

Crossroads Salamander

by John Burnell



photo: Mark Rea

European explorers in North America encountered a number of mysterious earthworks at various sites in the upper midwest left behind by long-gone peoples. While some of these forms were simple burial mounds, others were found to resemble shapes of creatures -- birds, bears, panthers, turtles and snakes. Since their initial discovery some two centuries ago, numerous professional and academic careers have been expended in an effort to speculate the meaning behind what has come to be termed "effigy mounds."

The occasional presence of charred embers within these mounds and a long tradition of animism among native cul-

tures usually suggests a ceremonial significance to these forms. However, were one to literally apply the circumstances surrounding the creation of a similar structure today to that of the distant past, then one possibility, among the many hundreds previously postulated, could point towards some sort of antediluvian playground.

"Crossroads Salamander," a stone sculpture in Amherst, Massachusetts, has become just that, upon its installation in a public park in 1998. The creation of local landscape designer/builder John Sendelbach, "Crossroads Salamander" is a likeness of the amphibian creature that, with its prehistoric anatomy rendered in dry stone construction, brings to mind an ancient effigy mound.

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The sculpture was initially funded through the Massachusetts Arts Lottery, an arm of the state lottery that distributes money to various localities on a per-capita basis. It was then administered through two other agencies, the Amherst Cultural Council, an umbrella arts organization, and the Amherst Public Art Commission, the latter being a panel of citizens devoted exclusively to the display of public art in the western Massachusetts town. The APAC sponsors an annual program called "Visiting Art," wherein artists are invited to "display and sell works of art not readily exhibited in indoor galleries." The jury-selected pieces are then earmarked for display in several locations on public land in town for a period of one year. The artist receives a \$1500 honorarium, maintains ownership of the piece, and may sell the work without being charged a commission upon the conclusion its year-long display.

Sendelbach, a partner in a local landscape design company, responded to a posting for the proposal and came up with the idea of a salamander sculpture for one of the targeted areas, a common on the north end of town. The salamander "effigy" was inspired by the fact that the town of Amherst went to the expense of building several tunnels underneath a nearby roadway to accommodate a yearly migration of the creatures seeking mates across the way. As for building materials, Sendelbach, who had built extensively with stone in his business, proposed a replica of the amphibian in stone that users of the common could engage in, as both a walkway and use as a bench.

According to several members of the arts commission, Sendelbach's proposed salamander immediately stood out from the other entries, not only for its acknowledgment of the town's relationship with the local salamander but also for its proposed dry stone construction. The latter aspect further enhanced the sculpture's regional identity, as the New England countryside is distinctive for its wealth of dry stone walls.

The plan, upon its unanimous acceptance by the arts commission, did meet a snag or two, most notably from nearby residents of the common who, while not objecting to the aesthetic value of the proposal, felt left out of the decision-making process. Too, safety concerns were aired, as the initial site was felt to be too close to an intersection, necessitating a relocation of the piece to another section of the common. Once these issues were resolved in a series of public meetings in which the artist participated, construction began.

Sendelbach and several crew members staked out the site, removed a layer of subsoil and laid the foundation course on a 6" bed of stone chippings. The succeeding courses were laid in the same manner as a traditional dry stone wall with face stones on both sides sandwiching a

core of packed rubble. The stone, donated by a local quarry, is a bluish-gray- and copper-colored mica schist, a metamorphic rock common in the Berkshire region whose flat, slab-like shape makes it ideal for walkways and provides for ease of stacking. The coiled tail of the salamander is flush with the ground and rises gradually to a level of 18" at the body before descending back to the ground at the creature's head. As the local salamander species is spotted, Sendelbach placed buff-colored glaciated quartzite stones within the courses of schist, and used the same for the eyes. The sculpture is built completely dry, and was examined and approved by the local building department.

Owing in part to immediately accessible aesthetics, all natural construction and a nearby preschool, "Crossroads Salamander" has become, in the words of one Amherst official, "an instant focal point" for the park. Like its distant kin the effigy mounds, it too intends to draw people to its setting. This is especially so amongst children, magnetized by the spiral pathway of the salamander tail. Such drawing power is a testament to the transcendent nature of well-designed and well-wrought stonework -- its ability to stir that portion of the soul containing one's yearnings for a sense of the timeless.

Upon a year of its creation, Amherst residents were solicited for opinions by city officials as to whether the sculpture should be removed as per the original conditions of its installation. The result, according to one of the arts commission members, was an "overwhelming support" to retain the stone salamander as a permanent fixture on the common. Should it endure, its presence could long continue to stimulate imaginations.

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