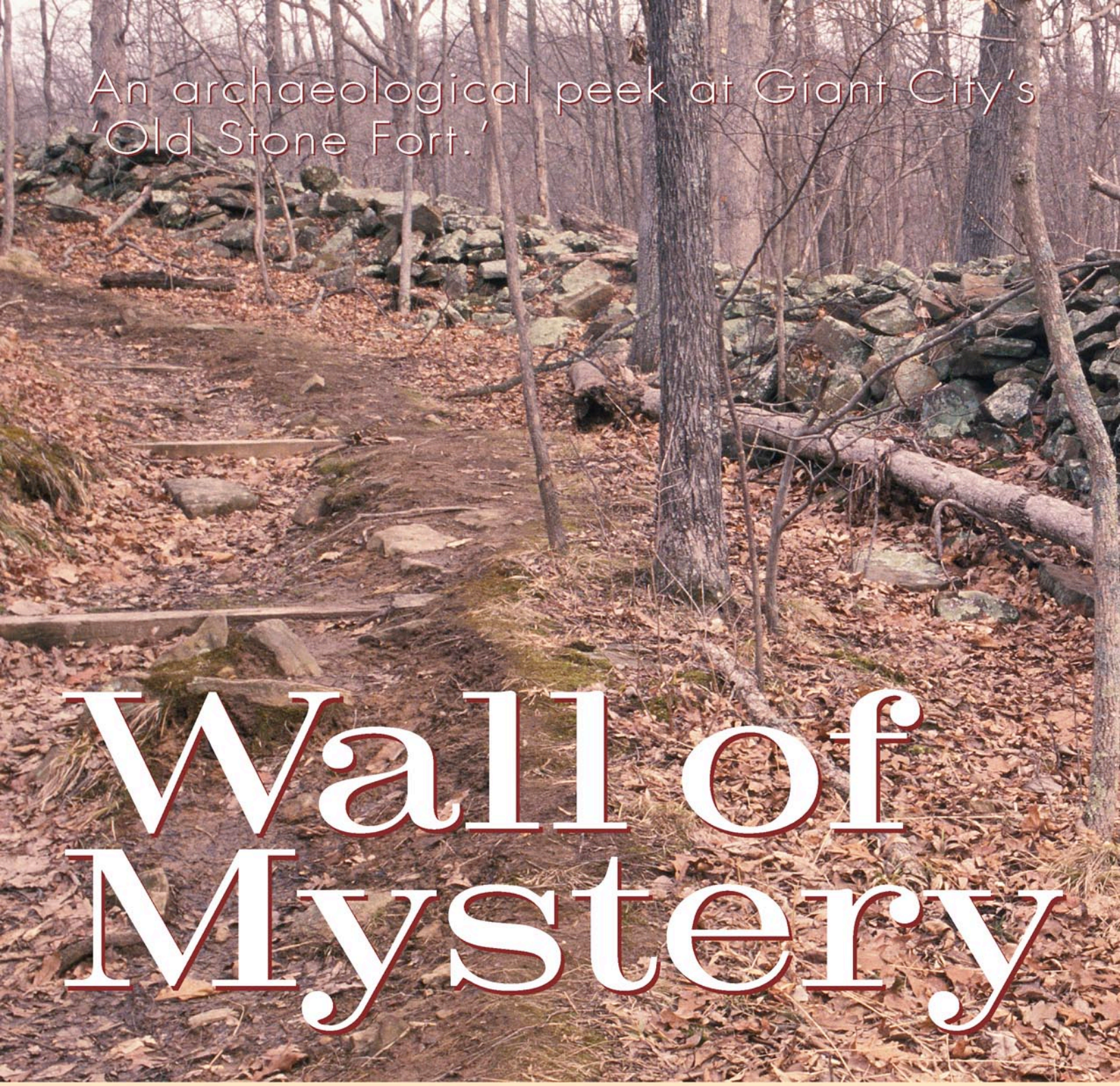


An archaeological peek at Giant City's 'Old Stone Fort.'

Wall of Mystery

Story and Photos By
Joe McFarland

The National Register of Historic Places has recognized a stone structure in the wooded hills of southern Illinois, despite the fact no one is quite sure why it was built.

Experts converged upon the isolated bluff three years ago to scrutinize the soils where peculiar, lichen-spotted stones had been piled for ages. They examined this ancient wall of rocks as it had never before been studied.

And they agreed: It was certainly something. And very old—as ancient as 1,400 years, by scientific estimates. To honor the rude stone construction, a dignified brass sign was erected and state protections against vandalism were increased.

"We do not know what the function of the wall was, and we may never know," said Hal Hassen, archaeologist and cultural resource coordinator for the Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

In 2000, DNR contracted with the Center for Archaeological Investigations at Southern Illinois University (SIU), Carbondale to attempt something never before conducted at the mysterious old pile of sandstone within Giant City State Park.

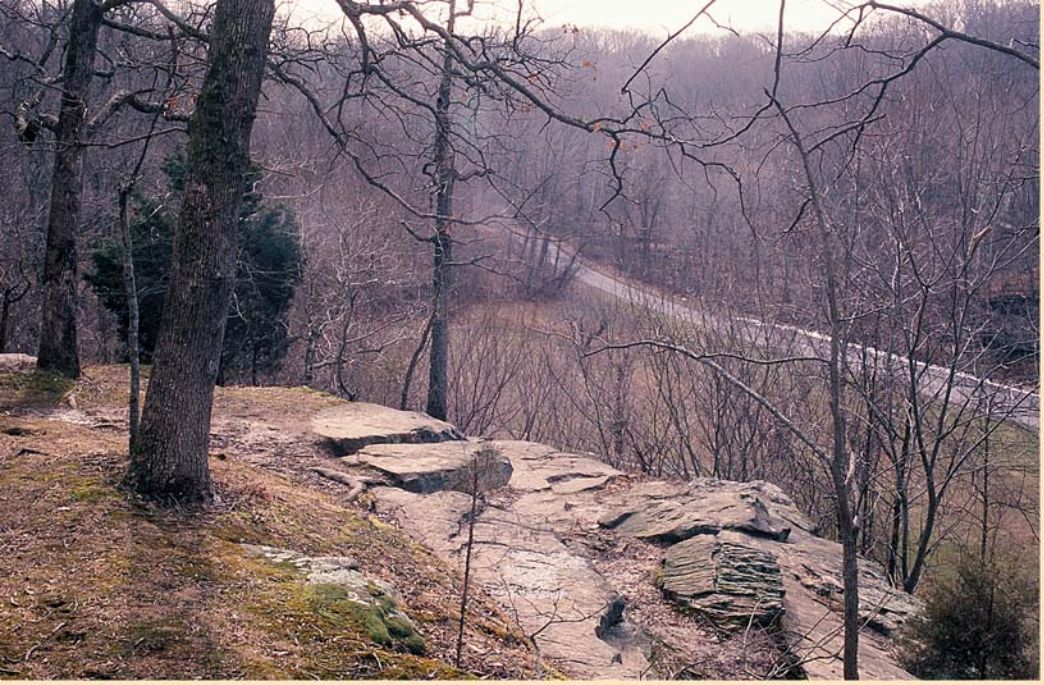
Giant City's "stone fort," reconstructed during the 1930s, now attracts many hikers to this mysterious prehistoric structure. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the site is protected under federal law.

After all of these years, officials wondered, was there anything left undisturbed that might explain why prehistoric people built this wall of rocks? Was it possible the site had somehow been unaffected by the crowds of visitors who had scoured these hills for more than 150 years?

It was an admitted longshot. The professional archaeologists were conservatively skeptical, based on the site's historic popularity. After all, some 1.5 million visitors descend upon Giant City State Park annually, many of them huffing their way up the hillside trail specifically to walk amid these old stone relics. Locals always assumed the stones represented the remains of some sort of American Indian fortress. The structure already existed when the first European settlers arrived, and local folklore subsequently suggested the wall represented a site of some strategic importance, perhaps a fortress built for defense.

Based on the long history of local familiarity, Hassen and his fellow archaeologists could have suspected the site had been damaged by shovels or plows more than 100 years ago. It seems earlier archaeologists might have assumed the same thing, because no substantial scientific work had ever been done at the site.

"We went in expecting to find nothing," explained Brian Butler, a SIU



Native Americans occupied this tall stone bluff more than 1,000 years ago. But why?

archaeologist who coordinated excavations in 2000 and 2001. "We were flabbergasted with the amount of archaeological information there."

After the entire bluff was test-sampled using small shovel probes, larger excavations of soil revealed that people actually lived here, off and on, for hundreds of years during the Late Woodland era, approximately A.D. 600-1000. As the excavations progressed, archaeologists uncovered relatively undisturbed evidence of ancient structures, complete with stone tools and pottery fragments, all buried amid the well-trampled soils of this state park attraction.

While there were no telltale hidden scrolls or chiseled tablets to indicate why prehistoric people came to this site, a surprising volume of cultural material revealed a pattern of seasonal occupation that suggested, among other things, people who came here were active hunters.

"There seems to be an emphasis on hunting," Butler surmised, noting the numerous projectile points—some for arrows as well as earlier spears—that were recovered added a new wrinkle to the story. Compared with other prehistoric "stone fort" sites, excavations on Giant City's bluff turned up ancient features more closely related to a seasonal hunting camp where hunters would take advantage of game resources, then move on.

After studying the surprisingly intact remnants of human occupation, a lingering question remained unanswered.

Why did prehistoric people bother to climb this formidable incline, essentially in the middle of nowhere, to stack chunks of sandstone and create a wall?

Hassen, as well as the team of archaeologists from SIU, acknowledge this much. The 180-foot wall of rocks barricading the edge of the bluff from the adjoining hillside might remain a cultural mystery forever. No significant clues related to the wall were discovered during the intense archaeological scrutiny, a point consistent with findings elsewhere.

Hassen noted there are a handful of other known stone "forts" scattered throughout the hills of southern Illinois, all of them prehistoric. Despite significant archaeological work at those sites, nothing irrefutably conclusive can be said of their purpose.

"What were they building walls for?" Hassen asked. "Previously, it was assumed walls had a ceremonial or social purpose, opposed to a more everyday use such as a seasonal camp. The evidence found at Giant City—fires, pottery

Archaeologists conducted scientific testing at Giant City's prehistoric site in 2000 and 2001.

(Photos by Mark Wagner.)

and stone tools—shows that people were doing a variety of things on the bluff."

Although the mysterious wall might once have enclosed a seldom-visited retreat used only for special occasions, at some point—or perhaps from the very beginning—those who came here had additional plans.

People lived there. They came and went, year after year, a fact based on the volume of common household debitage found within the stone wall area.

One fact was already understood.

"It wasn't a burial site," Hassen observed, explaining how no burial mounds were reported to exist even when the first European settlers arrived. He added the absence of those burials might have helped steer away artifact and treasure hunters who easily could have destroyed the archaeological integrity of the site years ago, back before Giant City became a protected state park.

Not that locals ignored it. Settlers here were fascinated by the so-called stone fort since the early 1800s, traveling deep into the woods to take a closer look.

An early history of Jackson County included mention of the already famous wall, describing it as a significant feature of local curiosity. In 1878, a local attorney wrote in his description of Makanda Township a summary in which he mentioned the wall and the beliefs about its origin:

"Most notable among all remains in this vicinity, and which defies all attempts at explanation," William F. Hopkins wrote, "is a well-preserved fortification of stone, built on a projecting promontory of sandstone, with walls a hundred feet high, within a half mile of Makanda. This is of very ancient origin, judging by the rough and moss-covered masonry. It was doubtless a place of defense against fierce hordes which finally drove out the original population. But its history must remain forever unwritten, and the praise of its heroes unsung. It is widely known as the "Old Stone Fort," and is a popular place of resort by pleasure-seekers and public gatherings."

Parties and picnics were held at the stone fort by 19th century visitors from Carbondale and surrounding communities. Many early settlers persisted in the belief that the stone wall represented a fortress, or perhaps a ceremonial site or sacred hiding place for hordes of treasure.

"When the rock walls were found in the 1800s, they were looked at as stone forts Indians would hide behind and fight against other people," said Mark Wagner, the SIU archaeologist who directed the Giant City excavations. Other theories, Wagner added, included the notion it was actually early European explorers, such as DeSoto, who created the rock fortresses while making inroads to conquer the land.

"Settlers here just couldn't conceive of Indians building these things," Wagner said.

No such evidence of European construction exists, of course. Nor was there anything to support the early theory the walls defended wondrous secrets, not the least of which was hidden treasure. Fueled by speculation this stone wall must be hiding something, 19th century locals might have even used dynamite to blast away a portion of the sandstone bluff, according to on-site evidence.

But the wall itself and the site survived largely intact. Early settlers probably swiped some of the stones for their own building material, and a 1930s-era reconstruction of the wall likely introduced stones not part of the original structure. Yet the old stone fort stands today as a significant—if mysterious— landmark of national, cultural importance.

"It's a unique aspect of our archaeological record," Butler concluded. "These are constructions that Native Americans built, for reasons that remain obscure to us."

Access to Giant City State Park's "stone fort" (above) was never easy. Rugged sandstone cliffs (right) afforded prehistoric residents an eagle-eye view of the surrounding lands.