

TRAIL MAP *for*

Hassanamesit Woods

GRAFTON, MA

WWW.HASSANAMESIT.ORG

SEEING THE PAST

400 Years in Hassanamesit



🌿 A walk through these woods reveals clues to the past. Cart paths, stone walls, drill marks on granite boulders, and multi-trunked trees are signs of former inhabitants. Some of these human interactions add beauty and interest. Others, such as the brambles and poison ivy that take over when plowed or bulldozed land is abandoned, have created problems that are difficult to solve.

This trail guide will help you see how people have used and changed this land from prehistory to today. Hassanamisco Indians of the Nipmuc Nation lived in this area before European settlement. Later, Hassanamiscos who converted to Christianity lived here in an Indian town sanctioned by the Massachusetts government. In the early 18th century, the Massachusetts government reallocated the Indian lands, and white families of European descent moved in.

Look for the past as you walk. Imagine standing on this trail in a different time, and consider the value of this land to people who have come before and who are still to come.

The interpretive trail begins where the Salisbury St. enters the power line corridor. Look for interpretive marker #1 here.



HISTORY TRAIL GUIDE for

Hassanamesit Woods

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1. POWER LINES

The highly manipulated landscape of the power line corridor provides an example of the forfeit of local landscape for greater societal needs. The wires overhead are part of the state's two main east-west electrical transmission lines. The power line corridor is not a beautiful landscape, yet it provides valuable habitat for birds and animals.

Cut in 1925, the power line corridor predates the arrival of many of the exotic invasive plants that choke other parts of Hassanamesit Woods. Utility maintenance workers periodically cut back woody growth, creating a miles-long linear habitat of shrubs and grasses.

Today, the power line landscape looks much as it has for the past 75 years, although it is now wider.

2. OLD MENDON ROAD

Two hundred years ago you might have met an oxen-drawn cart on this road. The road's compacted surface indicates years of use, and the cut banks suggest that the people who laid it out took care to make it level and passable by wheeled vehicles.

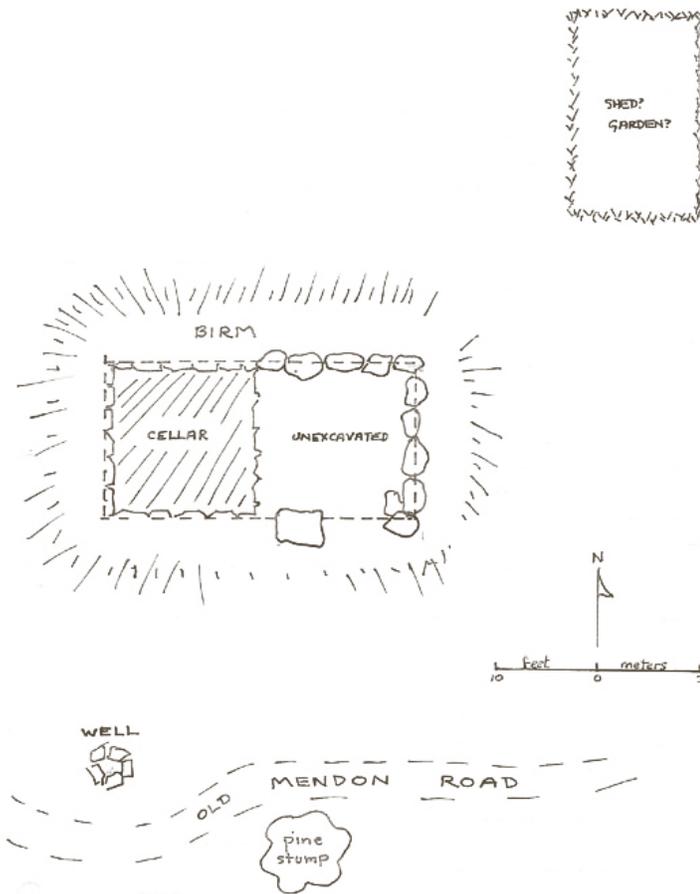
Although the road, which extended from Salisbury Street, does not consistently appear on historic maps, several houses along it do. Their presence gives evidence of the road that led from Grafton to Mendon.

Roads were vitally important to early settlers. They were lifelines to all the things needed in daily life that could not be produced on the farm—items like nails, pots, needles and thread, sugar, tea, and axe heads. Before phones, faxes, and computers, roads connected people to each other and to the news of the wider world.

3. STREAM CROSSING

Just as it does today, water posed a barrier to travelers in other eras. Horses and carts could splash across small, shallow, gravel-bottomed streams with low banks, but needed alternatives when they encountered larger bodies of water.

From the beginning of Anglo-European settlement in the late 17th century, Grafton's town government busied itself with road construction and repair, some of the most important work it undertook. On major roads with significant water crossings, like the Blackstone River at Main Street, townspeople might build full-fledged bridges of wood and stone. On less-traveled roads, local farmers might fill in the streams with stones or logs to provide a stable surface that still allowed the water to pass through.



4. BURRELL HOME SITE

This early 19th-century home site is a bit of a mystery. An 1831 map lists it as owned by the widow of Joseph Warren, who probably rented it out, instead of living in it herself. Other than its designation as the “Old Burrell Cellar” on a 1978 map and a passing reference to “Burrill” on a late 19th-century deed, no one knows who Burrell was, or when he lived here.

But the site does provide information. Although just about everyone at the time lived on a farm, this farm did not look like the large and rich spreads at the top of Keith Hill. Instead, its residents probably eked out a marginal existence on this rocky, sloping land at the edge of town, on a road that did not even appear on most maps. The cellar foundation outline shows that the house was small—15 x 28 feet—but then so were the houses of many of the neighbors. The still-visible 12 x 20 foot clearing nearby was either a garden or a shed.

5. GRAFTON BOUNDARY RIDGE

Predating Grafton, the town of Hassanamesit was officially established in 1654 by the Massachusetts government. The four-mile-square village was created for Hassanamisco Indians who had adopted Christianity.

Missionary John Eliot founded the town, the second of the fourteen “praying Indian towns” that he would create in Massachusetts.

King Philip’s War (when an army of Algonkian allies declared war on the English and their ways) brought an abrupt and violent end to the community in 1675. Some residents were killed while others were sent to Deer Island in Boston Harbor. Years later a small number of survivors returned to Hassanamesit.

In 1728, pressured by English investors and hopeful settlers, the Massachusetts General Court approved the sale of Hassanamesit. The surviving residents of the Indian town retained “shares” of land equal to those of the new settlers, including a hundred-acre piece of common land along the town’s south boundary. This ridge forms the south boundary of Indian common land and the town of Grafton in 1728.

5A. DISCOVERY EXCURSION: BOULDER QUARRY FIELD

The hill to the left is littered with granite boulders, some with sizable quartz veins. Grafton residents from several different centuries used these rocks for tools and building materials. In the 19th century, men drilled and split the granite for building foundations and possibly to support portions of the nearby railroad bed.

More than 200 years earlier, Hassanamisco Indians chipped the quartz for knives and projectile points. The Hassanamisco, a clan of the Nipmucs who lived around the Blackstone and Quinsigamond rivers, made good use of the area’s natural resources.

The exposed granite bedrock with quartz veins extending across the trail is similar to the boulders found on the hillside.

6. POWER LINE CROSSING

The open view downhill and across the valley from this spot has a 19th-century feel. By the 1850s, much of Massachusetts was cleared of trees, due to the incessant demand for wood for heat and power, along with the agricultural need for cleared fields and pastures.

One hundred years earlier, in the early 1700s, this view was of the Misco property. Widow Christian Misco and her son, Joseph Misco—formerly connected to Hassanamesit, the praying Indian village—lived on 205 acres granted to them when the Massachusetts General Court reallocated the Indians’ land.

Photo courtesy of William P. Fiske, illustrations by Electa Kane Tritsch

7. GRANITE BLOCK WITH DRILL MARKS

Through hard work, granite can be split and shaped by hand. The block on the south side of the trail reveals drill marks made by a stoneworker, who would have used a wedge to split the granite along the line of holes.

Across the trail, trees with multiple trunks are evidence of past logging. When some types of trees are cut down, new shoots sprout from the cambium ring between bark and wood. Too steep and rocky to plow, this hillside was probably logged repeatedly. The decline of markets for New England's agricultural products, coupled with a demand for lumber in the early 20th century, led many landowners in Massachusetts to harvest the second growth white pines that had sprouted from seeds in abandoned fields and previously lumbered woodlots.

8. STONE WALL CORNER

This wall marks the boundary between lands owned by Sarah Burnee and Joseph Aaron, half brother and sister, whose grandparents—Sarah and Peter Muckamaug—were among the original Indian land owners of Grafton. A later owner, Jonathan Fisk, probably built the wall. It is massive; serving as a retaining wall to keep the hillside from eroding as well as establishing a boundary.

An opening in the wall (a short distance from the trail), reveals yet another owner's mark on the landscape. This owner broke through the wall—perhaps to get a wagon or tractor into the enclosure—using a method called stone wrapping; he moved the rocks as if they were double doors. The now open “doors” rest next to the walls.

9. STONE CAUSEWAY AND DUMP

This rocky path above a wet area is a farmer's solution to wet feet. Wetlands are often unappreciated by farmers, who would prefer drier land for growing crops or grazing animals, and who can't spare the time to dig carts out of mucky roads. Some farmer, or perhaps several generations of farmers, tossed stones into the wetlands to create a high, stable and dry crossing.

The dump is the old way of getting rid of unwanted belongings. Before town-owned landfills, people often created private dumps on their own land. Rich sources of cultural information for later archeologists, the dumps can be hazardous to humans and environment.

10. POND

Once a patch of wetland, the pond took shape when a farmer dammed it to create a drinking hole for livestock. In the early 20th century, Fiske Farm workers dumped

a jumble of boulders on the uphill side as they cleared land for commercial orchards. The boulders now form a rough channel for the water that feeds the pond. Someone built up the downhill side of the pond with earthen birms to hold more water.

In the 1950s, a nearby landowner reshaped the pond so that it could be used as a skating rink by neighborhood kids.

11. DITCH FOR PEARS

In the early 20th century, Fiske Farms workers dug this ditch to drain the soggy upland. They planted a small pear orchard here, hoping to expand the farm's commercial orchard operations.

Pears are susceptible to many diseases and they did not thrive. This area could not be replanted with other fruit trees, as they might have become infected from pathogens remaining in the soil.

Apples were Fiske Farms' main crop. At the peak of operation the orchard employed 200 people during harvest season, many bussed from Worcester, to tend the 18,000 trees. Unlike the apple trees elsewhere in Hassanamessit Woods, little evidence of the pears remains.

12. TRAIL END

New England farmers considered many things when they chose a site for their house. The location of the Ellis-Salisbury foundation, around the corner on Salisbury Street, is a good example. It is close to the road, with a barn and yard area on either side of it. The house cellar is dry, but it is located as close as possible to wetlands, so that the building would not take up valuable crop or orchard land. If you imagine this site without its present forest cover, the house would be at the top of an open, south-facing downward slope, so it would soak up winter sun. Lilacs along the south side of the building would provide some shade during summer months.

