

Sandscrest: A Sense of Place, A Sense of Past

by Nora Edinger

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Early Days, Mysterious Ways: 17,000 BC to AD 1770

Part 1 in a Series

The story of how 300 or so acres of the Ohio Valley came to be an Episcopal retreat center called Sandscrest might best be described as a set of nesting dolls. In some ways, each new era was informed by the previous one. But, each of these times was also fashioned in a way that left the past hidden from sight except for a common shape. This shape seems to be the land itself – ancient forest; a life-sustaining river; energy buried in various, knotted-up forms. It's there -- an ongoing-if-whispered suggestion that opportunity is ripe for the picking.



Such possibility is heady to humans of any time and place. At and around Sandscrest, it launched what may be America's oldest settlement to be continuously occupied – a home place perhaps dating as far back as 17,000 BC. It later sparked a colonization that devolved into a gruesome killing that occurred within walking distance of Sandscrest and solidified the direction this specific tract of land would take. Still later, it facilitated a peaceful farm so fertile its cows

were producing the highest content of butterfat in the region.

Tucked into these many layers of story are some fascinating people – some of whom are knowable by name. There were hunters, warriors and practitioners of ancient ways who told their stories with petroglyphs. There were brothers who were loyal to the death. There were brothers who married sisters and built twin farms to celebrate this fact. There were cousins who married each other and created a legacy. Now, there are priests in collars, farmers in



bandanas, musicians, artists, quilters. There are guests who are simply inclined to curl up under a quilt or enjoy a porch whose view seems to stretch into eternity.

This initial installment of *Sandscrest: A Sense of Place, a Sense of Past* shares our story core -- the very innermost of these figurative nesting dolls. It is the story of the first people who loved this place.

The First to Arrive

Sandscrest emerged from a known context, but one that is somewhat mysterious because it is difficult to document. Based on modern genetic comparisons, its first people likely came as part of immigration waves from Asia in general and Siberia in specific. This happened a long time ago in human terms.

How long? In nearby Avella, Pa., for example, there is an outcropping of stone that makes a natural shelter along Cross Creek, a tributary to the Ohio River. There, what are possibly the region's earliest immigrants were living continuously from between 17,000 and 14,000 BC until the American Revolutionary War began in the 1770s. The 17,000 BC arrival date would make this National Historic Landmark (known as Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Historic Village) the earliest-known site to be continually habituated in what is now the United States, according to operator Heinz History Center of Pittsburgh.

Artifacts found at Meadowcroft further suggest the people living there got around or at least engaged in long-distance trade, according to the landmark's website. Some of their possessions included marine items linked to the Atlantic coast, for example.

Meadowcroft, interestingly, is only few hours' walk away from Sandscreech if one were hugging trails along other valley waterways.

These initial Ohio Valley inhabitants – and potential others whose locations have yet to be discovered or documented -- were not the only comparatively early ones in the immediate area. The Adena people were living up and down the Ohio Valley from approximately 1,000 BC to about AD 100. They are known to have experimented with horticulture (in addition to hunting and gathering), created pottery, and built mounds and other earthworks for religious and burial purposes.

A large burial location in Moundsville – the Grave Creek Mound Historical Site, pictured at right – is best known. But, the Adena were also active elsewhere in what is now known as the Northern Panhandle of West



Virginia and even as far south as what is now Charleston, W.Va., according to Hank Lutton, curator at the site.

Lutton said some Adena mounds remain in present-day Ohio County, WV – which is where Sandscrest is located. These sites are relatively unknown as they are on private land.

He noted the Adena preferred to build earthworks on the second terrace above the Ohio River or on a particularly high point overlooking the river. The river-adjacent earthworks generally disappeared as a new wave of immigrants from Europe (and their slaves of African descent) began to move into the area in the 1770s, he added. “On flood plains, if they survived being plowed, when industry came in, they were lost,” he explained of the mounds.

Many Early Peoples, One Land

Someone or multiple someones from either this early era or a later, multi-tribal presence surrounding Ohio County was likely



behind petroglyphs left on Table Rock. This large geological outcropping pictured at right is located on private property that is adjacent to present-day Sandscrest and was part of the same parcel of land when Europeans began to stake ownership claims. Table Rock – shaped like a table or mushroom – is topped by at least four petroglyphs believed to be of Native American origin.



One is a spiral or snail shape – a design that regional historian Alan Fitzpatrick said refers to emergence or creation stories across multiple

Native American tribes. He suspects the other three shapes are kinds of *manitou* or spirit guides. The shapes – in their basic orientation – are pictured above.

There might have been more petroglyphs on the sandstone feature – which is large and stable enough to support multiple adults on its top. But, part of the rock's surface was covered by a thin layer of concrete at some point and for unknown reasons.

“It’s possible that people were visiting Table Rock as a spiritual place – a connection between earth and sky – for thousands of years,” said Fitzpatrick, pictured at right. He speculates that the Adena people and Meadowcroft people would have been aware of the geological feature and could have travelled through Sandscree land as a result.

Realizing that early connection is unlikely to be documentable unless pre-historic artifacts would be found near Table Rock, he noted there is a more recent possibility of Native Americans interacting with Sandscree land. As

recently as the late 1700s, he said, a large, multi-tribe hunting camp was still located in what is now downtown Wheeling. It was on the site now occupied by WesBanco Arena.

Fitzpatrick and Luton of Grave Creek Mound said there were Wyandot, Seneca, Delaware, Mingo and Shawnee peoples living near Ohio County if not in it at this time – the period when European settlers first began to reside here. While these tribes were agricultural in the 1700s – raising such crops as corn, squash, beans and sunflowers – Fitzpatrick said the hunting camp was still a big deal.



“People brought their whole families and stayed for a long time. The men went out and hunted and women and kids stayed behind, curing meat and dressing skins,” he said.

Fitzpatrick is a naturalized American citizen who is native to Canada’s Saskatchewan province. He said he became fascinated with indigenous culture while attending school with First Nation students in that location and now studies history and writes about it from that point of view.

He finds it unlikely that Native American families of that era weren’t taking day trips of sorts to Table Rock. “There’s nothing like it for a hundred miles around,” he explained.

Oft-repeated lore that various tribes used the rock to assemble, plan raids and divide war loot doesn’t ring true to Fitzpatrick based on his research and interviews he has done with tribal elders from the Wyandot and Delaware nations in order to write eight books on regional indigenous history.

He insists Table Rock – again, Sandcrests’ very near neighbor – was primarily a spiritual site for Native Americans and remained so until European immigrants seized control of the land and changed the dramatic site’s use to a celebratory and recreational one.



“To white people, it was a good place to have a picnic,” Fitzpatrick said.

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Sources and Attributions:

Online records maintained by the Heinz History Center of Pittsburgh; Wikipedia; a 2024 phone interview and subsequent emails with Hank Lutton, curator of the Grave Creek Mound Historical Site in Moundsville, W.Va.; a July 2015 article about Table Rock, Sean Duffy, written for the Ohio County Public Library's Archiving Wheeling website; and a 2024 interview and subsequent emails with Alan Fitzpatrick, Wheeling historian and author of eight regional history books written from a Native American perspective.

Petroglyph images are Sandscrest-generated paper tracings of vintage photographs from the Ohio County Public Library Archives, Wheeling, WV. Table Rock photos are also from this library archive – the black and white image from the Schreiber family papers, circa 1906-1912, and the color image being a modern one taken by Sean Duffy. Both are used with permission.

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