

Old Home Places

by Bruce Roberts

I spend a lot of time exploring in the woods and photographing the various subjects I come across. Depending on the season, I might be looking for rare wildflowers, obscure waterfalls, native American sites, old ruins, or who knows what. During the cooler months when the leaves are off the trees, one of my favorite activities is looking for old home sites, or more specifically, old stone chimneys.



A beautiful old chimney

Most of my exploring takes place on what is now National Forest land. Occasionally I might stumble onto an old home site while looking for something else, but usually some research ahead of time is required. Looking at the early maps of a given area, I'll note the building locations. I then transcribe those locations onto a current map in my GPS app. Sometimes this is easier said than done, depending on the accuracy, level of detail, and scale of the early map.

After that, it's time for "boots on the ground". Often, just reaching the site is a trial. If I'm lucky, there might be the remains of an old settlers road, but even if found, those can be an impenetrable mess of laurel or rhododendron. In many cases, later logging roads and skid trails have obscured the original paths, and those, too, are often so grown up now that they can be difficult to follow.

Once in the tentative area, it's time to look at the surrounding topography. A house site back then obviously needed a relatively flat area (unlike the steep slopes on which we see some modern homes built), and most sites will be near a creek/branch or a spring. Of course, there

are always exceptions to the rule; I know of one place high up in a gap that requires a walk of several hundred yards down an old path to reach the nearest spring head. Those folks got a lot of exercise hauling water!



A unique springhead, lined with stone almost 5 feet high

Other signs of a past home site include old stone walls or terraces, foundation stones, unnatural ground features, stone-lined spring heads, and non-native plantings. Some homes had a cellar hole dug under the house. Over time, I've noticed that many of these old sites have a certain "feel" to them, and I can often discern the location as I approach, even while still a distance away.



Stone enclosure surrounding a foundation & collapsed chimney

The locations of some of these old places often amaze me. I have found two different house sites between 3200-3300 feet elevation. While climbing up to these areas, I was thinking "There's no way in the world that anyone lived up here back then!". But sure enough, there were the foundations and chimneys of the old homes from the 1800s. It must have been tough to eke out a living in some of these spots. Unfortunately, many of the early settlers weren't lucky enough to have drawn a nice low-land riverside lot in the early land lotteries!

Many of these properties were bought by speculators and timber companies at rock-bottom prices in the late 1800s and early 1900s. After the passing of the Weeks Act in 1911, the Forest Service purchased much of that land, and more. Once the Forest Service bought the land, any remaining old homes weren't long for this world. The houses and any out buildings were soon burned or torn down. In early years, the chimneys were sometimes left standing, but in more recent times, they too were knocked down.

For that reason (in addition to the passage of over a century), nothing remains of the old chimneys but a pile of stone at over 90% of the home sites I've visited. Many of these stone piles would not even be recognizable as a former chimney to the casual observer, while others still have some small amount of structure remaining at the base.



Collapsed chimney pile

At perhaps 5-6% of the sites, enough of the lower chimney/firebox remains that it can be easily recognizable as a chimney. At only about 1-2% of sites does an actual chimney remain, maybe not complete, but with most of the structure remaining.



Collapsed firebox



*Chimney with collapsed top
(Rocks stained from the clay chinking)*

Most old chimneys were built at the end of a house, and had one firebox/fireplace. In more elaborate structures, the chimney was built into the interior of the house, and had two fireboxes, on opposite sides of the chimney. Still larger structures had two chimneys, facing each other, at either end of the home. I have found one location where the double chimneys were 40 feet apart, and recently, another where they measured 50 feet apart. Now those were some big homes! What's more, both are in locations that would be considered "out in the middle of nowhere".

If any of y'all know of any old chimneys in the woods, please let me know. If I haven't already been there, I would love to photograph them!

