SEEKING PAGANS, FINDING MYSELF

Graham Trail is one of the many hiking paths at Ward Reservation, which straddles Andover and North Andover.
I stand, momentarily, at the edge of the Ward Reservation. I am about to repeat what so many before me have done; all of us counting on forgiveness being easier to receive than permission.

I imagine the countless midnight lovers' walks; the late-night high school gatherings; the giggling bouts of flashlight tag. Where I differ, at least at this moment, is that I am alone. And I feel blessed.

Many blessings have associated curses, however. So while pleased that the visibility is strong, the temperature shocks my lungs and dries my eyes. Clear nights are the coldest. As I acclimate to this one, I am especially pleased. A clear sky is essential for this adventure.

Snow has yet to fall this season, making this trip easier than most. Ice may be a concern, but staying on the path will be simpler. The sound, too, will be more comforting: I prefer the snap of twigs and the crunching of leaves to the muffled response of snow being compressed.
It's a quarter to 6 in the morning. I'll have plenty of time to enjoy the hike.

I enter the reservation — and she fights back. The first few hundred steps are always a surprise. You might wish for a gentle start to the journey, but you won't find it here. The footing is fine, but the path is steep. The frigid air conspires with the path, and soon the sound of my breathing overshadows the sounds of my footsteps. This both pleases and embarrasses me: I feel alive, but I should be in better shape.

I pause when I reach the main path. Many times I have continued upward and northward, so that I can visit Elephant Rock near the top of Boston Hill. The rock is deeply symbolic to me. My wife is Zimbabwean, and on our honeymoon I had the privilege of seeing wild elephants roam in her native country.

The symbolism, however, is not strictly international: Jumbo also is the mascot of the university where I teach. I gently chide myself for allowing coincidence to be interpreted as fate, but in this I am not alone.

People seek patterns. We see faces in clouds, and we try to impose order on the random. A smile graces my face as I turn and engage the Vetter Trail.

I'm thankful for level ground, and I quickly catch my breath. The trail bypasses Boston Hill, and the moon shines a ghostly light over the recently cleared territory. The land has been cleared so that the hill's basic ecology can collaborate with fire to facilitate a natural process of plant succession.

It's fun to consider the potential benefits of destructive forces. It's even more fun to recognize that the trail is sloping downward, and into the woods.

It's darker now, under these trees, and my thoughts turn inward. I enjoy the process of individual thoughts transitioning into an internal conversation. And I have long stopped fearing those rare occasions when the conversation becomes unpredictable, unfamiliar.

I let my mind wander while my feet stay on course: I reach Old Chestnut Street more quickly than I expected, and with less memory of the explorations of my mind than I wished. Old Chestnut Street disabuses me of any trance I may have been enjoying. I know almost nothing about this passage, but still it fills me with wonder. I know that I share all of these trails with fellow hikers, but this 'street' holds deeper memories.

What was life like for the residents of
the Andovers when this street wasn’t a memory, but rather was a throughway? Did it precede the Andovers, at a time before Andover split into Andover and North Andover? Which families did it connect, and what drama ensued because of that connection?

My northward trip upon the street is almost disrespectfully short, given the memories it must hold. The gap in the fieldstone wall tells me that I have reached the Graham Trail. I head westward.

I enjoy this trail. I enjoy the climbs and the retreats. And I enjoy the memories of leading hikes upon this soil.

It is here that, almost invariably, my students believe I am playing a nasty trick on them. By the second climb, at least one, and sometimes many, of the young adults following me will revert to a younger form: “Are we almost there? How much longer do we have to go?”

Typically, I gleefully reply with a confident, but information-free, statement. “A little bit further.”

I stop to straddle a large granite block. Here I can place one foot in North Andover, and the other in Andover. Being actively in two places reminds me of the many places within the reservation that I will not visit today. I will not visit the Pine Hole Pond, Shrub Hill, Rubbish Meadow, or either the Cat or Mars swamps. And I will not set foot on many of the other wonderful trails, including one of my favorites, the Sanborn Trail.

Today I will, however, reach the apex of Holt Hill.

And what will I find there? This is a running joke for me. Making the joke allows me to be both shocking and to sound eccentric: two qualities that I
The “Solstice Stones” mark the grassy summit of Holt Hill, the highest point in Essex County. This arrangement of stones indicates the cardinal points on the compass.

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It was her visit, in 1911, to Stonehenge that led her to create this gathering space on her property.

its length until I reach the central millstone. Here I sit, facing southeastward, and breathe a silent thank you to Mabel Ward.

These stones – the Solstice Stones – are here because of Mrs. Ward. The slabs are positioned in the four cardinal compass positions, with four additional slabs facing in northeastern, northwestern, southeastern and southwestern directions.

I watch, enchanted, as the sun breaks the horizon, the location of its rise perfectly predicted by the southeastern stone, which has been carefully placed 32 degrees from the eastern stone. Later, on this shortest day of the year, the position of the sun’s setting will follow the southwestern stone. This pattern is replicated, by different stones, for the summer solstice and for both equinoxes. The natural growth of the forest, however, has rendered all but the sunrise of the winter solstice invisible.

And perhaps this is why I am here. Mrs. Ward and the rest of her family have been incredibly generous to society. Their donation – now called the Ward Reservation – has been enjoyed by countless visitors. But for me, Mrs. Ward – a woman I never had the pleasure of meeting – is most visible through the Solstice Stones.

It was her visit, in 1911, to Stonehenge that led her to create this gathering space on her property. And it was in her husband’s honor that she shared it with all of us. It is the stones, the product of her behavior, that remain the most tangible aspect of Mrs. Ward for those who have followed.

With the sun now proudly above the horizon, I begin my trek home. I’ll follow the same path, although it will look different in the daylight. Once back among friends and colleagues, I’ll joke that – my squirrel aside – the pagans avoided detection.

I will also ponder Mrs. Ward’s challenge: What product of my behavior will be most tangible to those who follow long after I am gone?
SARAH ASHLEY DURRELL  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Sarah called around to find out which restaurants in the Andovers will be open on Thanksgiving for this issue’s Dining Out feature (Page 56).
“I’m not a fan of traditional Thanksgiving food, so I understand if people want other options on that day,” she says. “When I was a kid, my parents made me chicken fingers.” She found several places that will be open this year, so check them out.
Sarah graduated with a degree in journalism from Suffolk University and has been contributing to The Andovers since it launched. She lives in Newburyport with her husband.

PHIL STARKS  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Phil, who wrote our Reader Essay, “Seeking Pagans, Finding Myself” (Page 22), is a naturalist who enjoys spending time hiking through the Ward Reservation. One particularly memorable trek on the Winter Solstice is the subject of his essay.
Although his essay documents a solitary trip, he is aware that publishing the account may lead to having more company on the trails. “That was probably a motivating factor,” he confesses, “I really would like to welcome the Winter’s first sunrise with a community of nature lovers.” Phil is a Professor of Biology at Tufts University. He lives in North Andover with his wife, Caroline, and their son, William.

GREG VELLANTE  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Greg has written for The Eagle-Tribune since he was 16 years old. He has more than 300 film reviews to his credit and has had the opportunity to speak with a variety of Hollywood talent – from local legends like Ben Affleck (Page 28) and Mark Wahlberg to Oscar-winning filmmakers like Danny Boyle.
He is currently a senior at Emerson College, majoring in media studies. Greg is a member of the Boston Society of Film Critics and a founding member of the Boston Online Film Critics Association.

ALLEGRA BOVERMAN  
STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

When you walk into a home that’s been completely transformed for the holidays in a very specific, themed way, all you can do is wonder at the work and thought behind every single detail.
Photographing the Duffy home (Page 60) as it was prepared for a party was like finding little calming treasures around every corner and tree branch. “I lost track of time at the foot of the curving staircase wrapped in swirling garlands and creamy ornaments, gazing up at the soaring tree that seemed to go up and up forever,” she said.
Allegra is the photo chief of the Gloucester Daily Times and photo director of Cape Ann Magazine.

MARGOT LESAGE REGAN  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Having danced for 25 years, Margot Lesage Regan thought a pole fitness class would be a piece of cake. Boy was she wrong.
“It’s very humbling to not be able to lift your body weight, or spin around effortlessly. It’s definitely one of the most difficult fitness classes I have ever taken.”
Margot explains the benefits of pole fitness in her feature story on North Shore Pole Fitness (Page 34). When she’s not trying to invent from an 11-foot pole, Margot spends time with her husband and 3-year-old daughter. She works for a local college.

HELENE SOTO  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

If you’d like to trade one night of the hustle and bustle of the holidays for something entirely different, step into Helene Spoto’s kitchen. (See “Dining In,” page 52).
“Gathering a few of your closest friends together for an elegant sit-down dinner is easy when you have the right menu,” she says.
Helene owns Sentry Financial Planning with her husband and business partner, John. She is also a cooking instructor, a recipe contributor to several publications and has her own cooking show, “Healthy Cooking for Life” with Helene Spoto, airing on several local access channels.

TERRI SCHLICHENMEYER  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Bookworm Terri Schlichenmeyer loves to read – which is a good thing, since she shares her house with 13,000 books and one dog. When she doesn’t have a book in her lap, the dog fills the space. When Terri’s not reading, she’s tossing a ball. Sometimes, she even does both. And no, the dog is not spoiled.