



A PALISADES MUSEUM OF PREHISTORY EXHIBITION

Rock Art of the Potomac River Fall Line

Made possible with a grant from the
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This three-paneled petroglyph, which Gary Eyler discovered in 1984, is considered by experts to be of Native American origin.

Photo **1** shows figures aligned in an arc. Since daylight casts little defining shadow, the engravings have been enhanced using outlines produced in Photoshop.



In photos **2** and **3**, Scott Silsby makes a tin foil mold using a paintbrush. With that mold, Scott recreates the petroglyph in plaster. Before starting the work, Silsby's preparation ensures the petroglyph is not compromised by the process.





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Photos **4-6** show the individual figures using artificial light at varying angles. To illustrate the artist's intent, a Photoshop treatment blends several shadows into a single image. The glyphs' survival to this day is rather amazing considering their age and exposure to harsh elements.



Several interpretations of the petroglyphs have been offered. The arc may symbolize the path of the sun (or other celestial bodies). Their facing south may also suggest a solar observatory, or something of calendrical value.

Some experts believe the stick figure throwing the spear actually is using an atlatl (a throwing stick used to increase a spear's force).

The atlatl is believed to have gone out of use around 700 AD, when the region's inhabitants adopted the bow and arrow. This petroglyph therefore may precede 700 AD.

Other theories regarding this petroglyph cast it as: a) a training diagram for hunting and combat, b) a chronicle of hunters cooperating, c) a territorial mark showing domain over an area, and d) a boast of physical prowess.



[PHOTOS CAN BE PURCHASED HERE](#)



Photo **7** is a stylized “fish head” petroglyph located on the Potomac River in Great Falls National Park.

The photo was taken at night using a single light source. Carved into exceptionally hard metamorphic rock, the rock’s natural color bands obscures a multiple-shadowing technique. The enormous amount of work to carve such rock leads some experts to believe it may have been done using metal tools – a technology that suggests trade with Europeans.

Similar petroglyphs, undoubtedly of Native American origin, have been found on the lower Susquehanna River, with a concentration of glyphs at Bald Friar, Maryland. If the petroglyph shown is of the “contact period”, it’s likely the work of the Susquehannocks who were pushing down from their traditional territory in the Susquehanna drainage. Certainly the petroglyph carries the ferocity associated with the Susquehannocks and their Iroquois brethren.

The numerous petroglyphs of the lower Susquehanna include concentric circles, parallel lines, simple geometric patterns, cup marks, and radiant sun depictions. By far though, the most distinctive (and possibly most common) motif is that of a stylized face or head. This motif has been referred to variously as a serpent’s head, a fish head, a human head, a fish head with human characteristics, an Iroquoian “crooked face” or “false face”, and even a “bushy head” (the Delaware Indian’s cornhusk mask).

Like those found on the Susquehanna River, the Great Falls petroglyph likely served as a “place marker” revisited during annual fish migrations. [PHOTOS CAN BE PURCHASED HERE](#)



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Photo 8 shows a petroglyph discovered and photographed by Scott Silsby.

In 2005, Silsby discovered this striking glyph on Pimmit Run in Virginia. Scott, who grew up along the Potomac River in Virginia and worked as a naturalist for Arlington County, reported his discovery to the National Park Service. Fearing erosion might damage the artifact, the Park Service removed and transported it to park headquarters at Turkey Run, where it is stored under lock and key, out of public view. The Park Service says its intention is to exhibit the petroglyph in a new visitor's center planned for Great Falls National Park.



To accent the worn engravings, Silsby smeared mud into the rock's depressions and photographed the result. Scott believes the petroglyph may be a spiritual map showing directions in a mystical world.



Photos 9 and 10 show another petroglyph found on Pimmit Run. Although it's amongst historical initials, the rather small glyph may signify an economy of scale enforced by the limitations of working with stone tools. Located near Chain Bridge, the image appears to show a boat with a mast. John Smith, the first European to explore this area, commanded a small vessel called the "shallop" that sailed up the Potomac in 1608. Thwarted by Little Falls, Smith likely moored



his vessel near the mouth of Pimmit Run (today's Chain Bridge). The glyph might be the work of a Native American making a visual record of what he saw, or perhaps the work of a member of Smith's crew. Prefabricated in Europe, Smith's "shallop" was shipped to North America in pieces, probably in two halves that each could be rowed ashore then joined. Could the petroglyph's internal lines imply parts of a seventeenth

century prefabricated vessel? Oars? Of course one must consider a more recent historical probability of the glyph – some possibilities include a survey or property mark.

Photo 10 was taken in daylight and photo 9 at night. Using a multiple-shadowing technique on wet rock, the internal lines are clearly visible in photo 9.



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Images at right show several conspicuous markings on rock suggesting human activity.

Photo **11** shows a rock just upstream from Little Falls. The crude scratches may signify a vessel, with simple vertical lines representing passengers. Prehistoric images of boats with passengers are found around the globe.



Photo **12** shows an unusual mark on a stone in Pimmit Run near Chain Bridge. Its faint form suggests another work of abstract symbolism on Pimmit Run.



Photo **13** shows hole borings in rock where Donaldson Run meets the Potomac River. Unquestionably historic, several of the holes were likely used to anchor bolts running cables to barges used in transporting quarried rock. However, several shallow bore holes resemble the cupules surrounding the Native American petroglyph not far away on Pimmit Run.





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Images at left are the result of natural forces.

Photo **14** is a large boulder of the area's ubiquitous white quartz which often fractures in circular, concentric patterns.



Photo **15** shows lines on a lichen-encrusted rock. They are likely layers of ancient sediments. Since that distant time, the rock has metamorphosed and tilted to a different angle.



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These are examples of what we might consider intrinsically primitive works.

Photo 16 shows a fish petroglyph found on Donaldson Run. The “fish” theme found in Native American art persists into historic times with European Christians, whose religious iconography also included fish images.

Photo 17 shows a rock painting of a buck jumping over a rock. Located in the forest near Fletcher’s Boathouse, this painted image reflects the ancient practice of portraying animals as quarry.

Photo 18 shows an oddity found on Theodore Roosevelt Island. Though primitive, the image is very recent, probably made using a blue marker. It suggests the profound link between the human imagination and the natural world. For the rock art in this exhibit, a huge link in

that chain of creativity is the Potomac River, winding through our human history and our imaginations.

