Pilot Rock is a large Sioux quartzite boulder located on a high bluff overlooking the Little Sioux River valley south of the city of Cherokee, Iowa. This massive rock measures 31 feet long, 40 feet wide and 20 feet high, and is considered to be the largest glacial erratic in the state. Early explorers used the stone as a meeting place and navigational aid, and it was an important landmark for early travelers heading west to Nebraska and the Dakotas.

The rock was an important local landmark to early explorers and settlers in the region. Robert Perry, the first settler in the county, remarks on finding the stone while following an Indian trail en route to the site of the present town of Cherokee.

The Little Sioux River valley was an important travel route for pioneers heading west. The rock was an important landmark and navigational aid, and it was an important place and navigational aid, and it was an important landmark for early travelers heading west to Nebraska and the Dakotas.

In 1834, archaeologist Ellison Oniz visited the site and took a photograph of a single "turkey track" petroglyph located on the top of the rock. At the time, no further petroglyphs were noted, and no additional research was conducted at the site for some time. In the Spring of 2000, additional field and documentary research began at Pilot Rock. In addition to relocating the original petroglyph photographed in 1834, additional petroglyphs were noted, including two additional "turkey tracks," often interpreted by researchers as depictions of thunderbirds, and a deeply grooved crescent shape which has been partially destroyed. All petroglyphs discovered were deeply grooved into the surface of the boulder. Petroglyphs on the rock were divided into two panels on the basis of their spatial locations: Panel 1, consisting of the turkey track originally described by Oniz, and Panel 2, which consists of a small cluster of glyphs found during a recent survey.

Each panel was initially field sketched and photographed using color and black and white 35 mm film. Subsequently, the petroglyphs using large sheets of clear acetate, which were carefully taped to the rock surface above any petroglyphs to prevent damage. After taping the acetate sheets to the rock surface, the petroglyphs were carefully traced along the edges with permanent markers. Field notes were written directly on the acetate sheets, and a life-size scale was drawn on the acetate surface to aid in reducing the images.

This recording method is much preferred over traditional techniques, such as charcoal rubbing, both of which have been shown to damage the rock surface and interfere with newly developed petroglyph dating methods (Loendorf 1998:34). The field notes, photographs and other related material are archived at the Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist, Iowa City.

Pilot Rock is one of three known petroglyph boulder sites in Iowa; the others being the Newton Stone, located in Jasper County and the Radcliffe Sacred Rock, located in Allamakee County. High numbers of petroglyph boulders exist along the borders of surrounding states, suggesting that other petroglyph boulders have yet to be found. In addition, cup marked boulders can be found south of Ellsworth County and in Blood Run State Park in northeastern Iowa. Examination of petroglyph maps showing the locations of glacial erratic may be of use in locating other prehistoric boulder sites.

The rock surface has suffered from erosion, spalling and vandalism. Blasting of the upper portion of the rock surface to produce building stone occurred in the early part of the 20th century (McCulla 1914:44). A photograph taken in 1929 shows the rock to be considerably larger when compared to modern photographs. Graffiti is present on all sides of the stone, some of which appears quite recent. Local informants also stated that the rock is occasionally sprayed with paint by vandals, and that the surface is periodically sandblasted to remove the paint. There is no way of knowing how many petroglyphs have been destroyed due to natural descomposition, blasting and vandalism. Early descriptions of the boulder suggest that many more glyphs were likely present, and there is some evidence to suggest that petroglyphs may have also been painted, although no evidence of paint remains today.

The largest petroglyph measures approximately 10 centimeters in length, and is a classic representation of a "turkey track" thunderbird. Such turkey track glyphs are commonly found at rock art sites throughout the Midwest from southeastern Minnesota to Missouri. The second petroglyph, which appears as a semi-circle with an intersecting line similar to a lower case "u" appears to be a boomerang distribution. Silhouetted similar petroglyphs were found at the Jeffers petroglyph site in southwestern Minnesota (Loendorf 1979). The third petroglyph, a crescent shape which may be largely destroyed, is more difficult to identify due to its incomplete state.

The rock surface was later covered with Illinois sandstone slabs to protect the petroglyphs, which were then covered with concrete. In 1977, the City of Cherokee, in cooperation with the Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist and the State Historical Society of Iowa, installed a sign and interpretive panel at Pilot Rock State Park. This panel, which provides background information and the history of the site, is expected to remain on display for future generations.

Future work at Pilot Rock will consist of a detailed examination of the rock surface to attempt to locate and identify other surviving glyphs. A detailed study of the topography surrounding the boulder will also be conducted in hopes of locating aboriginal trails, earthworks, mounds and other prehistoric sites. Petroglyph awareness and periodic site monitoring should help to prevent further vandalism and protect this important place for future generations.

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History of Cherokee County, Iowa

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Figure 1. View of the Pilot Rock rest area showing sign placed by the local DAR Chapter.

Figure 2. View of Pilot Rock facing south.

Figure 3. Map showing the location of Pilot Rock State Park (13CK101).

Figure 4. Photograph of the "bird track" petroglyph as photographed by Oniz in 1834 while the place was in the hands of the Iowas, Taken during a 2000 field survey. Oniz's original (Charles R. Rogers Instrap, Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist and State Historical Society of Iowa).

Figure 5. Photograph of Pilot Rock taken in 1927. Courtesy Charles R. Keyes Archaeological Collection, Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist and State Historical Society of Iowa.

Figure 6. Dusted tracing of Panel 2.

Figure 7. Photograph of Pilot Rock taken in 1927. Courtesy Charles R. Keyes Archaeological Collection, Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist and State Historical Society of Iowa.

Figure 8. Stamped tracing of Panel 2.

Figure 9. Map showing the location of petroglyphs on the upper rock surface.

Figure 10. Photograph of vandalism on upper rock surface. The presence of recent graffiti is a good indicator of future site destruction.

Figure 11. Photograph of Pilot Rock taken in 1927. Courtesy Charles R. Keyes Archaeological Collection, Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist and State Historical Society of Iowa.

Figure 12. Photograph of Pilot Rock facing south.

Figure 13. Photograph of the Pilot Rock looking north.

Figure 14. Photograph of the Pilot Rock facing south.

Figure 15. Photograph of Pilot Rock looking north.