

Plantain Stone Piles and Pest House

The Plantain Stone Pile Cluster is one of several stone pile clusters located on the slope above the Nashoba Brook along the southerly portion of the Nashoba Brook Conservation Land and its adjacent parcel, Spring Hill Conservation Land. The cluster has been named for a low-growing evergreen plant, a member of the orchid family known as Downy Rattlesnake Plantain, *Goodyera pubescens*, which can be found growing between some of the piles on the westerly side of the cluster. Native Americans used this plant as an antidote for snakebite and as a tea for the relief of toothache, colds, kidney disease, and eye problems. A photo of this semi-rare wild plant is included on this screen.

Definition of Stone Piles

The Massachusetts Historical Commission comments, on the State website, that all such stone piles are the product of past agricultural or field-clearing activities undertaken by early European-descended farmers to provide pasturage for domestic animals or agricultural fields for food crops.

Modern Native Americans from Federally recognized regional tribes, however, tell us that stone piles such as these are ancestral tribal stone groupings with ceremonial significance for their people even to this day. Native American beliefs give spiritual significance to all natural objects. Constructed originally to commemorate significant tribal or personal events, such clusters are considered sacred places.

Native American cultural tradition in relation to stone piles

There are 24 Tribal Nations ranging from Maine to Texas who have joined together to form the United Southern and Eastern Tribes, or USET. In October 2002, USET referred, in Resolution #2003:022, to the purpose of the “sacred ceremonial landscapes” of which these stone pile clusters are a part:

“ for thousands of years before the immigration of Europeans, the *pau waus* and medicine people of today’s New England region used sacred ceremonial landscapes to sustain the peoples’ reliance on Mother Earth and the spirit energies of balance and harmony...

Later, in 2007, USET referred, in Resolution #2007:037, to the suppression of:

...many cultural and ceremonial practices, including the use of stones and stone landscapes [that occurred] during and following the Colonial oppression of Southern and Eastern Tribes.

Because of this systematic cultural suppression, today’s Native Americans, along with non-Indian researchers, are trying to reconstruct their cultural heritage, which has been

kept alive largely by oral tradition and the existence of features such as the stone piles described here.

If you visit this site, **please be careful not to disturb the stones.** Doing so would destroy their sacred value to Native Americans.

Stone pile characteristics

The two photos showing stone piles included with this text demonstrate some of the variations in stone pile structure that may be found at the Plantain Cluster.

Some researchers who are currently studying stone piles in this region have found that field-clearing piles:

- are irregularly shaped and consist of stones of many sizes;
- or, consist of similarly-sized stones with large stones and small stones piled separately;
- have over time assumed the natural 'angle of repose';
- have the appearance of a dumped group of stones; and
- are set next to a field or against a stone wall, or spill over an embankment.

In contrast to these characteristics, the piles in the Plantain cluster do not conform to these specifications. Additionally, when visiting the site, you will notice that the area around the piles, and throughout these woodlands generally, has not been cleared of stones.

Other features at the site

Just to the west of this cluster there is a **stone wall** which runs roughly north to south. It may have been built as a boundary marker by the earliest European-descended owners, or it may have been built much earlier by the Indians. It does have an astronomical alignment with the summer solstice sunrise to the south and the winter solstice sunset to the north, but it is not known whether this is significant evidence for early Indian construction and use, or just a coincidence.

Also located at this site is an unusually-shaped stone foundation set partially into the side of the slope just a short distance uphill from the stone cluster, but below the ridge. It is not known who built this foundation or what it might have been used for although one possibility is suggested below. Its unique footprint is not seen in other Colonial structures in this region, but the layup of the stones suggests that it was built during the Colonial Period.

There are no other foundations evident in this area of the Nashoba Brook or Spring Hill Conservation Lands. A few bricks have been found in close proximity to this foundation, and a tiny flowage of seasonal water is close by, probably the drainage off a higher portion of the ridge. To reach the site, follow the short path, signed with green arrows, starting at the back of the cluster near the stone wall.

Documented history of site

Historical research has shown that this site was part of Lot 51, one of the several lots acquired by Thomas Wheeler, Jr. of Concord, on which he established his farmstead and mills across the Nashoba Brook at the end of Wheeler Lane. A series of early maps of Acton, drawn after its incorporation in 1735, show in detail the location of each farmstead recorded at the time the map was made. Most such farmsteads are clearly marked with the owner's name. It is curious that throughout this series of maps, no buildings are shown as having existed in this portion of land between the present Pope Road and the Nashoba Brook. This foundation is not mentioned in any deeds of the town either.

We do know that in 1746, the "Wheeler Mill, Farmstead and 660 acres" were bought by the father of Dr. Jonathan Davies, born in Cambridge in 1715/16. Dr. Davies did not relocate to Acton, but is listed as a "Physician and resident of Roxbury" in 1752, when he purchased 184 acres of "upland meadow and swamp" from the executors of his father's estate. He purchased additional acreage in the area as well. He died in Roxbury in 1801, and he left the acreage to his nephew, Joshua Davies. He was the brother of Capt. Davies of the nearby Bellows Farm.

Dr. Davies never lived on the property, but Acton town records indicate that, at least on one occasion, Dr. Davies was paid for medical services by the town:

April ye 2, 1755: ...at the Same time an order to Dr. Davies for fourteen Shilling for time Spent in the towns Service the year past and Likewise the Sum of Six Shilling which was Due to Dr. Davies for taking Care of Abigail Russel when She was Sick the whole of his Demands...

One perhaps significant fact about the foundation is its isolation on the Davies property. Because the land was owned for over 50 years by Dr. Davies, it is possible that a building on this foundation served as a sick house, or what was commonly called a 'pest house,' for the Davies family or other community members. There were no hospitals in the 18th century, and doctors, or communities, often set up pest houses to keep infectious diseases under control.

Rumors that still circulate among the families of long residence in Acton insist that there was a 'pest house' somewhere in the land between the Nashoba Brook and Pope Road.

The plan of this structure, with a huge chimney base in the middle separating two 'rooms,' would have provided for two hearths for warmth in each space, and separation of a patient and a possible caretaker to reduce danger of contagion.

**Downy Rattlesnake
Plantain**

Look carefully between some of the piles, and you will find the low-growing evergreen plant, a member of the orchid family known as Downy Rattlesnake Plantain, *Goodyera pubescens*.

Native Americans used this semirare wild plant as an antidote for snake bite and as a tea for the relief of toothache, colds, kidney disease, and eye problems.