

Chapter 1

Headless Apparitions of the Haunted Cedar Knoll

She had heard the stories. Though a youngster, she had heard whispers of the haunted cedar knoll.

The ancient rocky knoll, strewn with hulking boulders, stood in Pelham Manor along Shore Road opposite Christ Church. Though it was the early nineteenth century, the youngster's grandmother had heard frightening stories during her own girlhood in the late eighteenth century. As her life ebbed, the grandmother warned her little granddaughter against visiting the knoll.

Such warnings only piqued the brash little girl's curiosity. She chose a windy night when a glowing full moon hung low in the sky to pick her way unsteadily up the boulders and rocks to climb the rocky knoll at its southern end.

Though the moon was bright, the furry branches of hundreds of ancient cedars on the rocky outcropping obscured much of the light. Because the moon hung low though, some light found its way beneath the branches. Shadows of the gnarled trunks and drooping branches striped the ground.

Each time the wind gusted, the furry branches shook and danced, casting confusing shadows that painted trunks, rocks, and ground. During one gust, the girl heard something eerie.

A howling shriek pierced the wailing gust. It curdled her blood. She knew howls of the wind. This was something sinister. As the shriek dissipated, she questioned her senses. Had she heard anything but wind?

Then shrieks rose again above the whining gusts. She knew then she should have taken her grandmother's warning to heart.

Instinctively the little girl crouched to lower her profile. Slipping from tree to tree and boulder to boulder, the courageously curious youngster crept toward shrieks and cries in the distance. As she made her way along the knoll toward its center, she could see an orange glow that flickered in the distance. The glow competed with the light of the moon and intensified the shadows of the furry branches that danced in the gusts.

The pungent smoke of burning green boughs brought tears to her eyes. She sneaked along and soon spied a fuming bonfire. Shadowy figures moved about the smoke and flames.

When she had made her way as close as courage allowed, she peered from behind a boulder. She spied a score of shrieking figures dancing around the fire. She first thought all had heads bowed, as though in prayer, as they danced about the flames. Soon she realized that she saw no heads, not because they were bowed and thus hidden from sight but because none of the furiously dancing figures had heads.

Wonder turned to horror. If the dancers had no heads, from where came the ear-piercing shrieks? Only then did she realize that the screaming dancers actually had heads. Each carried one.

Each dancer cradled within its arms a perfectly animated head that howled and shrieked. The eyes of each opened and closed, staring at the fire then looking toward the heavens as its wide-open mouth howled. Long dark hair cascaded from each head. The face of each was contorted and wrinkled.

Just as the little girl's grandmother had warned, the dancers once were Indians. Indeed, the spirits wore Indian garb and danced in a ring around the fire seemingly unaware that anyone spied nearby.

The hellish spirits bobbed diabolically. Though the eavesdropping little girl sensed evil, the spirits seemed to be hopping and whooping in a joyous celebration. Occasionally, each lifted a leg in unison with all others. The heads chanted in cadence. Other times the figures tightened the circle toward the fire, dancing in unison, then backed away in unison, expanding their circle.

Once, after the circle expanded, the shrieks ended abruptly. Howling winds halted. An eerie silence settled. The girl froze. She held her breath, fearing she might have been discovered.

The silence seemed eternal. The girl prepared to flee. Had she been seen? Had the terrible demons sensed her presence?

Each spirit then tossed its head toward the fire—not in the fire but near it. The heads rolled forward and stopped. Silence reigned momentarily. Each head then began to shriek in cadence again. With that, the winds gusted and the headless spirits linked arms and danced again both about the fire and the shrieking heads lying near the flames.

After dancing for what seemed an eternity to the girl, the headless dancers stopped. Again, the shrieks of the heads lying near the fire ended abruptly. The howling winds stopped. Another eerie silence washed over the knoll as each headless figure stood motionless and each head lay quietly by the fire.

The little girl feared what next might happen. She had a horrifying, uneasy feeling. She wished she had listened to her grandmother and never crept onto the cedar knoll.

As her regrets welled, every head lying on the ground came awake and shrieked a blood-curdling, piercing scream as though in monstrous pain. The unholy sounds reverberated throughout the knoll and across the little town of Pelham. Screams seemed to shake the headless Indian spirits back into motion. Each rushed forward and grabbed whatever head was nearest, whether its own or not, and cradled it, again, in careful arms. Once all held heads, the dancing and shrieking began anew.

“The stories are true,” thought the little girl. But she had seen enough. How would she escape without being seen? What if she were discovered? Should she run or creep away?

As the shrieks continued, she glanced over a shoulder to choose an avenue of escape. As she did, the shrieks ended abruptly. All became dark and quiet. She glanced back toward the headless apparitions.

All were gone. The bonfire was gone. Neither smoke nor embers remained. The area was bare. The howling winds had ended. Tree branches no longer swayed. Moonlight once again cascaded through the treetops above, striping the ground below with the shadows of the cedar trees’ trunks and branches.

Despite the serene moonlight, the little girl turned and ran to the edge of the haunted cedar knoll. She nearly tumbled down the rocky decline as she scrambled off the knoll and onto Shore Road. She ran for her life toward home.

As she ran, her mind raced. “The stories are true!” she gasped to herself. She thought of her grandmother’s stories that rival tribes known as Siwanoy and Laaphawachkins¹ once lived in the region harmoniously until one of the Siwanoy murdered a member of the rival tribe. A

blood feud followed and led to a deadly battle between the rival tribes on the great cedar knoll. The Siwanoy vanquished a score of their foes, decapitating each warrior and leaving their bodies on the top of the knoll. Each time the moon was full and the winds howled, the spirits of the dead Laaphawachkins danced in preparation for revenge against the Siwanoy.

The little girl ran frantically until she tumbled safely inside her home. Though brash, she never dared return to the haunted cedar knoll. Indeed, she was so frightened by what she saw that she never spoke of that frightening evening until her last years.

In 1901, however, a *New-York Daily Tribune* reporter convinced her, long after she had become an old woman, to tell her story. That story appeared in the December 15, 1901, issue of the newspaper. It is the only known eyewitness account of the headless apparitions of the haunted cedar knoll.²

Read More

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Chapter 2

Spirit of the Siwanoy Brave

Branches stung the face of the Siwanoy brave as he ran through the primeval forest. Underbrush clawed at his legs. Though blood streamed from scratches on his face, arms, and legs, he felt no pain, only fear.

The Siwanoy glanced over a shoulder as he ran, searching for pursuers. Though he could not yet see them, he could hear their shrieks. With each passing moment, the unearthly sounds seemed closer. He considered dropping the bow he carried in his left hand and the deerskin quiver with arrows slung across his back to make it easier to run, but he didn't. He ran.

Breathing heavily, he paused to rest against a tree, instinctively keeping its trunk between him and his pursuers. The shrieks were louder, almost drowning the sound of his heavy breathing. His temples pounded. His eyes darted as he searched for any refuge or avenue of escape. There was none.

Instantly, a strange sense of calm overwhelmed him. Momentarily, as he focused his thoughts on what next to do, the approaching shrieks melted away within his ears. Finally, he understood his heart. It was time to sprint to the Sacred Place ahead of his pursuers. He ran again, this time toward the Sacred Place.

The Sacred Place

Siwanoy knew the Sacred Place as the place of "Three Trees." Deep within the ancient Pelham forest was a monumental clearing in which

stood three massive oaks. Each of the ancient, monumental trees spread its canopy nearly 150 feet from its trunk. The primeval oaks stood in nearly a perfect triangle. The sacred trees already were ancient, according to the Siwanoy brave's grandfather, when his grandfather's father was a young boy. One tree stood at the north point of an equilateral triangle. The second stood at the west point. The third stood at the east point.

In later historic times, those famous Pelham trees were aptly named the "North Tree," the "West Tree," and the "East Tree." Some in Pelham knew the area not as "Three Trees" but as the "North Oak Triangle." By the late nineteenth century, however, the West Tree had died and disappeared, though the North and East Trees still stood. Old photographs show that both of those ancient trees were, indeed, monumental.

The North Oak Triangle stood in part of Pelham that has been annexed by New York City. For many years there was a road that branched from today's Shore Road beginning about where the driveway entrance to the clubhouse for the Pelham Bay and Split Rock Golf Courses now begins. The road, known variously as Split Rock Road, Prospect Hill Road, and Prospect Lane, meandered from today's clubhouse driveway along the modern golf cart path that traverses beneath the New Haven Branch Line railroad tracks, then beyond where it passed the landmark Split Rock boulder and proceeded across what now is Interstate 95 and into a portion of today's town of Pelham, where a few blocks of the roadway still exist as "Split Rock Road" before ending at today's Boston Post Road.

The North Oak Triangle stood along Split Rock Road about a quarter mile from the roadway's beginning at Shore Road. The trees stood just past today's New Haven Branch Line railroad tracks on the side of the tracks opposite Shore Road. In the late nineteenth century, both the North Tree and the East Tree stood on that side of the branch line, although the West Tree was gone.

According to one author writing in the early twentieth century:

These trees were regarded by the Indians with great reverence. Tradition tells us that, under their spreading branches the various tribes of Indians, some from Long Island and others from as far as Wappinger's Falls, met in the early part of every June and settled all their differences. This league of [Indigenous Americans] gathered together without any mental reservations and settled amicably their disputes.¹

Cornered at the Sacred Place

Scratched and bleeding, the Siwanoy brave made it to the West Tree of the Sacred Place. He ducked beneath heavy drooping branches of the tree and leaned on it with his bloody bare back resting against the rough bark of the massive trunk. He could smell the stench of decay from the moist ground beneath the outspread branches of the tree. His chest heaved as he struggled to catch his breath. He shifted the deerskin quiver slung over a shoulder and the two arrows it held so the quiver and arrows dangled at his side. He dropped the bow to the ground.

Though young, the exceptionally handsome Siwanoy brave carried himself with nearly aristocratic bearing. He was a proud and successful warrior. He was strong. He held within his heart, however, a deep secret. The precise secret that he kept and refused to divulge to his tribe is now lost to history. However, it was this secret and his refusal to divulge it to the tribe that was responsible for the terrible and relentless pursuit by his fellow Siwanoy—members of his own clan.

According to legend, this proud Siwanoy brave “kept a secret from the rest of his tribe which he refused to divulge when ordered to do so.” According to the story, members of the brave’s tribe decided to conduct two trials to determine whether he should be called to account for his refusal to divulge his secret.

It was the supposed custom of local Siwanoy to treat members of their tribe accused of wrongdoing as innocent until proven guilty by *two* trials rather than one. This Siwanoy brave was dragged to the first such trial and was proven guilty of wrongdoing for refusing to divulge his secret to clan elders. Only days later, as he was dragged to the second trial, he overpowered a guard, took his bow and quiver, escaped, “and was pursued from the rocks near Travers Island to these sacred trees.”

The brave’s secret, however, was not in the forefront of his mind as he leaned against the great West Tree and awaited the arrival of his tormentors. The shrieks continued as the pursuers approached. He stood with his back to the great tree. Through the outspread branches of the tree, he finally could see them as they approached.

As the Siwanoy neared, the handsome brave reached into the deerskin quiver dangling by his side from a strap and removed a single arrow. He stood ramrod straight and pressed his back hard against the trunk of the tree. He closed his eyes and defied his pursuers by holding

the tip of the arrow to his breast and shoving it violently so that it pierced his heart.

As the pursuers arrived, the proud Siwanoy brave fell at the foot of the great West Tree. He carried the secret with him to the grave.

In modern times those who visit the area of the Sacred Place on moonless nights have seen a spectral Siwanoy brave running frantically while carrying a bow with a deerskin quiver slung across his back. Usually when the spirit of the brave is seen, unearthly shrieks also can be heard in the distance, particularly when it is windy. It seems that the spirits of the Siwanoy band who chased the brave refuse to let the specter of the proud Siwanoy brave rest and, instead, will continue their chase for eternity until they learn the secret of the Siwanoy brave.

Read More

This tale is inspired by a tiny fragment of an unidentified, yellowed, and brittle newspaper clipping in the collection of the Office of the Historian of the Town of Pelham (copy in possession of this author). The clipping does not identify its date or source and has not yet been identified despite extensive research efforts.