

Native American Kiosk

Regional Native American Presence

When the English first settled in this region—which became Acton and Littleton—the Native Americans living here were known as the Nashoba. The name means, roughly, ‘land between the waters’, a reference to the many ponds, wetlands, and streams that abound in the area. The Nashoba Indians were a small extended family band loosely affiliated with the regional Nipmuc tribe, which occupied an inland area of eastern Massachusetts, south of the New Hampshire Pennacook. The Nashoba sachem during the mid-1600s was John Tahattawan.

During this same period, John Eliot, a Puritan minister from Roxbury, was granted his request by the Massachusetts General Court to establish a series of Native American settlements where Indians willing to adopt English customs, including dress, language, and Christianity, would, in theory, be protected from harassment by the English. These communities came to be known as ‘Praying Villages’. They were situated in a loose ring around greater Boston from Natick in the west as far as Littleton in the north. In these settlements, tribal people built English-style homes and tilled the land. The most northerly of these Indian settlements was Nashoba Praying Village, located in present day Littleton.

King Philip’s War, fought in eastern Massachusetts between 1675 and 1676, was a general Indian uprising against the English settlers, whom the native people saw as haughty, arrogant, self-serving, and materialistic. Encroachments by English farmers onto Indian lands, and occasional killings by both sides, set the war in motion. King Philip, whose native name was ‘Metacomet’, was the second son of Massasoit, sachem of the more southerly Wampanoags. He organized and led the Indian uprising, which ended with his death and the general defeat and final subjugation of the tribal people of eastern Massachusetts.

During these hostilities, some Praying Village Indians joined or aided their brethren in the skirmishes with the English. In retaliation, the settlers rounded up all village Indians in the fall of 1675 and sent them to Deer Island in Boston Harbor, where most died of cold or starvation during the winter. At the war’s end, the few survivors returned to their home areas, but the villages were never reorganized.

Sarah Doublet with her small family, who were among those who did return, resettled on the land she owned next to Nagog Pond in Littleton. Her husband, Tom Doublet, had acted as a translator and messenger between the warring parties during the conflict. Sarah lived out her final years in Jones Tavern in South Acton in return for her deed to the land where the Nashoba Village was located, and which is now Littleton’s Sarah Doublet Forest.

Throughout Littleton, Acton, Boxboro, and Carlisle, the still undeveloped woodlands are scattered with stone remains of Native American ceremonial structures. Not a few of these may be seen in these North Acton conservation lands, which, surprisingly, have never been significantly disturbed, except for the pasturing of sheep or goats and the harvesting of wood.

The archaeological excavation carried out during the late 1990s in South Acton determined that tribal people were living there as early as 7000 B.P. The site, named Pine Hawk, was an ancient settlement on the banks of the Assabet River, where many and varied artifacts were excavated.

Stone features to be seen in this North Acton conservation preserve include clusters of stone piles, stone rows with astronomical alignments, standing stones, a stone-lined pool, oddly shaped stone-row enclosures, a stone chamber likely of Indian origin, animal effigies, a natural spring enhanced with subtle stonework, a prominent glacial boulder field, enhanced paired stones, and other curiosities.

While many of these features, with the exception of the chamber, are common in wooded areas throughout New England where farming or residential development has never occurred, it is unusual for such diversity and density of stone features to be found in close proximity. Unlike the Pine Hawk site, this land does not appear to have had permanent habitation sites.

The presence of purposive astronomically aligned stone rows in this complex has been inferred from compass bearings. While azimuths of the sets and rises of many celestial bodies can now be accurately established for given eras, years, and seasons, fixing such alignments in a specific location is more complex. However, approximations to known azimuths at this latitude for common astronomical events have been measured along linear stone rows, and the results are suggestive. Common celestial events marked by native peoples worldwide include the sets and rises of the sun on the solstices and equinoxes, the heliacal rising of the Pleiades, lunar standstills, and such common celestial events as the August Perseid meteor shower.

The work of discovery and interpretation of the stone features of this region continues. Many such features are subtle, while others are partially covered with the accumulated woodland debris of time. There are currently several local independent researchers of these stone structures. One such scholar/scientist has shared his information with the Narragansett Tribal Preservation Office for interpretation. Much of the information presented on this kiosk panel and the several stand-alone Indian site panels along this portion of the TTT has been vetted through that office.

Native American Lifeways

The Native Americans living in the Northeast at the time of European settlement were said to be tall, robustly built, well formed, well nourished, and without infectious diseases. They were light in skin color, and their facial features were caucasoid. Algonquian was spoken in several dialects along the Atlantic seaboard from the Carolinas northward into Canada.

Indian socio-political organization was tribal, based on kinship, each tribe headed by a chieftain or sachem, who occasionally was a woman. Sub-tribal groups might be led by a sagamore.

Tribal leadership was usually hereditary through the mother's line. A leader's degree of authority varied among the tribes, but most chiefs governed with advice from their council of elders, and opinions were sought from subordinate chiefs. There was no law in the western

sense; custom and tradition were the law. The elderly were honored for their wisdom, gained through experience.

Each tribe's territories—for fishing, hunting, berry picking, nut gathering, crop fields, etc.—were defined by a river drainage system or other topographical feature. These lands were held in common, although the chief would allot to each family its own area for crops, fishing, hunting, etc. The concept of private property in land, which is an English invention, did not exist among the Indians, a fact that led to many disputes between the two cultures. Personal items, tools, food, and dogs were a family's own, excepting for the observance of hospitality customs.

Southern New England Indians ate a well-balanced diet, according to white settlers, who found them better nourished than Londoners of the same era. The Natives lived in small settlements near their crop fields, where they grew the trio of corn, beans, and squash, as well as melons and pumpkins. By clearing trees, they maintained berry patches, where they harvested blueberries, strawberries, blackberries, cranberries, along with grapes, plums, and many others. Nut-bearing trees were abundant; beech nuts, hazel nuts, and butternuts were eaten raw, chestnuts boiled, and acorns blanched and ground into flour. Summer surpluses were dried and stored for winter consumption.

Large areas of inland forest were cleared and maintained with grass to attract deer, which sheltered in the woodlands. When the harvesting of summer crops was finished, the men turned to hunting deer and other game. Turkeys abounded. Fish weirs were constructed on streams like this Nashoba Brook, where early spring runs of eels and alewives to spawn upstream made fishing easy. The now semi-ruined Robbins Mill dam is thought to have been constructed on the remains of such a weir. Fresh water and sea shellfish were gathered.

Though no obvious habitation sites have been observed in this large conservation area, there is little doubt that Native Americans would have exploited the abundant resources of the extensive wetlands bordering this portion of Nashoba Brook during ceremonial activities. Ducks raising ducklings in spring or migrating in the fall were easy targets. The coarse sedges and reeds could be woven into mats and baskets. Certain woody stems made excellent arrows.

The Indians of this region cooked in stone, wood, or birch bark pots, either set into hot coals or filled with water heated with hot stones. Foods were combined in numerous ways to provide soups, stews, roasts, berry cakes, and vegetable breads. Maple syrup was prepared. It is said that there were 150 recipes for maize alone, and not a few Indian recipes have been passed down through New England families for generations: for example, Boston baked beans, succotash, corn bread, and Indian pudding.

Most New England Indians did not live in wigwams. The southern tribes, living in villages next to crop fields, built permanent shelters. Flexible saplings, firmly secured into the ground in a roughly circular or oval plan, were bent into a curve so that ends met in the middle where they were secured with withes. Cross pieces of flexible, strong reeds or long branches were interwoven among the saplings to create a secure frame. A smoke hole was left open at the

top, while the rest of the structure was covered with woven mats and animal skins. A doorway, or two, to provide ventilation, could be covered with a leather flap.

Sleeping platforms were fashioned at a low height around the interior walls and covered with skins. A ring of stones provided a hearth for inside cooking. Baskets holding household items as well as herbs, medicinals, and dried food stores were stashed under the bed platforms.

Further north, long houses were built to accommodate several families, each with its own hearth. Because wigwams were easily transportable, they were used primarily for temporary camps established during the growing season at various places for the gathering of different foods.

Tools and implements were crafted with ingenuity and often artistry from a wide variety of natural materials. Bowls and cooking pots were made from steatite, a soft stone, until about 1500 AD, when women learned to make pottery from clay by coiling long slender rolls in a circular pattern on top of each other. These vessels were then hardened with fire. Other containers were made by weaving grasses, reeds, and strips of birch bark into baskets of all sizes and shapes for specialized purposes. Both baskets and birch bark canoe coverings were made waterproof by the application of animal fats and vegetable tars and resins.

A variety of knives, adzes, chisels, axes, fish hooks, and many other implements were made by knapping or grinding stone, bones, and antlers. A woman's pestle, or grinding stone, was often carried with her, and basins for the grinding of meal and flour from grains were often created out of conveniently shaped boulders located at well-used camping sites (Figure 11).

Clothing was fashioned from carefully treated skins, made into a variety of types of leather, and from woven textiles. In summer, men wore loin cloths and women, short skirts. Children ran naked. Both genders often wore a short cape that covered the shoulders to the waist. In winter, particularly in more northerly territory, fur lined clothing was tailored. Moccasins were made from soft leather. Leggings were worn by men when going into the bush. Feathers were used for decoration, and sometimes were woven into capes. Bead decoration, after Contact, was very popular.

Corn (Maize) inset on the panel:

Corn, *zea mays*, called maize in many languages, was domesticated in prehistoric times by Mesoamericans. It became the staple starch for all native North Americans. A tall, leafy stalk produced several large ears, or cobs, each of which contained many kernels. These grains were ground into flour or meal.

Native American Spiritual Beliefs

Many of the numerous and varied stone structures in this conservation preserve are remains of ceremonial architecture of tribal peoples who stewarded these lands for thousands of years before white settlers came.

The Algonquian-speaking tribal groups across the United States are among the oldest recognized ethnic groups here. They share cultural as well as linguistic traits. Their stone or earthen structures bear striking resemblances. Despite the long policy of suppression of Indian culture, first by white settlers and later by the U.S. Government, tribal peoples built in stone an expression of their traditional beliefs, intended to establish balance and bonding with the spirits of the Earth, Sky, and Underworld.

Central to these beliefs in the Northeast is the concept of manitou (kinôpsk in Algonquian), an animating essence that resides in all natural objects and phenomena. Land, sky, water, trees, stones, and creatures, as well as earthquake, thunder and lightning, are all manifestations of the living earth and thus possess manitou. The medicine man, or woman, a central figure in Algonquian society, is revered for possessing capabilities associated with shamans worldwide.

The concept of a primary creator may be a million years old. In the Northeast, it was called Kichtan, meaning 'Great Spirit'. A more personal manifestation of divinity was known as Hobomock, originally a consolidation of Spirits of Nature, who in time came to stand more for evil than for good. Often, effigies (nunokotokansh) of these natural beings, such as the local turtles and serpents, were rendered in stone. [See Figure 12]

Dale Van Every (*The Disinherited*, New York, 1976) says of the Native American:

"...he was peculiarly susceptible to every sensory aspect of every natural feature of his surroundings. He lived in the open. He knew every marsh, glade, hilltop, spring, rock, [and] creek as only the hunter can know them. ... he loved the land with a deeper emotion than could any proprietor. He felt himself as much a part of it as the rocks and trees, the animals and birds. His homeland was holy ground, sanctified for him as the resting place of the bones of his ancestors and the natural shrine of his religion. He conceived its waterfalls and ridges, its clouds and mists, its glens and meadows, to be inhabited by the myriad of spirits with whom he held daily communion. It was [to] this rain-washed land of forests, streams, and lakes [that] he was held by the traditions of his forebears and his own spiritual aspirations...."

The Indian did not so much worship his gods, as appease or try to please them. He made no idols to represent them. He did not strive to achieve dominion over all lands and creatures, as Genesis advises. Rather, with noisy ceremonies of dance and chant, and decorated with paint and feathers, he sought favor with his gods as he prepared for planting, hunting, or battle. Singing accompanied the dance, and smoking tobacco, which symbolized the breath of life, was part of the celebration.

Feasts of thanksgiving for good harvests and other bounties, as well as rain dances for summer crops often went on for days. But, just as likely, a dance would be undertaken to ward off evil spirits, or simply to bring hope to a sick friend.

Such a belief system, when translated into everyday activities, impelled the Indian to maintain reverence for the remains of animals whose lives he took for food. No parts were wasted; and

parts unusable for food or practical needs might be returned to the habitat where the animal had lived. Only a portion of the winter's store of nuts gathered by some small creature would be taken for human use.

Burial customs and practices varied widely. In some individual burials, the body was placed with the head facing southwest, but others were found in a fetal position. Some group burials were arranged like spokes of a wheel. Cremations were common, and reburials might be bundled. Often, the deceased was accompanied with possessions prized during life and practical objects for use in the world of souls. These might include a man's tobacco pipe, stone hunting tools, and wampum; or a woman's baskets, grinding pestle, and jewelry; a tiny pot might accompany a child.

The apparent relationship between sacred and astronomical observances attributed to the stone features scattered throughout this forest is significant. Often, celestial events that provided a calendar for agricultural activities were also associated with spiritual beliefs. For example, on August 13 the annual Perseid meteor shower is at its peak. Northeastern Indians believed that the streaks of light made by the meteors were the souls of recently departed loved ones going to their final rest in the Milky Way. The date also marks the beginning of the harvest season, still celebrated by some local tribal people with a week-long festival.

Interestingly, August 13 is a date that recurs throughout North and Mesoamerica with ritual significance. It marks the beginning of the short cycle of the complex Mayan calendar, and in Mayan cosmology it is the date when the gods brought forth the world.

In the woodland surrounding this kiosk are several types of both natural features and man-made stone structures that mark it as a significant center for ritual/astronomical Native American observances. In addition to the multiple manitou stones, there are curving stone rows which may represent a serpent, sometimes with its tail in a small pool or seep.

Such small pools, if not seasonal, may be faced with stones at its margins.

Among trees sacred to the Indians of this area are the hornbeam and the cedar. All parts of the hornbeam were used in sacred ceremonies. If hornbeam was not present, cedar could be used. Hornbeam trees within the nearby Princess Pine Stone Pile Cluster are located among the piles at the center of the enclosure (qusuqaniyutôk).

Similar complexes exist along the Boxborough esker and in the former Nashoba Praying Village site in Littleton (1650s to 1670s). Carlisle, to the east, has many stone structures of Indian provenance, with some types not seen in these conservation lands. They can be reached from the TTT via a red trail from the Robbins conservation land. These four towns lie within a swath of land, beginning in present-day Lincoln and ranging northwards to Westford, which once comprised an extensive sacred landscape for regional Indians

Hornbeam inset on the panel:

Hornbeam, *carpinus caroliniana*, a small tree with extremely hard wood and a smooth, muscular looking bark, is still used by Indians in all aspects of their ceremonies, including medicinal practices. Often twisted into an unnatural shape, it is common on this southerly slope of the Nashoba Brook.