

Treasures from the Sherman Room

An Introduction to Brimfield History from the Library's Historical Collections

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Steerage Rock

Steerage Rock, a famous landmark in the early Connecticut Path

The following was read before the Quaboag Historical Society at Warren on June 9, 1897 by Miss M. Anna Tarbell. It was published in the Warren Herald on June 18, 1897 and the Springfield Weekly Republican on July 9, 1897.

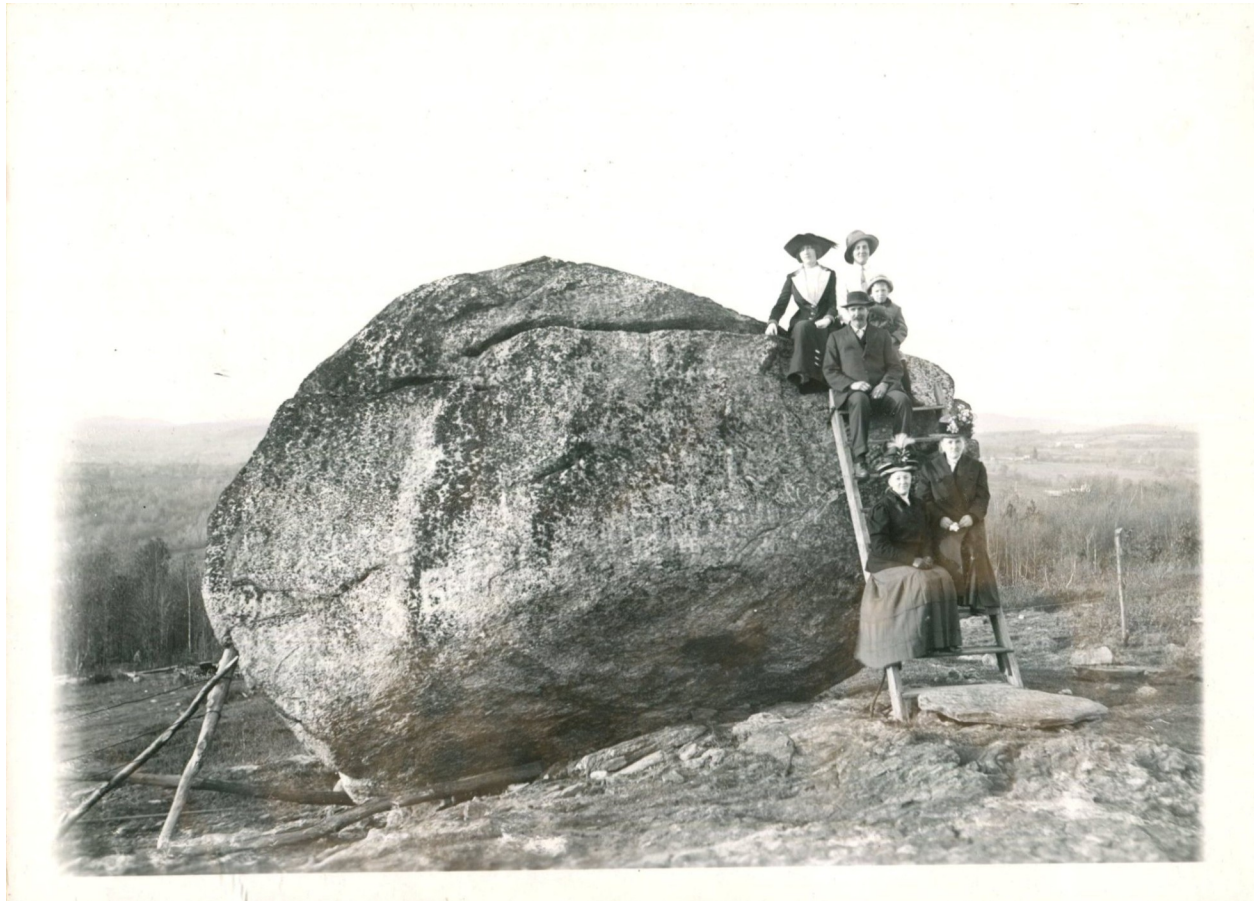
About two miles west of the village of Brimfield is the highest point of land in what was formerly the Quaboag territory. It is a summit in the eastern range of the Woddaquodduck mountains and is commonly known as Steerage Rock Mountain. There is no higher elevation between the Connecticut River and the ocean, south of a line running about twenty miles north of Brimfield. The spot possesses great geological interest, as on the top of the mountain over twelve hundred feet above sea level, there is perched an immense boulder lodged there by a glacier ages ago. But this boulder is not simply one of a class of geological curiosities, it is rich in human associations, and it has a name which tells the nature of its historical interest. The tradition has always been that the name Steerage Rock was given this boulder because the Indians were accustomed to steer their course from it, take their bearings for distant points. One has only to obtain the view from Steerage Rock to be convinced of the truth of the legend regarding it. Both for picturesque and historic reasons the ascent of the mountain should be made on the east side; while there is especial romance in climbing the path up the precipitous ledge which forms the east face of the mountain. When the summit is reached from this side, a thrill of wonder is experienced, as the view suddenly bursts upon the sight in all its beauty and extent. By the aid of a clumsy ladder of rails and rocks, the boulder may be scaled with just enough peril to give the zest of adventure, and from a seat on its broad surface fifteen feet above the ground the scene which surrounds the beholder, stretching far in every direction, may be surveyed at leisure. It is the same scene which met the eyes of the red man two hundred and fifty years ago, the same, but yet how changed, on account of the signs of the white man's possession of what was then the Indian's peculiar domain. Spires point upward in the valleys and from the hills and villages which lie on the distant slopes.

Charlton, Spencer and the Brookfields come so distinctly within the range of vision as to seem like neighbors, and a little further off and Leicester and Oakham, New Braintree, Hardwick and Belchertown. Spires or houses in seventeen towns can be distinguished. Mt. Tom and Mt. Holyoke stand out distinctly, the smoky outlines of Wachusett and Monadnock may be seen, and

distant Greylock can be discerned. Faraway in the west are the Berkshire hills, rising tier behind tier until they appear as faint blue haze in the sky.

One who is on history bent will be eager to trace with the eye the course of the great Indian trail which crossed Steerage Rock Mountain, for it was the use of this elevated spot as a place of outlook for practical ends which made it an objective point with the Indians, and it was sought by them especially for the purpose of sighting their course to Nontuck and Agawam. The trail on the west side of the mountain, parted near the elbow of the Quabaug River, the northern branch crossing the river there and going to the falls at Holyoke, the southern branch keeping south of the river to Agawam, now Springfield. The path as it came up the east side of the mountain, was not a local, nor a single trail. It was composed of a number of long distance trails coming from the east, southeast and south coasts.

Through the researches of Mr. Levi B. Chase of Sturbridge, who has supplemented the work of the late Mr. Temple in the location of Indian trails, we learn that paths from four points on the coast far distant from one another, united in Sturbridge going as one through Tantsque pass in the Quinnebug valley, the only way between the natural barriers to east and west passage through that section.



The Nipmuck path from Norwich, Connecticut, met the Providence path from Mt. Hope and the Narragansett country at Woodstock. One path united these, going from Woodstock through Southbridge to Sturbridge, where it was met by another double path from the east. This second double path came from Oxford and was composed of a trail from the southeast coast of

Massachusetts, which ran to the north side of the lake with the long name and a path that came to Oxford from Massachusetts Bay.

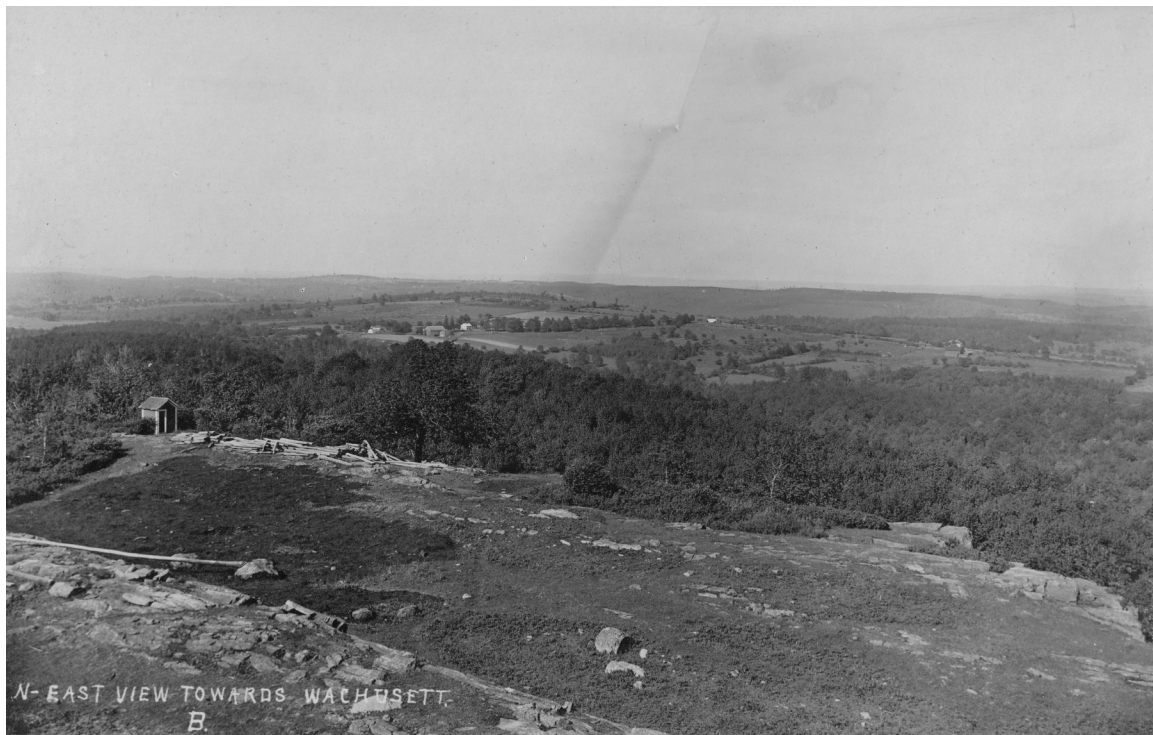
From Tantsque pass the course of the united path to Steerage Rock, is well known, the section lying through Brimfield being described in Holland's History of Western Massachusetts. From Fiskdale it ran south of Little Alum pond, through the Captain Charles farm and the Deacon Tarbell farm, down the hill and by Mr. Morgan's mill pond into Little Rest; thence between the north shore of Sherman's pond and Quabaug old fort and across the lower slope of Hubbard's hill to Steerage Rock Mountain, crossing the mountain north of the rock. It is probable that the earliest course was directly to the rock. East of Steerage Rock this great trail was met by a long-distance path known as the Nashaway trail, whose course is described by Mr. Temple. This trail ran from the vicinity of Boston through Weston, Sudbury and Stow to Lancaster (Nashaway); thence through Princeton, the south part of Barre and the north part of new Braintree to Wickabaug pond in West Brookfield. Crossing the Quaboag River near the milk condensing factory, it went to the W.A. Patrick place and through the south central part of Warren, entering Brimfield just north of Hubbard's hill to join the southern path before described. It may be mentioned here that the Nashaway trail, according to Mr. Temple, became the settlers' path to Springfield from the Bay in 1648, when it is recorded in Winthrop's journal that "This year a new way was found out to Connecticut by Nashaway which avoided much of the hill way." The journal entry gives the reason why this northern route superseded the earlier and more direct one from the Bay which went to Steerage Rock by way of the Quinnebaug valley. It must be remembered that by "Connecticut" it is the river that is meant.



Thus practically five long distance paths connecting the Indian settlements along the coast from Massachusetts Bay to the Sound with those of the Connecticut valley united to pass our Steerage Mountain. The object of these long journeys, according to Hubbard's History of New England, was social intercourse, particularly the exchange of hospilities, between the

natives in the different sections. Visitors from the inland tribes to those living on the seashore were regaled with sea-food, such as oysters and clams, and, in their season, lobster, bass and sturgeon. Then when fish were most abundant in the inland fresh water ponds and streams “those who had entertained their neighbors at the sea-side expected like kindness from them higher up in the country and were wont to have their great dances for mirth at these general meetings.” The prospect of feasting on the cartloads of salmon and shad taken in the spring from the “long river” was sufficient attraction for making the long journeys thither.

The curiosity which Steerage Rock excites as a land-mark of the Indians is overshadowed by the sacred interest it possesses as being the halting-place and point of outlook for the pioneers who open the Connecticut valley to civilization [sic], when on their way from the settlements at the Bay. Dr. Holland fitly calls this early route of the pioneers “charmed ground, a precious passage.” But the white man in his excursions into the wilderness was obliged to depend entirely upon the Indian for guidance and the Indian’s trail became the white man’s bridlepath and cartway. Previous to 1783, when the settlers were familiar enough with the country to be able to lay out a road called the Bay Path, - not the one of Holland’s romance however - the route from the Bay settlements to Springfield lay by way of Steerage Rock. How grateful must have been the shadow of that rock to the weary travelers, and how overpowering must have been their emotions, as on gaining the summit of the mountain, the new, strange scene broke suddenly upon their sight. For the first time in all their toilsome journey they beheld the country where their new fortunes were to be cast - the land which they and their descendants were to possess. With what satisfaction the leaders must have pointed out the mountains guarding the hidden river that watered the fair domain. Up to this point the obscurity and sameness of the way, through forests and thickets and streams and up steep hillsides, over and over again, must have been disheartening; while the prospect was seldom more extended than from hill to hill.



Now when Steerage Rock is reached, the travelers have the “far look” so necessary for courage and inspiration. Those natural objects which before had been wearisome from close and hard encounter, now appear grouped into an entrancing picture. To many, the sight of mountain scenery was a new experience, and powerful must have been the impression upon them of the majesty and mystery of the western mountains, wrapped in blue haze, their lines rising higher and fainter until lost in the mists of cloudland.

Nothing is more attractive to the eye or to the thought than a path, signifying onward-moving, attaining, and connecting the known and tried with the unknown and untried. The point of greatest significance in a path is the place where the end is sighted, the bearings taken, the course, sure. From the outlook that Steerage Rock gave to the travelers, the accomplishment of their toilsome journey was assured and they went down the western slope of the mountain with the new courage that assurance gives.

We are not accustomed to think of any indebtedness to the Indians and there is no respect in which so much is owed to them, as for leading the way through what otherwise had been a trackless wilderness. We have an opportunity to realize this indebtedness by studying the Indian paths and landmarks which became, by adoption, these of the pioneers who gave to presen