

Historical research on suspected Indian burial vaults in Hunterdon County  
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In late 2016, I began donating time photographing and studying the Hunterdon County Historical Societies' collection of American Indian artifacts amassed by Hiram E. Deats and John C. Thatcher in the late 1800s. This research of native peoples in Hunterdon County led to the rediscovery of some ancient stone mounds located atop Cushtunk Mountain. The site is off the beaten path and described in James Snell's *The History of Hunterdon and Somerset Counties, New Jersey* (1881). A 1984 article in the N.Y. Times titled *Searchers Seek Indian Crypt* refers to Snell's work and recent efforts on locating this site.

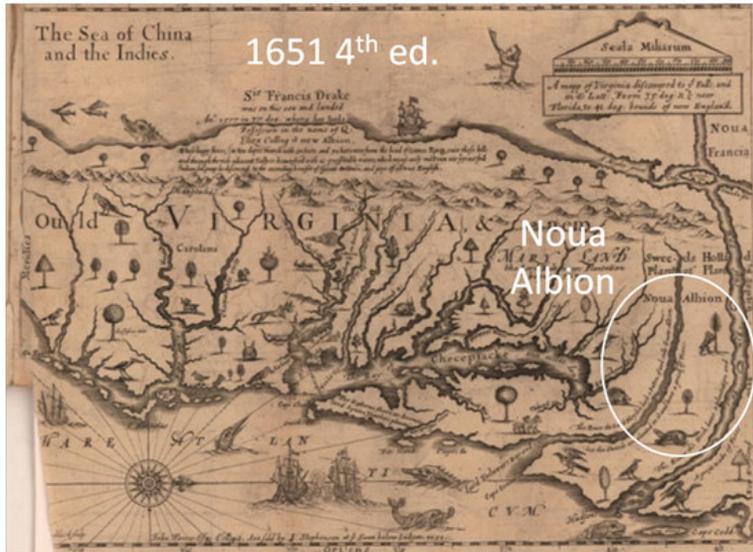


No. 5 looking North  
with Drs. Michael Serfes and  
Donald Monteverde, 04-09-2017



Mark Zdepski looks at  
No. 3 (apparently undisturbed).  
Photograph viewed looking East.

The first recorded English contact with American natives in the Hunterdon region was during 1640 to 1647 when 'Sir Edmund Ployden, a British citizen of Irish heritage, ventured into the province with 500 men to 'plant' and claim the region between the Delaware and Hudson rivers, then mapped as Noua (New) Albion. A journal account of this expedition was kept by Beauchamp Plantagenet, a member of Sir Edmund's expedition into lands along and northeast of the Delaware River that likely included northern reaches of Hunterdon County. As chronicled, 23 'Kings or Chief Commanders' of the region included two Raritan 'Kings' in the north next to 'Hudson's river'. One held a fortress on Mt. Ployden located '20 miles from the Sandhay Sea and 90 miles from the ocean, next to Amara Hill...'. Plantagenet described Mt. Ployden as a "square rock, two miles compass, 150-foot-high, a wall like precipice, a straight entrance easily made invincible, where he keeps 200 for his guard, and under it a flat valley, all plain to sow and plant." The mountain fortress is depicted on the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of an early colonial map of the Virginia colony (Farrier, 1657) that includes Noua Albion (NJ), but lacks details bearing on its location. Ployden's claim to the region and consequently his namesake mountain is missing on modern maps, but many have speculated that the 'kingly seat' could be Hunterdon's Cushtunk Mountain, or Somerset County's Chimney Rock or Neshanic Mountain. Some historians have openly cast doubt on Plantagenet's 'extravagant' and 'imaginary state of the Raritan King', but the Cushtunk mounds are described in Snell's work as "piles of stones in the forest arranged in such a manner as to leave no doubt that they had been placed there, when the trees were small saplings, to mark an Indian burial-place." He also reports that James Alexander (who purchased and surveyed large tracts of land in Hunterdon in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century) found atop the most rugged parts of Cushtunk Mountain: "a large heap of stones piled together with some regularity that formed a rudely-arched vault containing the remains of seven warriors, with their arms, ornaments, and utensils around them.



There were beads of bone and copper, wrist- and armbands of the same metal, and a number of pipes, besides leather leggings and other articles of Indian dress. The general appearance was that they were all warriors of the same tribe, and to each one was affixed the symbolic characters showing the order in which they had succeeded each other. There was nothing in common in these relics with those of the then existing tribe to show that they were the same people. The trees seemed to have grown there since this vault was built, and the probability is that it was the resting-place of seven generations of kings who had roamed up and down here long before the white people came." The stones were reportedly replaced, "fearing lest the Indians, discovering his invasion of this ancient sepulcher, would be incensed against him."

In 1956, Henry Beck (*The Roads of Home: Lanes and Legends of New Jersey*) raised the Cushtunk Mt. - Mt. Ployden link by noting "the bold eminence" of the mountain, but he mistakenly identified the southern rim of Round Valley as the likely site of the long-lost warrior kings. As he stated, "Presumably, the graves must have been opened. Recent wanderings and inquiries have brought forth no trace of these burials." Norman Wittwer (*The Dawn of Hunterdon*; 1964) also pointed out that Professor Pilhower, 'who devoted more than half a century to the study of New Jersey Indians', thought that Round Valley fit the location of Mt. Ployden if Lake Hopatcong is the 'Sandhay Sea' and the distance to Mt. Ployden was taken along water courses rather than a straight course.

Many of the stone mounds that we mapped have been apparently disturbed by past foraging (note the central crease in mound No. 5 above). Whether these mounds are ancient Indian graves or not awaits confirmation through professional archeological work. But in my mind, this site in conjunction with adjacent archeological sites about the headwaters of Rockaway Creek points to the high probability of Cushtunk Mountain being Mt. Ployden and the resting place of the fabled warrior kings, among others. To be continued....