

Special Experience in the Woods

A LUCKY FEW RETRACE THE KNOX TRAIL

By Ron Bernard



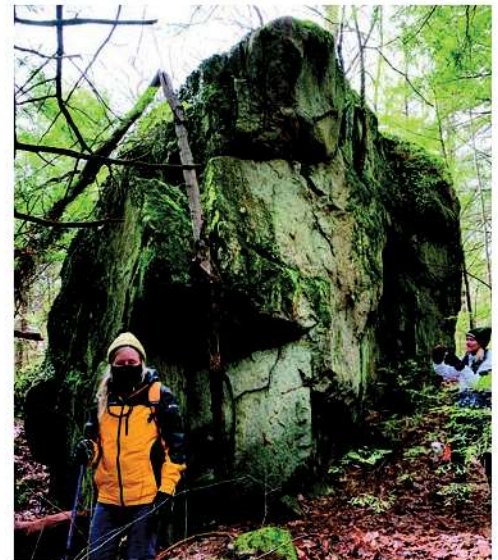
It was a chilly and damp post-snowstorm Saturday morning, April 17.

But 25 curious and eager souls, undeterred by the weather, turned out early for a special experience. They were the lucky few who managed to get on the list in a frantic first-come sign-up for a rare interpretive hike with Knox Trail cartographer-historian Tom Ragusa.

Local interest in the Knox spiked after the announcement earlier this year by the Otis Historical Commission that an application for official recognition for the Sandisfield-Otis section of the Trail had been accepted by the Massachusetts Historical Commission. The ultimate goal is nomination and listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

For almost four hours and six miles of challenging, wet conditions, Tom explained to the rapt enthusiasts trailing behind him how his patient and fastidious research plus a couple lucky breaks had eventually led to an accurate record of the road – basically still the one-horse path as it was in the mid-18th century. Today the trail is no longer obvious to the untrained.

Tom Ragusa by a core-dated yellow birch tree on the survey line that is 200 years old. Photos Jack Dennerlein



Abiel's Rock, a two-story high outcropping 150 feet south of the Knox Trail in Sandisfield, takes its name from Abiel Slayton who played on it while travelling the Trail with her father in 1742. For probably centuries before it was documented in 1764 by surveyor Nathaniel Austin, this huge monument would have been a reassuring sight for Native American trail users. Tom Ragusa said that only three large boulders used as references in Austin's survey exist as all other markers have been lost to deterioration or history. For the story of the legend of Abiel's Rock, see *The Sandisfield Times*, August 2013.

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It is in the last undeveloped, virtually untouched section of what was a 300-mile overland passage from Boston to Albany and connected north to Fort Ticonderoga. Tom has meticulously traced the Sandisfield-Otis section on a 14-foot long scroll which undoubtedly will win a place of prominence at the Massachusetts State Library if not in our National Archives.

Tom has conducted this tour only a handful of times, all in recent years, and the April event may be the only one this year. At day's end a weary but well-informed group expressed their appreciation and returned to their homes to recount a fun and interesting experience.

The official recognition of this section of the Trail, the first step in a lengthy process, came about because of Tom's commitment over some 30 years to document the original route of the ancient native trading path and route to seasonal hunting grounds in the Berkshires. In colonial times the trail was important in the fur trade, then as a military road which played vital roles during the French and Indian War (Gen. Amherst, 1758) and by Col. Henry Knox at the outset of the American Revolution, winter of 1775-76. 🍷

A Road of Many Uses, Many Names over Many Years

Earlier in the country's history the few but really vital trails and roads often had numerous names, sometimes concurrently. In the 18th and 19th centuries people did not speak of roads in terms of their entire lengths, of which they may have had no idea, but instead applied colloquial terms for segments of relevance to them. For instance, "the Boston to Albany Road." Early historians and writers were more likely to take a broader but more ambiguous view, hence "The Great Road."

Rudimentary horse-and-rider roads like this went out of general use by the 1820s as proper roads were constructed to link populated areas by stage coach. Portions of original trails and roads were often incorporated into the new roads. For example, much of Massachusetts Rt. 23 lies on the original native/Knox trail

Following are names of this road identified by Berkshire historians Tom Ragusa and Bernard Drew who have thoroughly studied the Knox Trail. And Tom adds, "Don't think of this list as exhaustive. There were probably more."

Suggested reading: Bernard A. Drew, *Henry Knox and the Revolutionary War Trail in Western Massachusetts*; McFarland & Co., Inc., 2012.

- "Indian trail"
- "Indian path"
- Ye Trodden Path (17th century)
- "publik and common poste rode" (early)
- The Great Road (1737)
- Westfield to Sheffield Road (1735)
- County Road (1754)
- The Boston (to/and) Albany Road
- The King's Post Road
- New England Fur Trail
- The New England Road
- The Great Turnpike
- Old Albany Road
- Westfield to Great Barrington Road
- Sheffield Road
- Barrington Road/Stage Road
- General Amherst Road (1760s-1770s)
- Amherst War Road
- Revolutionary War Road/Trail
- "military road"
- Knox Road/Trail (and variants, e.g., Knox Cannon Trail, Knox Heritage Trail, from early-19th century to present)
- Parts of Norton Road & Ext. in Otis
- Parts of Cold Spring Road in Sandisfield & Otis
- Webb Road (discontinued, connects with Cold Spring Road)

Recreation Committee News Flowers and Flags

A floral decorating event will be held Saturday, May 8, 10:00 a.m., until noon at Fire Station # 2 on Rte. 57. This event will be open to all ages. Sandisfield taxpayers only. Class size is limited, and all work stations will be distanced appropriately.

We will provide petite containers for you to decorate, and then guide you to creating a pretty floral arrangement to take home. (PS: The following day is Mother's Day.)

PREREGISTRATION IS REQUIRED. Please email us at SandisfieldRecComm@outlook.com or call 413-269-7357 before May 4th. We apologize for the short notice.

A few weeks later, for the Memorial Day Drive By Parade on Sunday, May 30, we will distribute small flags prior to the beginning of the parade at The Farmington River School in Otis, and also at the Sandisfield Library parking lot before and during the parade.

We hope you will join us for the floral decorating event and the parade. 🍷





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