

Native American Kiosk

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.