

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.