

Survey and Research Report
on the
Big Rock Rock Shelter



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1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Big Rock Rock Shelter is located at 6500 Elmstone Dr. or 635 meters at c. 229 degrees from the intersection of Endhaven Lane with Elm Lane in southern Mecklenburg County .

2. Name, address, and telephone number of the current owner of the property:

Mecklenburg County

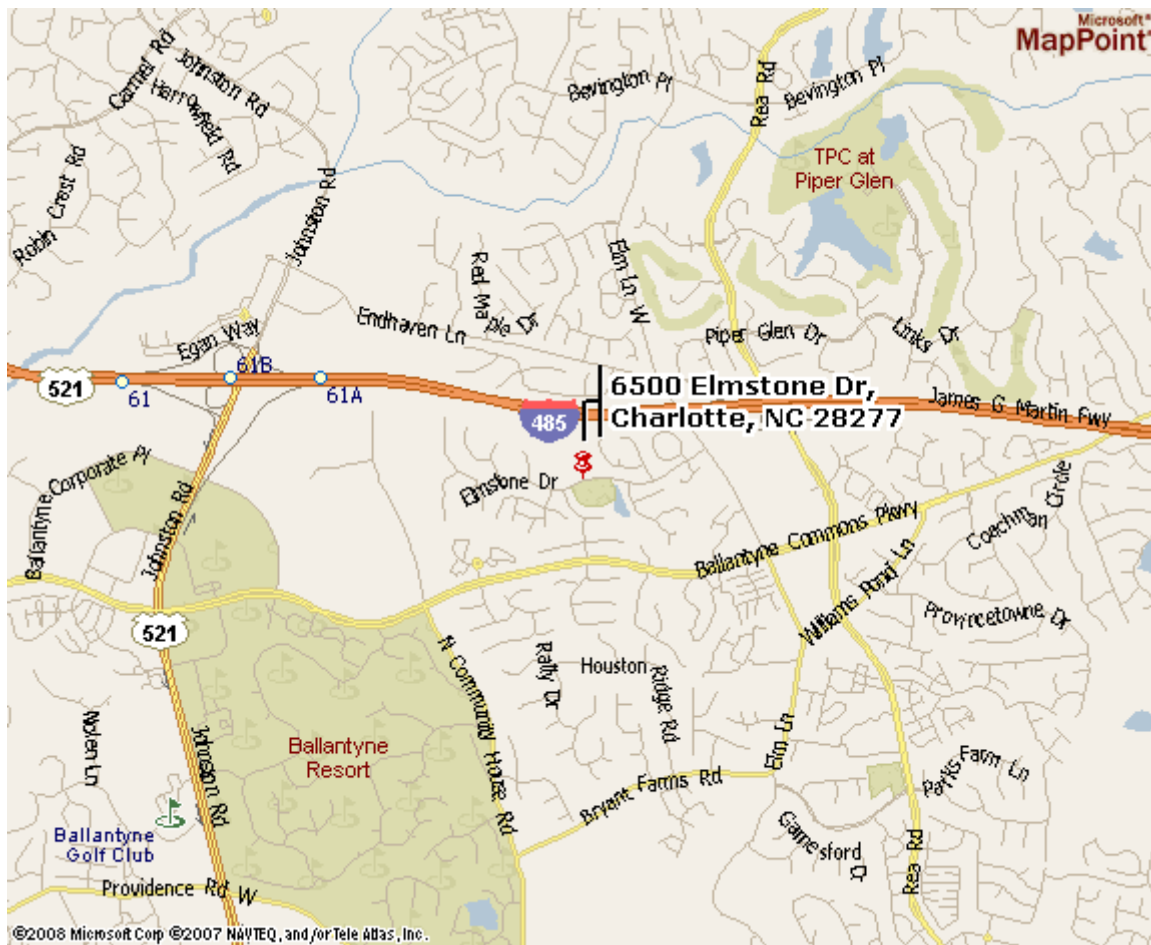
600 East Fourth St., 11th Floor

Charlotte, N.C. 28202-2816

Telephone: 704-336-2472

3. Representative photographs of the property: This report contains representative photographs of the property.

4. A map depicting the location of the property.



5. Current Deed Book Reference To The Property. The most recent deed to this property is found in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 7647, Page 899. The tax parcel number for the property is 223-441-60.

6. A Brief Historical Essay On The Property. This report contains a brief historical sketch of the property prepared by Dr. Dan L. Morrill.

7. A Brief Physical Description Of The Property. This report contains a brief physical description of the property prepared by Dr. Dan L. Morrill.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-400.5.

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission judges that the Big Rock Rock Shelter possesses special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations:

1) The Big Rock Rock Shelter is a locally significant pluton and contains the largest known exposed boulders in Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

2) The Big Rock Rock Shelter has experienced minimal ground disturbance, thereby making it especially important as an archeological resource for both historic and pre-historic artifacts.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission judges that the physical description included in this report demonstrates that the property known as the Big Rock Rock Shelter meets this criterion.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes a designated "historic landmark". The current appraised value of the Big Rock Rock Shelter is \$532,000. The property contains 14 acres and is exempt from the payment of Ad Valorem taxes. The property is zoned R120.

Date of preparation of this report:

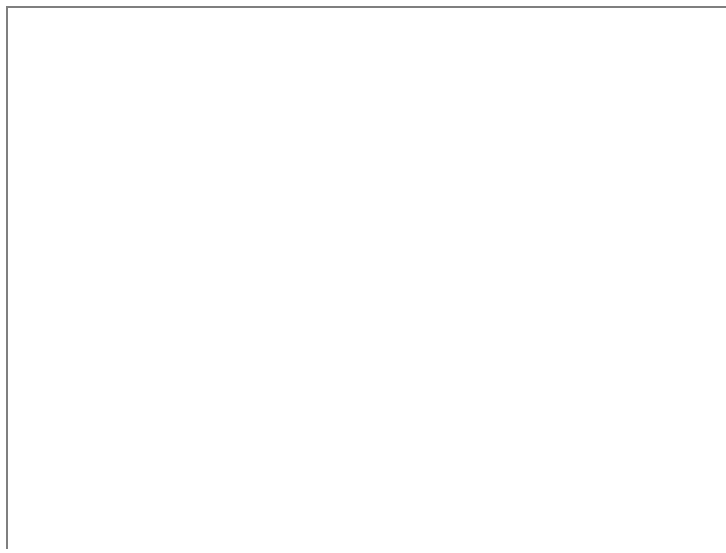
March 4, 2008

Prepared by:

Dr. Dan L. Morrill

A Brief History of the Big Rock Rock Shelter

The Big Rock Rock Shelter is one of many plutons or bodies of intrusive igneous rock that appear in the Piedmont plateau of the two Carolinas. Located on a northwestward-sloping, wooded, rock-strewn or talus hillside near a second order tributary of Four Mile Creek in southern Mecklenburg County, the Big Rock Rock Shelter, like its many counterparts in the region, most notably the Concord Pluton, consists of a cluster of sizeable, randomly distributed granite boulders that have been exposed by weathering over the eons because they have been especially resistant to erosion. Although geological formations of this type are widely dispersed in Mecklenburg County, the Big Rock Rock Shelter is locally significant because it contains the largest known exposed boulders in Charlotte-Mecklenburg and because it has experienced minimal ground disturbance, thereby making it especially important as an archeological resource.



This pluton is off Scaleybark Rd. in Charlotte.



40-acre rock near Pageland, S.C. is one of the region's most visited surface plutons.



The largest erosion resistant promontories are called monadnocks. Several appear in the Piedmont plateau, including Crowders Mountain (pictured here), the Pinnacle, Anderson Mountain, Pilot Mountain, and the Sauratown Mountain.

An archeological investigation of the Big Rock Rock Shelter site was conducted by Dr. Fred W. Fisher in March 1987.¹ No significant material alterations to the place have occurred since that investigation. This study reveals that the Big Rock Rock Shelter and its immediate surroundings contain American Indian habitation debris from as early as 7000 years ago, as well as pre-historic and historic artifacts from more recent periods. The existence of a multilayered or stratified archeological deposit is a rare discovery in this region. To quote from the official report: "Stratified

archeological deposits are rarely found on the interfluvial upland in this region, and the size and form of the outcrop/shelter are unique."² Noteworthy is the fact that a perennial spring rises on the site and has provided a nearby source of water over the centuries. "The proximity of natural shelter, vantage, and a variety of upland resources attracted Indians to the place for several thousand years," writes Fisher.³ Especially rich in terms of archeological resources are dry shelter areas created by fractures in the rocks. Potsherds, sharp-edged waste material, a variety of stone and bone tools, animal bone, shell, plant remains, and a musket ball have been unearthed in the largest shelter area on the site. In 1964, investigators identified one two-sided stone tool or biface as a Morrow Mountain projectile point (c. 5500 to 4500 B.C.E.).



This fracture in the largest of the exposed granite boulders has provided shelter over the centuries for those who have visited the site..

Although there is no physical evidence, it is reasonable to assume that the Big Rock Rock Shelter site was a campsite, rendezvous point, and observation post for the first human beings who inhabited what is now Mecklenburg County. They were Paleo or Ancient Native Americans whose forbearers had migrated from Asia across the Bering Strait made dry by advancing glaciers some 40,000 years ago. These initial nomads reached the Carolina Piedmont about 12,000 years ago. They had wandered over the Blue Ridge and Smoky Mountains in pursuit of big game. Living in highly mobile and lightly equipped groups, the Paleo Indians ambushed their prey,

principally now extinct giant mammals, by thrusting spears into their flanks at close range. Native American materials recovered from the Big Rock Rock Shelter site mostly date from three principal periods: Early Woodland (c. 600-100 B.C.E.), Mississippian (c. 1300-1450 C.E.), and Late Woodland (c. 1650-1850 C.E.).



Graffiti mars the face of the largest boulder at the Big Rock Rock Shelter

The first Native Americans who resided here lived in tiny bands of one or a few families, rarely came in contact with other human beings, and inbred for centuries. They have left no evidence of permanent settlements, burial sites, pottery or agriculture; and, like the great majority of Native Americans, they never developed a written language. Despite the harshness of their existence, Paleo Indians saw their numbers increase in North America. Only the hardest had completed the long trek from Asia, and the cold climate of the Ice Age may have eliminated many disease-causing organisms.

About 10,000 years ago the glaciers started to retreat and deciduous forests began to predominate in this part of North America. Their habitat destroyed or massively altered, some large mammals, like the mammoth, disappeared, while others, like the camel and the horse, moved elsewhere. Paleo Indian traditions began to die out as the Native Americans adapted to their new environment. Archeologists have named the next cultural customs the "Archaic."

Archaic people foraged for plants and hunted smaller game, such as rabbit, squirrel, beaver and deer. Still nomads, they roamed within smaller territories than had their predecessors, because to succeed as hunters and food gatherers they had to become intimately familiar with local plant life and with the habits of indigenous animals. Indians of this era were more technologically proficient than their forbearers. One of their most ingenious inventions was the atlatl, a spear-throwing device that enabled them to kill deer and other large game more easily. They also used grinding stones and mortars to crush nuts and seeds, carved bowls from soapstone, and fashioned their spear points into smooth and shiny projectiles.



This tributary of Four Mile Creek is just northwest of the boulders and has been a convenient water supply.

A momentous event in the history of the Native Americans of this region occurred about 2000 years ago. Indians of the so-called "Woodland" tradition began to practice agriculture and establish permanent settlements. The great majority of the Native Americans who inhabited what is now the Carolina Piedmont, including the Catawbas

of this immediate area, were still following these Woodland customs when the first white men arrived in the 16th century. People of this tradition developed a sophisticated culture, replete with religious ceremonies and complex ethical systems. Their religion was polytheistic, meaning that Woodland Indians believed in many gods. Unlike followers of Judeo-Christianity, who divide existence into heaven and earth or separate celestial and terrestrial realms, Native Americans held that many spirits inhabit *this* world and that they must be appeased. Woodland Indians also had no concept of private property. Land was for use, not for ownership. Native Americans believed that carving up the earth into separate plots and fencing it off was as senseless as parceling out the air or cutting up the water. Such notions would come into direct conflict with the cultural values that white settlers would bring to the Carolina Piedmont.



Example of Catawba pottery.

The first white people to move through this region were merchants who beginning in the mid-1600s began bringing finished goods, such as iron utensils, pots, and axes, on the backs of horses or on their own backs to trade for animal hides prepared by the Catawbans and other Native American tribes. The Catawbans and other inland tribes also traveled widely. Long before the arrival of the white man, Native Americans had established trade routes along footpaths that stretched from the mountains to the sea. White explorers and traders became familiar with this system of reliable, well-established Indian trails and adopted it for their own use.

A fundamental transformation of the Yadkin-Catawba territory occurred in the 18th century when the era of Native American domination of the region came to a precipitous end. European civilization became predominant within a very few years. The initial white settlers drove their covered wagons into the Carolina Piedmont in the 1740s, mostly along ancient Indian trading paths. First in a trickle then a virtual flood,

these immigrants, who were mostly from Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware, came swarming down the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road to establish farms and homestead. Unlike the white traders who had preceded them, these families planned to stay.

The pioneers changed what they found. To them the ancient home of the Native Americans was a wilderness to be tamed. The white settlers built houses, taverns, mills, established ferries, and cleared fields. The Catawbas were powerless to resist. By the 1760s, after only a decade of persistent white occupation, much of the Catawba's lands had been sold, bartered, or lost. The Catawba nation had dwindled to a population of about 1000, for in addition to tribal warfare they suffered from contact with European diseases and vices: chiefly smallpox and whiskey. In 1764, two years after the death of the last famous Catawba chief, King Haiglar, the colonial governor of South Carolina granted the Catawba fifteen square miles on the border of North Carolina and South Carolina. By 1840 the area had dwindled to 652 acres, and there were only seventy-five Catawba left.

Unlike the Native Americans, who had used the Big Rock Rock Shelter site as a meeting place and a place of refuge from the elements, the white settlers transformed the surrounding countryside into farmland and looked upon the Big Rock Rock Shelter as place of lesser importance. There is evidence that quarrying did occur around the southern part of the outcropping during the nineteenth century. The greatest number of non-Native American artifacts identified on the site are glass bottle fragments, mostly pieces of reusable beverage bottles from c. 1920 until the present. Aluminum can pull tabs and plastic ammunition box fragments, as well as disposable thin ware manufactured after c. 1950, also exist on the site. Graffiti painted on the boulders suggests casual visitors frequent the Big Rock Rock Shelter Site today for unsupervised recreational purposes. Mecklenburg County has acquired the property and plans to develop it as an environmentally sensitive park.



1. Fred W. Fisher, "Preliminary Report Big Rock Rockshelter Site," for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission (July 1987). The majority of the information in this report is taken from this source. [Click here to view the report.](#) For an historical overview of Mecklenburg County see Dan L. Morrill, *Historic Charlotte: An Illustrated History of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County*, Historical Publication Network, 2002. For a treatment of the history of Native Americans in North Carolina see Douglas L. Rights, *The American Indian in North Carolina*, John F. Blair Publisher, 1988.

2. Fisher.

3. Fisher

A Brief Physical Description of the Big Rock Rock Shelter



View from the bottomland toward the major rock outcropping.

The Big Rock Rockshelter is located on an approximately 23-acre tract of land bordered by Elmstone Dr. on the south, a curvilinear residential street connecting the Thornhill and Elmstone neighborhoods in southern Mecklenburg County. To the west and east of the tract are suburban homes. Elm Lane, a major local thoroughfare, borders the property on the north. The tract slopes northwestward from its summit on the east and continues across a mostly flat, low-lying area to a tributary of Four Mile Creek. The property is heavily wooded throughout with hardwoods. A dirt pathway leads from Elmstone Dr. northward to the major rock outcroppings, and other pathways of similar configuration meander through the site. The tract contains three principal plutons -- the largest on the hillside just below the summit, where another smaller outcropping occurs, and a third a short distance north of the largest pluton. The tract show no signs of major recent ground disturbance. Graffiti does mar the face of many of the boulders, especially on the north face of the tallest exposed rock. There is also intrusive noise pollution caused by the traffic on Interstate 485, which is just north of the site.