

On the Multiple Lives of Bannerstones: Indigenous North America 6,000 BCE to the Present

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Fig. 1 Double-Notched Butterfly bannerstone, banded-slate, 7.5 cm h., 11.5 cm w., Stark County, Ohio, 6,000-1,000 BCE, American Museum of Natural History DN/305. Author photograph.

- 1 “Objects” and “forces” such as stones, thunder, or stars are known within our ontologies to be sentient and knowing persons.
- 2 Kim TallBear, “An Indigenous Reflection on Working Beyond the Human/Not Human”¹
- 3 *Note: It is an honor to bring images of bannerstones into this present to reflect on ways to see and revere these ancient Indigenous carvings. And though I will at certain times discuss the choices of their makers to bury them with their dead, I do not include in this essay bannerstones that were known to be removed from burials.*
- 4 Looking at Indigenous bannerstones from what is known as North America, their unique shapes and symmetrically drilled holes carved from an array of lithics, from sedimentary stone to quartz, I wonder what stories they are telling (Figs. 1-9). Do their stories begin with the sculptors who made them east of the Mississippi Valley in 6,000 BCE or do they begin four billion years ago

when volcanic heat from the earth's core melted and congealed minerals to form the oldest terrestrial rocks?² Left in middens and along riverbanks or carefully placed in caches or burials, bannerstones remained in the ground until they were tilled or dredged or dug out beginning in the nineteenth century, placed in private and public collections throughout Eastern North America, a rare few on display, most others stored in boxes, and others perhaps now or one day reburied. When we follow the stones that began before their carving and remain long after, the shifting meaning of bannerstones comes to light for the living and the dead.



Fig. 2 Wisconsin Wing bannerstone, porphyry granite, 87 cm h., 12.1 cm w., Wapello County, Iowa, 6,000-1,000 BCE, National Museum of Natural History A26977. Author photograph.



Fig. 3 Quartz Butterfly bannerstone, ferruginous quartz, 6.4 cm h., 10 cm w., Illinois, 6,000- 1,000 BCE, National Museum of Natural History A30191. Author photograph.



Fig. 4 Knobbed Lunate bannerstone, banded slate, 7.3 cm h., 15.8 cm w., Onondaga County, New York, 6,000-1,000 BCE, American Museum of Natural History 13/105. Author photograph.



Fig. 5 Crescent bannerstone, serpentinite, 4 cm h., 11.1 cm w., Madison County, Virginia, 6,000-1,000 BCE, National Museum of Natural History A61857. Author photograph.



Fig. 6 Knobbed Lunate bannerstone, banded slate, 8.7 cm h., 18.3 cm w., Cabell County, West Virginia, 6,000-1,000 BCE, National Museum of Natural History A173605. Author photograph.



Fig. 7 Tubular bannerstone, banded slate, 6.5 cm h., 4.2 cm w., Licking and Knox Counties, Ohio, 6,000-1,000 BCE, Ohio History Connection A 66/000007.001. Author photograph.



Fig. 8 Hourglass bannerstone, ferruginous quartz, 8.4 cm h., 6.2 cm w., Howard County, Missouri, 6,000-1,000 BCE, National Museum of Natural History A62033. Author photograph.



Fig. 9 Fluted Ball bannerstone, banded slate, Warren County, Ohio, 4.8 cm h., 5.5 cm w., 6,000-1,000 BCE, National Museum of Natural History A22389. Author photograph.

- 5 From the Great Lakes to the Florida Panhandle and from the Mississippi Valley to the Atlantic, the bannerstone makers carved these distinctive stones, most of which can be held in the palm of a hand, between 6,000 and 1,000 BCE..³ They were predominantly hunters and gatherers with no evidence of social divisions, making bannerstones not for a ruling elite, but for themselves. Choosing to live nomadically or in settled communities at places like Poverty Point, Louisiana or Indian Knoll, Kentucky, their horticulture consisted of augmenting the domestic growth of edible flora.⁴ With their mindful selection of lithics, they were attentive to the deep-time geologic formation of rocks themselves (Figs. 10-13). From warm soft-brown slate, to chalk white limestone, to speckled grey gabbro, to marbled green serpentine, to iron-infused quartz—the makers chose stones based on their color and geologic composition, which would have been linked in their minds and memory to particular places in the land.



Fig. 10 Rectangular unfinished bannerstone detail, gabbro, Chattahoochee River, Alabama, 6,000-1,000 BCE, American Museum of Natural History 2/1919. Author photograph.



Fig. 11 Shield bannerstone detail, banded slate, Jefferson County, New York, 6,000-1,000 BCE, American Museum of Natural History 1/1702. Author photograph.



Fig. 12 Quartz Butterfly bannerstone detail, ferruginous quartz, Illinois, 6,000-1,000 BCE, National Museum of Natural History A30191. Author photograph.



Fig. 13 Crescent bannerstone detail, serpentinite, Madison County, Virginia, 6,000-1,000 BCE, National Museum of Natural A61857. Author photograph.

- 6 After chipping raw lithic material from an outcrop on the face of a mountain or picking up a stone found on the ground, the sculptor would take into their hand a piece of granite worn and pebbled by a river to use as a hammerstone to peck, grind, transform, and polish the surface of bannerstones into the shape they had imagined—making a rock sculpture with rock. Slow, repetitive, and percussive, the labor would envelope the sculptor, echoing out their intention into the surroundings. Sometimes they might work alone, at other times they would work in a circle of syncopated sound alongside flint-nappers and ax-makers. And though the term Stone Age has often been used pejoratively, it is most apt to describe this milieu where stone was the most ubiquitous ever-present material to shape and be shaped. Stone was used for making tools, ornaments, and was a material in which to store memories and reflect identity, not unlike in our digital age where our cell phones have become the intermediaries of our self-fashioning and experience.



Fig. 14 Curved Pick bannerstone, banded slate, 2.7 cm h., 13.6 cm w.; Glenn Falls, New York, 6,000-1,000 BCE, American Museum of Natural History DN/12, diagonal view. Author photograph.



Fig. 15 Curved Pick bannerstone, banded slate, 2.7 cm h., 13.6 cm w.; Glenn Falls, New York, 6,000-1,000 BCE, American Museum of Natural History DN/128, front and back view. Author photograph.

- 7 With this Curved Pick bannerstone found in Glen Falls, New York one can imagine how the sculptor delighted in the naturally occurring dark banding of the metamorphic slate interrupted by the white trace fossil inclusion of a burrowing worm (Figs. 14-15).⁵ To highlight the symmetry of their composition the sculptor carved a central ridge along the axis of the perforation, accentuating and bringing into play the white inclusion and banding of the stone revealing aspects of Indigenous awareness of fossils as traces of life from a far distant past.⁶ On the other side of this work, the natural banding radiating out from the center is thinner, attracting and challenging the sculptor to compose both sides into a single composition. In the pre-thought of imagining and in their making, bannerstones were and remain visual displays of their makers' individual stone carving acuity and fascination with the natural world.



Fig. 16 Southern Ovate unfinished bannerstone, igneous, coarse-grained alkaline, 11.5 cm h., 10.3 cm w., Habersham County, Georgia, 6,000-1,000 BCE, American Museum of Natural History 2/2205. Author photograph.



Fig. 17 Southern Ovate unfinished bannerstone, igneous, coarse-grained alkaline, 11.5 cm h., 10.3 cm w., Habersham County, Georgia, 6,000-1,000 BCE, American Museum of Natural History 2/2205. Author photograph.

- 8 To drill a hole into stone the sculptor would place hollow cane between their hands, rubbing back and forth, adding bits of sand to bite into and perforate the surface.⁷ This could take hours, days, or even weeks of work depending on the size or hardness of the bannerstone, some of which, like this igneous Southern Ovate, were left unfinished with the hole only partially drilled (Figs. 16-17).⁸ Many similar bannerstones were found along the Savannah River in Georgia where coarse-grained igneous rock is plentiful. As unfinished or finished bannerstones, these carvings are also found hundreds of miles south in Florida where rock of this kind does not exist, leaving an ancient trace of long-distance trade of specific bannerstone forms and materials. With this diorite Southern Ovate found in Hardee County, Florida we know the stone was carried hundreds of miles south from Georgia (Figs. 17-18). One can only imagine if it was the sculptor there or in Florida who meticulously carved and polished the semi-circular thinned out flanges or placed the delicate double trough design above the perforation. In the deep south of the lower Mississippi, in places like the densely populated city of Poverty Point there are no local sources of stone due to the force of the river on the land breaking lithics into sand and silt.⁹ Yet even here the inhabitants brought in lithic material from great distances to make bannerstones, demonstrating their essential importance to ancient Indigenous life on the North American continent.¹⁰



Fig. 18 Southern Ovate bannerstone, diorite, Hardee County, Florida, 13 cm h., 14 cm w., 6,000-1,000 BCE, National Museum of Natural History A317061. Author photograph.



Fig. 19 Southern Ovate bannerstone, diorite, Hardee County, Florida, 13 cm h., 14 cm w., 6,000-1,000 BCE, National Museum of Natural History A317061. Author photograph.

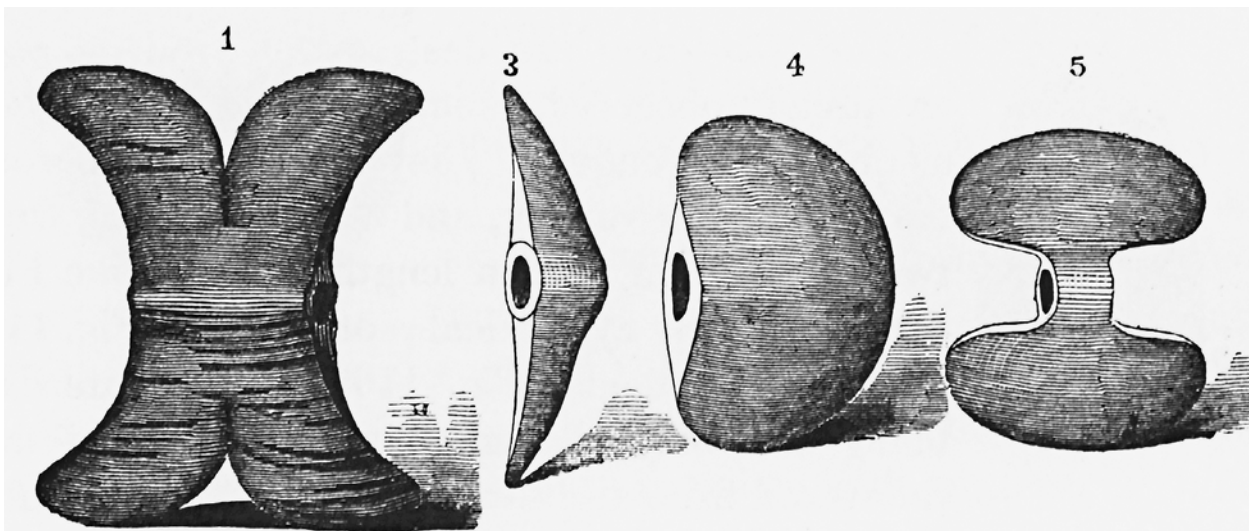


FIG. 114.

Fig. 20 Implements. Ephraim G. Squier and Edwin H. Davis, *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1848), fig. 114.

9 With several thousand bannerstones currently in public and private collections, their documented history begins in the first Smithsonian publication of 1848 entitled the *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* (Fig. 20).¹¹ Here, Ephraim G. Squier and Edwin H. Davis included wood engravings of these anomalous carvings at that time misnamed as “hatchets,” with the authors noting they would be too fragile in material and structure to be used in this manner.¹² Thirty years later, due to their symmetrical shape and centrally drilled holes, collectors and scholars assumed they were placed on wooden rods hoisted in the air as “banners” leading to the term “bannerstone” that has been used ever since.¹³ Studied and interpreted through the logic and lens of the burgeoning field of archaeology, as if anxious in the face of such visual diversity and

expressiveness of form, archeologists sought to define a specific use for bannerstones including theories of them as seizures placed between the knots of fishing nets or as weights placed on the wooden shafts of throwing sticks for hunting known by the Nahuatl term *atlatl*, a tool used for thousands of years to extend the flight and thrust of a spear well before the invention of the bow and arrow.¹⁴ These interpretations raise as many questions as they may appear to answer. They do not explain away the making and importance of these finely sculpted polished bannerstones many of which are too small, like the Double Notched Butterfly found in Medina County Ohio weighing 46 grams or too large, like the Double Notched Ovate found in Branch County Michigan weighing 500 grams, to be used as net sizars or hafted onto an *atlatl* (Figs. 21-22), too large to be used as net sizars or hafted onto an *atlatl*.



Fig. 21 Double Notched Butterfly bannerstone, banded slate, Medina County, Ohio, 5 cm h., 6.5 cm w., 46 grams, American Museum of Natural History T/124. Author photograph.



Fig. 22 Double Notched Ovate bannerstone, banded slate, Branch County, Michigan, 15.2 cm h., 12.7 cm w., 500 grams, The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2011.154.14. Author photograph.

¹⁰ Ninety years after the Smithsonian publication, in a 1939 detailed book length study titled *Banner-stones of the North American Indian*, Byron Knoblock published maps indicating where bannerstones were made across Eastern North America with the heartland at the fulcrum where the Mississippi and Ohio rivers meet (Fig. 23). Knoblock also created a detailed typology naming twenty-four bannerstone shapes acknowledging that there were many exceptions and sub-categories that attest to the fluid and experimental nature of these Indigenous carvings where no two bannerstones are the same (Fig. 24).¹⁵

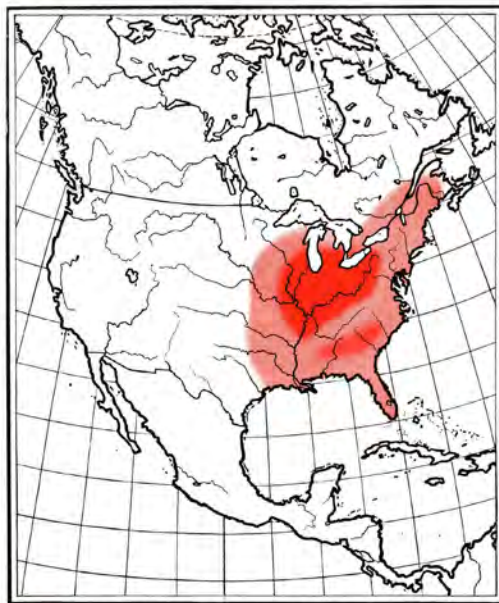


PLATE 2. Map of North America showing the distribution of banner-stones.
 ● Light shading indicates the entire Bannerstone Area.
 ● Medium shading indicates the Primary Area, where first banner-stones were made.
 ● Dark shading indicates the Type Area in which the majority of banner-stones reached their highest development, and in which approximately 60 per cent occur.

Fig. 23 Map of North America showing the distribution of banner-stones. Byron Knoblock, *Banner-stones of the North American Indian* (LaGrange: Byron Knoblock, 1939), pl. 2; compilation of shapes from pls. 44- 55.



Fig. 24 Bannerstone Typology of Twenty-four Shapes. Byron Knoblock, *Banner-stones of the North American Indian* (LaGrange: Byron Knoblock, 1939), pl. 2; compilation of shapes from pls. 44- 55.

- 11 Beyond the excavating and explaining, bannerstones remain exquisite individual sculptural expressions that were made and valued for over 5,000 years. Inexplicably, after 1000 BCE bannerstones were no longer made nor did they live on as actively used lithics or as heirloom objects of successive Indigenous communities, pointing to their specific importance within a particular place and time. What they meant to the bannerstone makers and the community of people who saw and valued them and why they stopped making them remains elusive, unknown, or unknowable. In the realm of the everyday, with their perforated holes meant for some kind of assemblage, what did they adorn? Did people wear bannerstones on their bodies or hoist them in procession? On the other side of the ephemeral every day, we do know what people did with bannerstones beneath the ground. Into that ground, held fast, some were left in middens or along the banks of a river, others they carefully placed in caches or, with great intention, buried with the dead. Many of these bannerstone makers and their communities mindfully placed these carved stones in the ground, anchoring something of themselves as they seasonally left and returned with an echo of their placement in their memory. As part of the life cycle of these carvings, their makers intentionally broke a vast number of bannerstones, cleaved in half at the spine where they are most fragile due to the thin walls of the drilled perforations (Figs. 25-27). Archaeologists and historians of the ancient Americas have often identified this practice as “ritually killing” an object. Rather than killing, which implies an abrupt end, the act of breaking perhaps is more a transformation of the bannerstone, pointing to Indigenous concepts about the materiality of stone and the act of breaking, not to be killed or forgotten, but to be remembered as alive and active.



Fig. 25 Double Edged bannerstone fragment, metamorphic rock, Allen County, Indiana, 6,000-1,000 BCE, American Museum of Natural History 20.1/9172. Author photograph.



Fig. 26 Geniculate bannerstone fragment, banded slate, AMNH 9/34; Butterfly fragment, banded slate, Saratoga County, New York, 6,000-1,000 BCE, American Museum of Natural History 20.1/5818. Author photograph.



Fig. 27 Double Crescent bannerstone, banded slate, Seneca County, Ohio, 6,000- 1,000 BCE, American Museum of Natural History DM/333. Author photograph.

12 Looking at a broken Single-Notched Butterfly bannerstone one sees that this carving was made by an agile sculptor (Fig. 28). To first find and then sculpt the banded slate into this butterfly-like shape, evoking in stone a reference to flight with wings no more than a centimeter at their widest and a millimeter at their edge, the sculptor was testing and skillfully playing with the limits of material and form, seeing how far they could go with and against the grain of slate in terms of symmetry, refinement, and grace. To then, with a single well-aimed blow to the spine, break the stone in half to place it in a cache with other objects or bury with a loved one adds another layer to the life of the bannerstone, bringing it into the work of memory or the woeful work of mourning. Experiences, perceptions, and thoughts are fleeting. When such important, though fleeting, elements are encoded into bannerstones these lithic compositions hold their shape indefinitely, bringing something more lasting with the touch of the world of the present into the ground across time.



Fig. 28 Single-Notched Butterfly bannerstone, banded slate, 9.6 cm h., 15 cm w., Wynadot, Ohio, 6,000-1,000 BCE, American Museum of Natural History DM-1290. Author photograph.

13 When farmers, miners, and railway workers of the nineteenth century found bannerstones, whole or broken, they brought many of them to sell for a few dollars to the newly formed natural history museums across the Eastern United States. On August 28, 1883, A. E. Douglass bought both pieces of this broken Single Notched Butterfly bannerstone along with one hundred and eighty-two other Native American objects from W. E. Woodard (Figs. 29-30). The sale, for \$2.80, of the two pieces of the bannerstone is recorded on page 166 of the museum ledger when Douglass's collection of over twenty thousand objects was donated to the American Museum of Natural History.¹⁶ Each piece was then marked in red with a distinctive "D" for Douglass enclosed in a diamond and given a unique accession indicator, in this case "M1290" is written in white. Below the accession number on each wing of the stone the cataloguer placed a number "2" to indicate that this is one of two pieces with "Wyandot County, Ohio," where it was reportedly found, which is written beneath. Raw rock found, selected, carved into bannerstones, many placed into the ground by their makers—how inexplicably bewildering that several millennia later they would be removed from that ground with the vast majority of them placed, sequestered and silenced, in the storerooms of institutions founded in the nineteenth century.

No.	Description	Qty	Loc.	Price
1279	Bannerstone	67	Wyandot Co. O.	2.80
1280	"	68	"	2.80
1281	"	69	Cutleria	2.80
1282	"	70	"	2.80
1283	"	71	"	2.80
1284	"	72	Wyandot	2.80
1285	"	73	Wood	2.80
1286	"	74	"	2.80
1287	"	75	Defiance	2.80
1288	"	76	"	2.80
1289	"	77	"	2.80
1290	"	78	Wyandot	2.80
1291	Bird Arrow	182	Wyandot	7.40
1292	"	89	Wyandot	2.40
1293	"	90	Wyandot	2.40
1294	"	91	Wood	1.00
1295	"	92	Wyandot	6.20
1296	"	93	Wyandot	6.60
1297	"	94	Wyandot	3.20
1298	"	95	Wyandot	2.80
1299	"	107	"	2.40
1300	Bird Arrow	100	Wyandot	10.00
1301	"	96	"	1.00
1302	"	97	"	3.20
1303	Beady Stone	101	"	8.00
1304	Beady Stone	102	Defiance	1.60
1305	Copper Chisel	116	Wyandot	8.00
1306	"	117	Defiance	12.00
1307	Ground Stone	124	Wyandot	1.20
1308	"	125	"	1.20

Fig. 29 AMNH Ledger Book, page 166.

In the course of agrarian, industrial, or intellectual pursuits, these stone carvings have been brought into distinctly different contexts. Markings in red and off-white, even the inadvertent inked fingerprint visible to the left of the “D” form a layer that intrudes and persists as a colonial and contemporary component of the life of these bannerstones.

14 Since the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, advocated and fought for by Native Americans, the burial remains and funerary objects of Indigenous ancestors in the territories currently defined as the United States are no longer there for the taking for the collector’s shelf, college laboratory, or museum case. These remains and objects, including those bannerstones that were buried with the dead are protected from being disturbed unless permission has been granted by Native American Tribes or lineal descendants.¹⁷ In the newly revised NAGPRA laws of January 2024 who qualifies as a “lineal descendant” is not just a matter of tribal affiliation, but now “requires deference to Native American traditional knowledge,” a much more complex and subtle point of reference.¹⁸ This shift in the law recognizes ancient and living Native American epistemological perspectives about who Native Americans are and what they have made and continue to make into and beyond the present.

15 In one particular case, in 2020, a few years before the publication of the revised NAGPRA laws, the William Webb Museum in Kentucky removed all photographs of the 55,000 objects, many of them funerary, that Webb excavated at Indian Knoll in 1936 and will no longer allow scholars to study these remains and objects “until legal compliance under NAGPRA has been achieved.”¹⁹ What “legal compliance with NAGPRA” specifically means for remains dating back to 4,050 BCE is profoundly complex. With the long history of colonial and United States government violence and especially with the ratification of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, many of the Native American families and tribes in areas where bannerstones had been made were forced to move west of the Mississippi further disassociating them from ancestral lands.²⁰ How the William Webb museum will choose to follow NAGPRA, which Native communities the museum will reach out to, and what those communities will choose to do with the burial remains of their ancestors taken from Indian Knoll will set a precedent unfolding into the present.

16 Into the shell mound at Indian Knoll ancient Indigenous people placed whole and intentionally broken bannerstones on or next to the bodies of children, women, and men. Here we know that the people who made these bannerstones placed them in acts of burial and mourning to create connections that were meant to remain as long as the life of stone itself. When and however



Fig.30 Single-Notched Butterfly bannerstone detail, banded slate, 9.6 cm h., 15 cm w., Wynadot, Ohio, 6,000-1,000 BCE, American Museum of Natural History DM-1290. Author photograph.

possible, these funerary bannerstones are to be repatriated, and if so chosen, literally returned to the ground similar to the way the remains of the Ancient One known as Kennewick Man was reburied on February 18, 2017 in an undisclosed location along the Columbia river in the state of Washington by two hundred members of the Colombia Plateau tribes.²¹ Whatever the aims of post- Enlightenment science or the elucidating potential of the exhibition of objects, these ideological motivations must be abandoned or rethought in light of the desires, memories, practices, and philosophical underpinnings of Indigenous peoples.

- 17 NAGPRA creates clear guidelines for the return and care of funerary remains and objects and for demonstratively sacred objects of Native American cultural patrimony. The vast number of the several thousand bannerstones in museums fall into neither category. They remain in a free fall or suspension; few of them are on display or known to Indigenous people of North America as ancestral lithic carvings. In response to their obscurity, I began in 2016 to photograph them, placing all images and metadata on an open-source website entitled the Bannerstone Project supported by the Department of the History of Art and the College Library of the Fashion Institute of Technology and funded by the State University of New York.²² With this website we seek to bring bannerstones, at least on the visual level, out of their archival boxes to reflect upon the ontological arc of these carved stones: opening a possibility of listening to these works, which are amongst the most ancient stone carvings on the continent. Photography, a nineteenth-century technology and practice, like archaeology, has its own history and logic in how it represents people, objects, and moments. The photographic image can cut in many directions, further alienating objects from their makers or their contexts. In his study of bannerstones, Knoblock reproduced thousands of images of the stones he photographed in collections across the Northeast. In these black and white images, usually presenting one view of each stone lined up in neatly arranged categories of shapes, the bannerstones themselves appear lifeless, enclosed in the photographic image similar to the way they lay enclosed in museum boxes.
- 18 When I began to photograph bannerstones in the American Museum of Natural History in the spring of 2017 I wanted to learn from Knoblock, searching for a different way to engage that would be less encyclopedic and more responsive to the stones themselves. Given the privilege to hold them and look at them for long periods of time, I could feel subtle variations in their sculptured structure that I did not readily see with my eyes. Photographing at first on a tripod with studio lighting did not reveal the articulated details of the carvings that my hand could apprehend. There was something about the rigidity of the tripod that superimposed a Cartesian-like grid over the surface of the bannerstones. Straight on, back to front we see a flattened representation meant for a kind of quick consumption of the object. When I took the camera off the tripod, using strobe lighting, I was free; I could begin to follow the stone where the sculptor was leading. It was then, when I knelt down and photographed at an angle with raking light, that I saw how the sculptor had ground two separate planes that met at the center of the surface of each flange of this Curved Pick bannerstone (Fig. 31). Photographing from above at another angle revealed how the sculptor ground down the area surrounding the top perforation to create diverse modulations in the stone surface (Fig. 32).



Fig. 31 Curved Pick bannerstone, banded slate, 2.7 cm h., 13.6 cm w., Glenn Falls, New York, 6,000-1,000 BCE, American Museum of Natural History DN/12, top and bottom views. Author photograph.



Fig. 32 Curved Pick bannerstone, banded slate, 2.7 cm h., 13.6 cm w., Glenn Falls, New York, 6,000-1,000 BCE, American Museum of Natural History DN/12, top and bottom views. Author photograph.

- 19 Photographing in this way invited and revealed a different kind of attention that can bring us into the haptic texture of bannerstones with grooves from grinding with a hammerstone and sand visible on the stone surface of a Shield slate bannerstone found in Jefferson County, New York (Figs. 33-34). Looking closely and quietly these polish scratch marks were the indexical trace of the person who imagined and made this work, reminding me of the handprints we see in paleolithic cave paintings from South America, Spain, and France.



Fig. 33 Shield bannerstone, banded slate, 12.5cm h., 9.7 cm w., Jefferson County, New York, 6,000-1,000 BCE, American Museum of Natural History 1/1702. Author photograph.

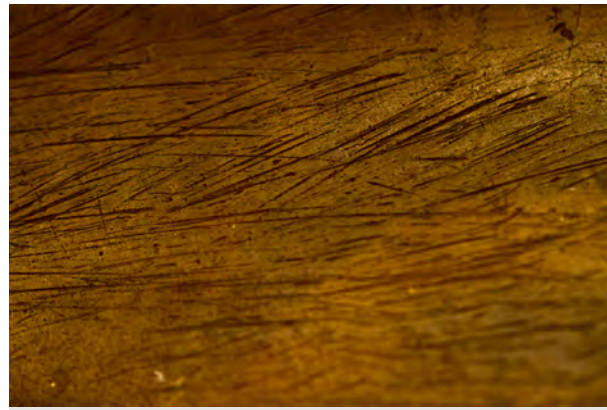


Fig. 34 Shield bannerstone, banded slate, 12.5cm h., 9.7 cm w., Jefferson County, New York, 6,000-1,000 BCE, American Museum of Natural History 1/1702. Author photograph.

²⁰ Photographing this Butterfly bannerstone found in Megis County, Ohio with its wide thin flanges and gently sloping rounded ridge at the perforation brings us to where the sculptor has centered their composition on the natural banding of the stone, thinning the flanges out from the thicker perforation (Figs. 35-36). Working in this manner the sculptor creates the appearance of concentric undulating waves across the surface of the slate that break into the present, a dynamic visual interplay for the past, evoking an echo of water in stone. To look in slow time we can focus on one particular Quartz Hourglass bannerstone, attentive to the massive iron inclusions burst through with luminous white patches of crystal formations (Figs. 37-39). The structural and chromatic elements of the stone would have attracted the sculptor who then with great patience—given the relative hardness of quartz—would have chosen and carved one side with a slopping flat surface and the other side with a gentle triangular pitch. From top to bottom they then carved the two sides into carefully calibrated curves. The precise central perforation would have taken weeks or months to complete.



Fig. 35 Butterfly bannerstone, banded slate, 8.8 cm h., 19.6 cm w., Megis County, Ohio, 6,000-1,000 BCE, Ohio History Connection A 56/000070. Author photograph.



Fig. 36 Butterfly bannerstone, banded slate, 8.8 cm h., 19.6 cm w., Megis County, Ohio, 6,000-1,000 BCE, Ohio History Connection A 56/000070. Author photograph.

- 21 Looking, one can begin to imagine the sculptor’s desire to riff on the aesthetic beauty of naturally formed lithics linking people to outcrops whether close to where they lived or traded from afar, associating place with a stone that moved through the land, accompanying their bodies above and into the ground. Works like these were meant by their makers to be seen as testaments to what mattered to them on physical and metaphysical levels about the world they lived within and experienced. The stones and their sculpted shapes were chosen for the moment and chosen for their lasting qualities, lasting in and beyond their making, testaments to experiences and memories encoded into the lithic material. Simply said, these photographs are not bannerstones; they are literally metaphors, things that stand in for something they are not, initiating a relation not for producing knowledge about bannerstones but rather seeking to engage with the knowledge that is in them.
- 22 Though I am aware of the limitations of photography, even of photography that pushes against the proscriptions and algorithms of digital mechanical reproduction, photography is the visual coinage of our time, shaping and making possible the shared contemporary act of approaching bannerstones that reveal something about the lives of people who lived on the North American continent eight thousand years ago, transporting sparks of thought and agency that lead to their making. In his 1962 study, *The Shape of Time*, George Kubler compares the astronomer to the historian. “Both” he writes, “are concerned with appearances noted in the present but occurring in the past.”²³ He goes on to describe the things of the past as having a “self-signal” that “can be paraphrased as” a “mute existential declaration.”²⁴ In a certain way Kubler is speaking directly to the enigma of bannerstones and to our predicament as we regard them. Bannerstones refer to themselves. They have what Kubler calls a “self-signal” that in and of themselves declares meaning.



Fig. 37 Hourglass bannerstone, ferruginous quartz, 13.3 cm h., 7.6 cm w. Fulton County, Illinois, 6,000 BCE-1,000 BCE, The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2011.154.15. Author photograph.



Fig. 38 Hourglass bannerstone, ferruginous quartz, 13.3 cm h., 7.6 cm w. Fulton County, Illinois, 6,000 BCE-1,000 BCE, The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2011.154.15. Author photograph.



Fig. 39 Hourglass bannerstone, ferruginous quartz, 13.3 cm h., 7.6 cm w. Fulton County, Illinois, 6,000 BCE-1,000 BCE, The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2011.154.15. Author photograph.

To date, I have photographed 121 bannerstones chosen from the American Museum of Natural History, the National Museum of Natural History, the Ohio History Connection, and the Metropolitan Museum collections. As of September 2024, in the midst of writing this essay, the Bannerstone Project staff that I work with have removed all images and metadata of four bannerstones from the American Museum of Natural History and three plaster cast replicas of these stones in the National Museum of Natural History from the *Bannerstone Project*.²⁵ What makes these bannerstones different from the others is that they were removed by A. E. Douglass in 1871 from a mound in a separate location from, though in proximity to, Indigenous archaic period burials.²⁶ Seeking to follow both the spirit and the letter of the new NAGPRA regulations, and with advice from the AMNH staff, we are currently reaching out to the Seminole Tribe of Florida, Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, Miccosukee Tribe of Indians, and the Muscogee Nation of the Tomoko Creek region where these bannerstones were originally cached over 5,000 years ago. Decisions that any one of these tribes may make will determine whether these bannerstones may remain in the museum, be photographed, or given to the tribes to rebury or revere in whatever manner they choose. This precisely is the point of the new NAGPRA regulations: to begin conversations between academics, museums, and tribal communities where decision-making is weighted toward Indigenous perspectives on multiple levels including the question of what is sacred.



Fig. 40 Audie Murray (Métis), *Chi Fii Embraces the Old Ones*, Installation with digital photographs printed on cloth vinyl, 144" x 72" (365.8 x 182.9 cm) each, and lite candles, 2021. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

- 24 In her writing about the red stone found in quarries in southeastern Minnesota and used for centuries by Indigenous carvers to make ceremonial pipes, Kim TallBear writes that the stone is considered “an artifact of ‘blood’ of a people . . . spoken of as a relative.”²⁷ Definition by taxonomies and geological science risks “deanimating the red stone,” removing its life so intertwined with prayers and social relations where the making, holding, and smoking of pipes is an interactive communal ongoing practice.²⁸ Similarly, thinking across time into the Indigenous past, Michif artist Audie Murray in her process-based multimedia installations takes us even further beyond the logic of extraction and catalogs (Fig. 40).
- 25 In her 2021 installation at the Nanaimo Art Gallery, entitled *Chi Fii Embraces the Old Ones*, she suspends on the wall two 144 x 72-inch digital photographs printed onto cloth vinyl whose lower edge rests, slightly folded, on the ground. While these images are in the gallery, Murray places two candles in front of each photograph with the warm light of the flame reflecting off their surfaces. With the placement of candles, she creates an altar, inviting the viewer into a flickering active process of engagement. In a conversation we had in the summer of 2024, Murray told me how each photograph represents a hammer stone, one her father found near their home in Regina and the other found by her uncle in a prairie field in Saskatchewan. Both were gifted to her and remain in her home or studio. For Murray, these are not stones that she owns, but rather living embodiments of the past that have been placed in her care.²⁹ Murray places one of the hammer stones on a comfortable plush silver-white rabbit fur, the other on a dark animal skin. Around each hammer stone Murray wraps a beaded daisy chain she calls *Chi Fii*, evocative of the wild daisies that grow in the nearby fields. *Chi Fii* in the Michif dialect of the Métis people of the Northern United States and Southern Canada translates as “little girl,” a nickname Murray shared with her great grandmother. In her poem “Dream,” Murray writes:
- I am beading a long daisy chain to remind myself of what it
was like to be a child; only to realize the daisy chain is me, or a
representation of a past self. The daisy chain is chi fii.
- As I wrap chi fii around hammer stone rocks, I am hugging the
old ones. They work so hard, they are so old. They deserve to be
cared for.³⁰

- 26 The hammer stones, beads, and fur, the intimate physical objects that bind Murray to intergenerational multiplicities of Indigenous lives are beyond the reach of the excavator or collector. Instead, she gives us the photograph, and through the photographic medium she keeps safe and cares for the “old ones,” her ancestors and the stones themselves, cared for and seen at the same time, inviting us to witness a conversation she initiates between materials that speak to one another and to us.

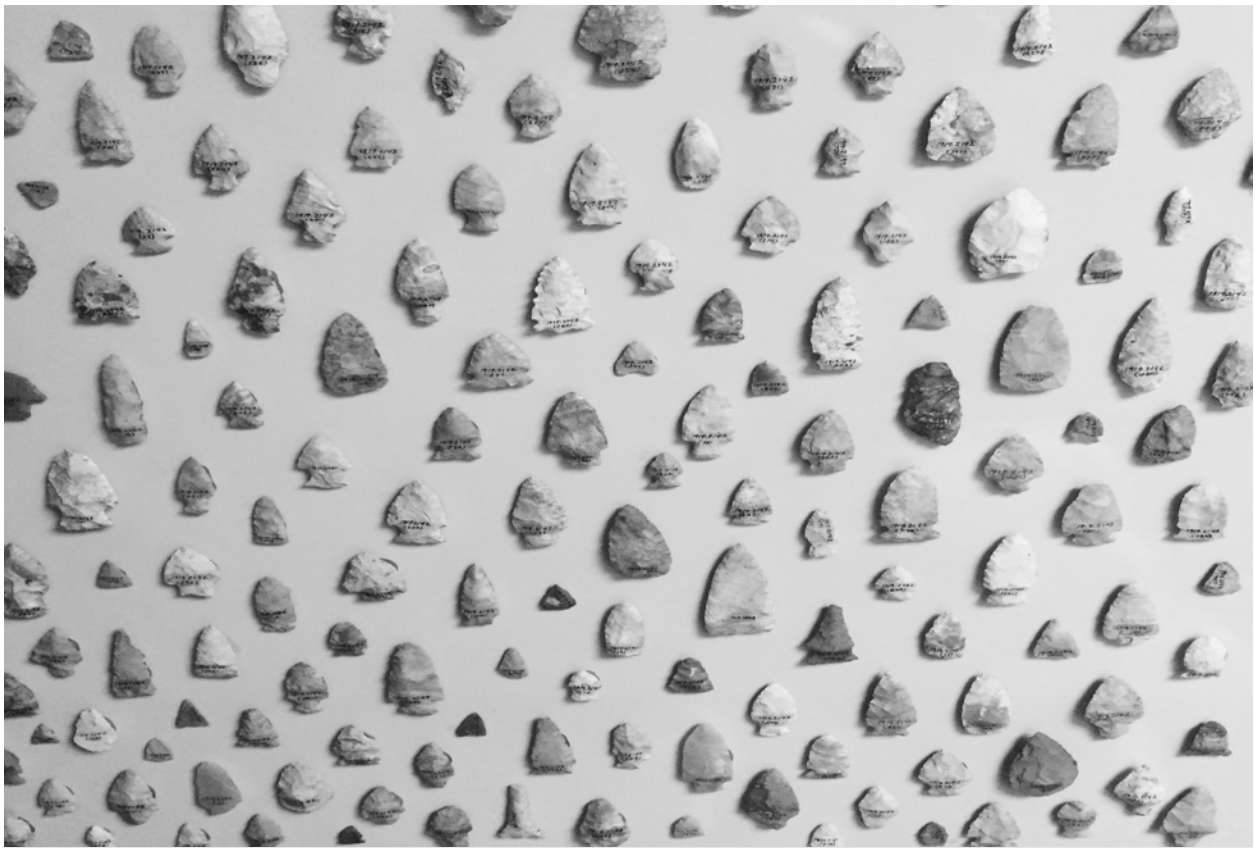


Fig. 41 Indigenous North American Points & Microblades, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives. Author Photograph.

27 Looking at Murray's work, I wonder what names the bannerstone makers had for the stones they carved, both the materials and the completed works. I wonder what assemblages they too embodied and the stories they told. The colonial past and complex present cannot be erased from bannerstones; they have become part of their life. Together in conversation, Indigenous lineal descendants, intellectuals, artists, academics, and curators can begin the process of reanimating bannerstones so that they can more fully and vibrantly express themselves. On or just beneath the surface of the soil, across the North American continent there are points of spears, microblades, axes, ahls, lithic carvings, and shards as countless and many as there are stars in the sky (Fig. 41). Within this immense body of Indigenous carved stones, both in collections and still undisturbed in the ground of North America, bannerstones are one beckoning instance in the long duration of forms that challenge us to recognize and esteem the experiences and perspectives of their makers and the possibility of an ethical collaborative engagement with an Indigenous past and present.

28 **Acknowledgments:** I would like to thank:

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Notes

1. Kim TallBear, “An Indigenous Reflection on Working Beyond the Human/Not Human,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2015): 234.

2. Acasta gneiss is one of the oldest terrestrial rock formations dating back over 4 billion years covering over 300,000 km of Northwestern Canada.

3. For an in-depth study of the chronological history of bannerstones see David L. Lutz, *The Archaic Bannerstone: Its Chronological History and Purpose from 6000 B.C. to 1000 B.C.* (Newburg: David L. Lutz, 2000).

4. Tristram R. Kidder, “Trend, Tradition and Transition at the end of the Archaic,” in *Trend, tradition, and turmoil*, ed. David Hurst Thomas and Matthew C. Sanger (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 2010), 23ff.

For the dating of Indigenous communities at the Indian Knoll site see Darcy F. Morey, George M. Crothers, Julie K. Stein, James P. Fenton, and Nicolas P. Herrmann, “The Fluvial and Geomorphic Context of Indian Knoll, an Archaic Shell Midden in West-Central Kentucky,” *Geoarchaeology: An International Journal* 17, no. 6 (2002): 521. They propose 6000BP-3000BP (4,050 BC-1,050 BC) for the dates of Archaic period occupancy at Indian Knoll.

5. This bannerstone was found in Glenn Falls, Warren County, New York. The stone was purchased from M. F. Savage on June 13th, 1888, for \$12.00 (by A. E. Douglass and donated to the AMNH in 1901. Source AMNH digital database. This was a high price at the time when most bannerstones could be bought for one or two dollars.

6. According to Adrienne Mayor “the care taken to highlight the trace fossil suggests that the bannerstone maker may have viewed the worm/snake shape as a being from the deep past, a creature so old that it was transformed to stone. The ripple pattern of the sediments around the white shape may have evoked a water creature.” Personal communication February 24, 2025. For a book length study of Indigenous knowledge of fossils see: Adrienne Mayor, *Fossil Legends of the First Americans* (Princeton University Press, 2025).

6. Native bamboo of the *Arundinaria* genus grows wild in moist forested mountains or along rivers of Eastern North America. *Arundinaria appalachiana* is hill cane, *Arundinaria gigantea* is river cane, and *Arundinaria tecta* is switch cane.

7. Unfinished bannerstones would have been less fragile and safer for travel and trade, able to be completed at any time. Sassaman proposed that these bannerstones were traded north, west, and south of the Savannah River Valley where they were made. See Kenneth E. Sassaman, "Crafting Cultural Identity in Hunter-Gatherer Economies," *Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association* 8, no. 1 (2008): 100-101.
8. Clarence H. Webb, "The Poverty Point Culture," in *Geoscience and Man*, vol. 17 (Baton Rouge: School of Geoscience, Louisiana State University, 1977), 47-49.
9. Kenneth E. Sassaman, *The Eastern Archaic Historicized* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 59.
10. Lutz, *The Archaic Bannerstone*, 21.
11. Ephraim G. Squier and Edwin H. Davis, *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley, Comprising the Results of Extensive Original Surveys and Explorations* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1848), 218, fig. 114.
12. Charles Conrad Abbott, "Stone Age in New Jersey," in *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution Showing the Operations, Expenditure, and Conditions of the Institution for the Year 1875* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1876), 332-336.
13. For a discussion of the many early theories about bannerstone use as a specific tool see Byron Knoblock, *Banner-stones of the North American Indian* (LaGrange: Bryon Knoblock, 1939), 191, 565.
14. For a discussion of the many early theories about bannerstone use as a specific tool see Byron Knoblock, *Banner-stones of the North American Indian* (LaGrange: Bryon Knoblock, 1939), 191, 565.
15. Knoblock created an elaborate typology of bannerstone forms choosing names that were either purely descriptive such as "triangular" to names that were both descriptive of bannerstone shapes as well as indicative of locations where these shapes were most often found such as "Wisconsin Wing." See Knoblock, *Banner-stones of the North American Indian*, 149-171. For this essay I have used the twenty-four core types Knoblock created to name bannerstones. This streamlined typology can be found [here](#).
16. American Museum of Natural History, *2nd Volume of the Original Entry Book of Prehistoric Relics belonging to A. E. Douglass deposited in Room 1., American Museum of Natural History* (New York, 1901), 165ff.
17. United States National Parks Services, NPS Archeology Program: The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), see [here](#).
18. Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Regulations, Part 10, Subpart A, see [here](#).
19. "William S. Webb Museum of Anthropology," University of Kentucky, accessed 02/15/2024. See [here](#).

20. “Indian Treaties and the Removal Act of 1830,” *Office of The Historian, Department of State, United States of America*, accessed 02/15/2024. See [here](#). May 28, 1830 Statute I. Chapter CXLVIII (148) “An Act to provide for an exchange of lands with the Indians residing in any of the states of territories, and for their removal west of the river Mississippi,” accessed 01/15/2025. See [here](#).

21. Armand Minthorn, “Human Remains Should be Reburied,” *Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation* (September 1996). See [here](#).

Kristi Paulus, “Kennewick Man finally buried by local tribes,” KEPR (February 20, 2017). See [here](#).

22. See the *Bannerstone Project* [here](#). Though the provenance of most bannerstones is anecdotal, based on the spoken record of the people who found them, we have created a map on the website that lights up their presumed location spread out across the Northeast. Of the 121 bannerstones on this website, all are currently in storage, none are on display.

23. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 19.

24. Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, 24.

25. Since 2016 I have worked with Joseph Anderson, Digital Initiatives Librarian who developed the online format of the Bannerstone Project; Molly Schoen, Visual Resources Curator who transferred and edited all the metadata; and Nanja Andriananjason, who edited all the images on the Bannerstone Project website.

The photographs removed correspond to AMNH D/142, D/144, D/146, D/147; NMNH A61057, A61058, and A61059. Rather than erasing them, we have chosen to leave their catalog numbers on the site indicating with an explanation text that they have been removed for a reason. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries when bannerstones were being actively collected the AMNH lent to the Smithsonian (NMNH) five of the bannerstones that Douglass had excavated in 1882. While in DC plaster casts were made of these stones and kept in the collection. Since these casts represent the originals, we have chosen to remove photographs of them as well as photographs of the original stones in hopes of discussing with tribal members the delicate terms and conditions of representation.

26. A. E. Douglass, “A Find of Ceremonial Axes,” *The American Antiquarian and Oriental Journal* 4 (1882): 103. And though Douglass did not find any sign of human remains in this mound, subsequent excavations have found several human burials within different areas. See Jon C. Endonino, *Tomoka Archaeology Project Stage 1: Mapping and Excavation at the Tomoka Mound and Midden Complex (8VO81) Volusia County, Florida* (Richmond, KY: EKU Archaeology Laboratory, Eastern Kentucky University), March 2019.

27. TallBear, “An Indigenous Reflection,” 232-233.

28. Ibid.

29. Details about where these hammer stones and this piece *Chi Fii Embraces the Old Ones* were shared with me in conversation with Audie Murray on June 21, 2024.

30. Audie Murray, "Dream," in *Pawatamihk: Audie Murray* (Nanaimo: Nanaimo Art Gallery, 2021) See [here](#).

Suggestions for Futher Reading

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