

Blue Hills History 6 – Archaeology & Native Americans

Most of this excerpt is quotes from a keynote speech given in 2014 at the Friends of the Blue Hills Annual Celebration by Joe Bagley, who is the Boston City Archaeologist.

As you may remember from Part 1, 600 million years ago the Blue Hills were a volcano. Then... well 600 million years of erosion, and glaciers. Think about that... 600 MILLION years. We all see rain come down and wash a bit of dirt down the trail. We see the results of water freezing in a crack and breaking off a piece of a ledge, or splitting a large rock. But try to imagine what can happen over 600 MILLION years. (You can't, as that timeframe is really beyond what we can comprehend!) But all we have to do is look at the Blue Hills, and we can see the results.

And a 'mere' 10,000 years ago the Blue Hills were mostly like they are today. What made the Blue Hills special to the people living here back then were the rocks. To most of us hikers, all rocks look pretty much alike. If we are observant, we might notice some are smoother, while other places the rock seems rougher. One thing we do notice is conglomerate, AKA "Puddingstone", that mixture of old smooth rounded rocks which have been turned into inclusions in the newer stone. Conglomerate is 'pretty', but 'pretty' wasn't what the inhabitants were interested in 10,000 years ago. They lived by making stone tools and spear points. If you wanted to kill an animal, having a sharp rock on the end of your spear was very helpful. (They hadn't invented the bow and arrow 10,000 years ago, so arrowheads came much later.)

*If you start reading these excerpts, and find this story interesting... **stop**... and go read 'the whole speech' at: <https://friendsofthebluehills.org/keynote/> It isn't **that** long, and... what better things are there to do right now than learn? (Then, if you wish, you can return here and read my additions, which are in italic. And look at Rob MacDonald's picture below.) And now, to the excerpts from Mr. Bagley's talk...*

"That volcano is directly responsible for producing half dozen outcrops of stone used by Native Americans for thousands of years.

The slate that formed in the low lying areas of Boston was cooked by the rising plumes of granitic lava that would go on to make the Quincy granite, melting and restructuring the platy material into a glassy dense black stone beloved by Native Americans for its color and smooth texture. The lava from the original volcano formed massive formations of stone across the Blue Hills ranging in size from large boulders to entire mountains."

The inhabitants searched out "outcrops of blue hills rhyolite, Braintree slate, and Massachusetts hornfels" because each material had different, special properties. Where they found it, they worked for thousands of years quarrying it.

"... what we find is workshops surrounding these outcrops of stone where people dug out or broke off portions of the rhyolite, slate, and hornfels occurring here, and nowhere else in the world, and roughly broke down these angular fragments into "preforms," which are essentially partially-made stone tools. These preforms were much easier, and lighter, to transport throughout the region, but also economically sensible as the larger rough stones did not need to be carried, nor were the far more fragile and delicate finished tools needed to be transported back to camps and villages where they were

more likely to break during transportation. *[Note - We'll come back to this in a later issue, when we discuss the two archaeological dig sites at the Blue Hills.]*

“Over thousands of years, these workshops form piles of stone fragments, each representing moments in time— seconds in a person’s life who lived here thousands of years ago.”

“Wampatuck Hill, one of the many that make up the ridges of the Blue Hills, is made entirely out of a material called rhyolite. Essentially this hill represents a portion of the lava column located within the volcano that solidified so quickly that it’s silica (or glass)- rich magma turned into a crystalline fine grained blue rock with tiny flecks of quartz. It is the natural blue color of the stones of the Blue Hills that gave the area its name, and it is this one particular type of blue stone that brought Native people from the surrounding area to Wampatuck to mine and work its natural stone.”

“As you walk the Sawcut Notch path along the northern boundary of the park, you will pass Great Dome and Little Dome. These two small hills are made out of Braintree slate and Massachusetts hornfels. Keep an eye open for scoop-like marks in the stone where thousands of years before a Massachusetts Native person was standing exactly where you are striking the slate to remove portions of it to turn into tools. Turn around and behind you will be small mounds of stone fragments.

These mounds are not natural deposits, but heaps of stone waste, each the result of stone striking stone working raw slate down to a spear preform or perhaps a stone adz. These are all viewable from the path and artifacts lie within the path itself.”

[Bob note: I recently took a walk in that area. I’m not a trained archaeologist, so I didn’t ‘see’ as much. But it was still interesting to just walk along and think back 10,000 years and think about what was going on there at that time. Gives you a lot to think about when walking along those trails. More than just ‘How much further are we going?’ When we get back out hiking, there will be many places for us to stop and talk about this history. ☺]

“Further west, by the pipeline building, I came upon another quarry site. Again, these are not new discoveries I have made, these quarries were published decades ago. The terraced hills seemed to trace the erosional record of the past few million years exposing large areas of Braintree slate. As I walked through the area, I found it difficult to find the quarry that was written about in the documents I had read. About half-way up the hill I noticed some Braintree flakes at my feet, indicating that I had finally found the quarry area. That said, I was at least 40 feet from the nearest outcrop. As I began to search the ground around me, I had the adrenaline-inducing realization that while I had been climbing up this terraced hillside of rocks looking for a quarry, I had completely missed it simply because I had utterly underestimated the scale of what I would find.

The natural hillside was not in fact natural, it was, and IS, a quarry of truly monumental proportions. The terraces I had walked were not simply erosional, but were in fact carved into the raw rock by Massachusetts Native people quarrying stone from the hillside for thousands of years, and the mounds and pathways I had been climbing over were mountains of stone debris consisting of millions upon millions of stone flakes each individually struck by human hands.

I literally stood there for several minutes in complete silence not quite able to grasp the scale of the place, and floored by the simple fact that the hillside, these terraces, and the heaps of stone surrounding me are not only one of the most significant archaeological and historical features of New

England, but are essentially unchanged from the moment they were made thousands upon thousands of years ago.”

“This is a truly sacred landscape to the Massachusett People. The prominence of Great Blue Hill, the tallest hill within 10 miles of the Atlantic Coast south of Maine, was a landmark that all on the eastern side of Massachusetts could see. The surrounding hills were life givers in the sense that Native people could harvest raw stone from the ground, transform them into tools, and use those tools to hunt animals, process their food, cut down trees for structures, and hollow out large trunks for canoes. The fresh water of Ponkapoag Pond lies adjacent to one of the largest Archaic Massachusett village site, dating to between 3,000 and 8,000 years old where those preforms I discussed earlier were brought in great quantity to process into ulus, ground adzes, spear points, and other tools. The rivers and streams provided fresh water for hundreds of people and some of the very same paths you walk today were first blazed by the feet of Massachusett people 8,000. 10,000. 12,000 years ago.”

“Nowhere in Massachusetts can you so clearly walk in the footsteps of the ancient past along trails that are older than we can truly comprehend, past sites and places that have been sacred to the many Native and non-native people who have visited this place for so many years.”¹

Thank you, Joe Bagley, and FBH for having him as your speaker (and publishing his speech for all to read.)

So, as you walk through the Blue Hills, try to take some time each week and think back. Think back and try to imagine the whole place as a volcano. Think about 600 million years of erosion and freeze/thaw cycles. 600 million years! Think about the glaciers, ice up to 2 miles thick sliding over this whole area. (And pushing ahead of it the debris that would become Cape Cod and the islands!)

Then think back 10,000 years to the people who lived here then. Who came to the Blue Hills to quarry the best stone for tools and spear points. Think what their lives would have been like. Chipping stones, carrying them back to their villages along the shores of Ponkapoag Pond, or the Neponset River. Making those spear points and then hunting supper through these woods. Think of the changes that happened over the next 9600 years, before Europeans arrived. Think what the Blue Hills were like through all those thousands of years. We aren't the first ones to think of the Blue Hills as a special place.

And here is a picture from Rob MacDonald: “...both of them were found within what's now the Blue Hills Cemetery. In fact, when we do that one section of the RLBH that is off of West Street in Braintree, you're pretty much at the Blue Hills Cemetery. I can even remember what section I was in when I found them. There had been some Harvard archeological explorations out there in the past so I know there must have been some Native American activity. Because of that, I always kept my eye open for artifacts when digging.”



Until next time,

Bob Vogel

¹ Quotes from <https://friendsofthebluehills.org/keynote/> Joe Bagley, Boston City Archaeologist Friends of the Blue Hills Keynote, Annual Celebration, October 9, 2014