

A POSSIBLE INDIAN ROCK SHELTER SHRINE AT NASHOBA*

The September-October 1997 issue of *Sanctuary*, the journal of Massachusetts Audubon Society, carried an interesting introductory essay by John Hanson Mitchell titled “On Shaky Grounds,” which focused on a little-known and seismically active area called Nashoba that lies between Nagog and Fort ponds in Littleton, Mass. It is thought that this area, a 95-acre tract of common land deeded to the town of Littleton in 1988, was the spiritual center of the Indians even before the village was organized in 1654. The combination of water, unusual and rugged terrain, and seismic activity, made it sacred to the Indians who lived there. According to Mitchell, one can still stroll through the woods and come across fascinating stone features, such as walls on top of rock outcrops that look like “crenulated battlements,” and land below that is “twisted and pocked with swales and strange, serpentine ridges.” Fascinated by Mitchell’s description, and knowing that Mavor and Dix devoted a whole chapter in their book *Manitou* to this area, I decided to see it for myself.

Although Mitchell’s description of this rugged site was hardly a road map, I knew it lay west of Nagog Pond. The woods around Nagog Pond were foreign to me, but being competent with a compass and topographic map, I felt confident that I could probably find the hillside that Mitchell described. Parking my car on the north side of the road beside the pond, I headed west up a wooded slope. At its crest, I encountered a trail marked with painted tin can covers that went diagonally across my route. I followed this trail southwestward, tracing the edges of a bog. A bit further on, I spotted a rocky ridge in the distance, and as I came closer, I could see

there was a wall on top. This wall or row, similar to the “crenulated battlements” described by Mitchell, followed the ridge to the south where it eventually intersected with the trail I was walking on. As this point I decided to backtrack and follow the stone row to the north. The row was roughly built and followed the uneven course of the ridge, making odd turns every so often for no apparent reason. In its serpentine configuration, the row didn’t make any sense as a boundary line, and the longer I followed it, the more convinced I became that people other than early English Colonists had erected it.

Avoiding a large rock fall just below the crest, I followed the ridge where it began to level out, and then I climbed down its east slope through stands of hemlock and oak, backtracking my way to the rock fall where large stones had tumbled down. The sight in front of me gave me the chills: From below were two large stone slabs, one above the other, that looked like the cantilevered projections of a Frank Lloyd Wright house (Fig. 1).



Fig.1

The bottom slab, less regular in shape than the one above, had in front of it two small standing stones, about a foot high and placed to either side, wedged in the ground. The one on the right was thin and had a crescent shape (Fig. 2).



Fig.2

It was heavily patinated with lichen, and appeared to have been worked. Unusual anywhere, these small standing stones seemed to have been deliberately placed. As I walked up the slope to the left of the first slab, I peered inside the dark cavity underneath the large stone lintel and discovered in the center, in back of a large rounded stone, a marvelous white stone, the size of one's fist, firmly set in the compacted soil (Fig. 3).



Fig.3

I looked at it closely and touched it, but it did not seem like pure quartz. The blocky structure and cleavage reminded me of orthoclase or microcline feldspar, but quartz might have been present too (Fig. 4).



Fig.4

Whatever the nature of its composition, its central location, protected by the overhang, and the striking features around and below the overhang, marked this spot as a shrine – a sacred place.

Standing stones are frequently mentioned by Mavor and Dix in their book *Manitou*, where they say that they served as monuments to spirits, “astronomical or other place markers, or memorials to individuals.” But the authors caution that no full understanding of them can be taken without considering and carefully studying the general area in which they are found. In the case of the Nashoba site, the stone shelter and white stone must be seen in this overall context. This means also that the orientation of the shelter opening toward the southeast is significant, as well as the view from it and the two, large lintel-like slabs, above which is a

section of the stone row. Although most of the construction of the stone row is unremarkable, that which is immediately in line with the large slabs of the shrine proper below consists of two stone slabs supported by two smaller stones, in a post-and-lintel construction, mimicking the lintel stone of the shelter itself. All of this, in my estimation, is part of a conscious, purposeful plan.

The white stone, if containing only a partial amount of quartz, played a significant role in Indian ritual, as its natural brightness symbolized the light properties of the sun and the moon. Quartz also has piezoelectric properties, which means that a photon light will be emitted when two smooth quartz stones are vigorously rubbed together in a dark room or closet. This unusual characteristic has long been recognized by native peoples the world over. While quartz could conceivably emit light during seismic activity, it is pure speculation whether seismic activity in Nashoba over the last three hundred years played any role in how the white stone was placed, or its actual function. More likely, the orientation of the shelter opening to the east, and the placement of the stone within it, could be tied in with rituals performed during the solstice and equinox sunrises. On these days, we can envision that the sun's rays, striking the stone at an oblique angle in its darkened protective space, would only enhance its natural brightness, giving rise to mystical interpretation of the occurrence and its ritualistic observance.

Only recently, after reading John Hanson Mitchell's fine new book *Trespassing*, did I learn that the land on which the shelter-shrine is found is called the Sarah Doublet Forest, named after the last owner of the Nashoba Plantation lands, or what is left of the original sixteen square

mile plot. By 1736, when Sarah Doublet deeded her land to two Concord citizens, she owned only 500 acres between Nagog and Fort ponds, but some believe that she held on to it for so long because it remained the spiritual heart of the property. For the next two hundred and fifty years the land remained in private hands. Then, in 1988, the two elderly Concord women willed 95 acres of this land to the town of Littleton. Once again, as in the 1600s, a portion of what was Nashoba belongs to the people, and the story of Nashoba has, by a peculiar series of events, come full circle. The spiritual nature of this forest preserve seems almost palpable, and recalling what I found after only a brief stroll through the area only reinforces this impression.

*The original article first appeared in *Stonewatch*, the newsletter of the Gungywamp Society, in 1999. In March 2018, I made some minor modifications and amplifications to the text and added a few additional photographs, all in color.

REFERENCES

James W. Mavor, Jr. and Byron E. Dix, *Manitou: The Sacred Landscape of New England's Native Civilization*, Rochester, VT, 1989.

John Hanson Mitchell, "On Shaky Grounds," *Sanctuary*, 37/1 (1997), 2.

Ibid, *Trespassing*, Reading, Massachusetts 1998.

Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape, Places, Paths and Monuments*, Oxford/Providence, 1994, 53.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. Shelter-Shrine in Sarah Doublet Forest, Littleton, MA.

Fig. 2. Crescent-shaped standing stone in front of bottom large slab of Shelter-Shrine, Sarah Doublet Forest, Littleton, MA.

Fig. 3. Interior of space underneath large lintel stone, Sarah Doublet Forest, Littleton, MA.

Fig. 4. Detail of white feldspar and quartz stone of Shelter-Shrine, Sarah Doublet Forest, Littleton, MA