

Guidelines for Visiting Native Stonework Sites: Ceremonial Stone Landscapes

Prayers in Stone Project

Friends of Pine Hawk

© January 2024

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With input from the non-Native CSL community

The Logic Behind the Approach:

If we are to identify these stone constructions as Native made, and if we are to identify them as having a ceremonial / religious function, then it stands to reason that we should seek guidance from Native medicine people on how to interact with these sites and constructions.

Further, the medicine people we should be seeking guidance from are the ones from the tribe whose lands a site is historically associated with.

Unique Circumstances:

Natives lived in the Praying Indian Village of Nashobah from 1654 to 1730. (i.e. Littleton, part of Boxborough, and a small part of Acton.) Prior to this, the Nashobah people were part of the larger tribal land of Nashope, under Chief Tahattawan. Nashope was a gore of land situated between the Assabet, Concord, Nashua, and Merrimack rivers. Chief Tahattawan had a residence at Musketaquid (Concord), but his primary village was at Fort Pond in what is now Littleton. Chief Tahattawan, and Nashope, was part of historical Massachusetts tribal territory.

The heart of Nashobah Plantation, and part of the Praying village itself, is still intact and undeveloped, and preserved as the 90 acre Sarah Doublet Forest. Currently, the Sagamore of the Nashobah Praying Indians resides at the Sarah Doublet Forest. He is a descendant of Chief Tahattawan and is also a medicine person.

Significance:

Having the Sagamore (and a medicine person) of the Native tribe ancestral to this area residing again on the land, and for the first time since 1730 (according to traditional history), is a cultural sea-change and redefines how we interact with the local Native sacred sites. We can no longer interact with them as though they are clear and devoid of the Native people whose ancestors built them.

Natives have by right a seat at this table, and by right a significant voice in this discussion.

We need to collaborate with the ancestral-indigenous peoples whose sites these are, and not only give them voice, but give them a leading voice and take guidance from them.

Consideration:

Natives are an integral part of the ceremonial sites they built. Natives and Native voice and wishes cannot be philosophically extricated from the sites they built for non-Native convenience. Natives are part and parcel of the land and the sites they built there. A common Native belief in New England is that "we don't own the land, the land owns us."

There are many many non-Native voices that speak loudly and authoritatively about how things should be done, what things mean, and what can and cannot be thought or done when it comes to Native sacred sites. There are very few Native voices allowed in the discussion of their own sites, and these voices are given little weight other than for show.

Example: “The landscape is the star of the show.” This is a prevalent non-Native view that effectively removes Natives and Native voice from Native sacred sites. This is “colonialism” alive and well. The builders and their constructions cannot be viewed separate, or the one removed from the other. The Native voice is integral to the sites and needs to be given its due.

Spiritual Considerations:

Native sacred sites are religious-ceremonial in nature and function. The constructions are literally prayers in stone. The constructions involve attached spirits, a view held by Natives and (most) non-Native researchers alike. Not all spirits involved are good, some are dark. Part of the spiritually oriented points in the guidelines are to protect people from inadvertently getting attached by unwelcome spirits. Examples are: not handling or moving the stones and not making offerings.

While spiritual considerations are given little value in secular culture, being at Native sites puts a person in a spiritual and spirit environment, whether they are aware of it or not. It is important that medicine people guide us in these respects, both for ourselves, and for the site-walking public. Its not so much if spiritual aspects should be presented, but more how they are presented and to what extent.

Questions:

- To what extent will non-Native culture “allow” Native voices and wishes expression in giving guidance in how non-Natives interact with Native ceremonial-religious sites?
- The Native medicine perspective is spiritual in nature. How will this intersect and be processed by the generally secular mindset of non-Native New Englanders?

Suggestions for Version 1.2 of the Guidelines:

- The original version should be for the LCT CSL Stewards. LCT CSL Stewards have a higher calling. (The Littleton Conservation Trust (LCT) has requested a copy of the final guidelines for use with site stewards on Trust land in Littleton.)
- The public version should be less spiritually oriented, and focus more on the physical aspects. The public has a lower calling.
- The public version could also have a section for the spiritually inclined: how to interact spiritually with a spiritual Native site. This section won’t be requests, but suggestions. (“You many want to...”)
- The request to not post pictures and videos on social media, and/or give site locations will be removed from the public version. It is far to problematic in a real-world sense, and at this point is water under the bridge.