


# DIG this Historic Trail!

## Manitoulin's Sheguiandah Archaeological Site

WRITTEN BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY MIKE DAVIS EXCEPT WHERE NOTED

Visitors head back down the trail from the summit, or highest point of this historic site. Well-built boardwalks provide access while protecting the ground, stones and plants from being trampled. According to Indigenous elders, the summit has in the past been used for such spiritual purposes as meditation and sweat lodges.





If you're interested in archaeology, history, Indigenous culture, geology, nature or simply walking in a beautiful forest, you'll probably enjoy the in-depth, educational exploration of one of the most intriguing parts of Manitoulin Island, on a guided tour of Sheguiandah's national historic Indigenous site.



**T**his area was first featured in the Summer 2017 issue of this magazine, with the article “Quest for Quartzite: Aboriginal Ancestors at Sheguiandah.” That feature covers much of the history of the site and the archaeological studies done there, including the controversy over the earliest date of human occupation. This feature is available for free on the website NEViews.ca.

In 2017 plans were underway to develop an interpretive trail through the large site and offer guided tours to the public. Taking the trail is only possible with a guide, and the knowledge and information that is shared is worth the time and attention. Access to the trail is through the Centennial Museum in Sheguiandah. Before starting the tour, it's helpful to examine the museum's exhibits of artifacts and finds from archaeological digs at the site. These include stone worked points and examples of cordage made from Leatherwood plant fibres. From the museum, it's a short drive to the shore of Sheguiandah Bay where the trail begins.

The 10-hectare site is one of many early sites in the area, and is significant for ancient quarry pits and stone tool workshops that have been assessed as reaching back up to 10,000 years ago when Paleo-Indians used the resources here. Other peoples occupied the site more recently, including those from Archaic, Woodland, Ojibwa and Odawa cultures. The site continues to hold cultural and

spiritual significance for First Nations people today, who may practise meditation here.

The trail was developed with the expertise of archaeologist Dr. Patrick Julig of Laurentian University, who explains that “the trail concept as related to a tourism initiative was put forward around 1989/90 by a local consortium of three First Nations on Manitoulin and the local municipality, now the Town of Northeastern Manitoulin and the Islands. There was a band council resolution to do the new research on the Sheg site and improve access or build an interpretive centre as a tourism initiative and help protect the site. It was looted for artifacts by collectors for many years.” Patrick explains that the interpretive centre was found to be too costly, and the option of a guided tour on a trail was chosen instead.

### **Climbing the Trail**

The trail moves gradually upward from Sheguiandah Bay, past occasional informational signs and black metal sculptures that suggest activities from long ago. The landscape features some flat sections or terraces, which are ancient beaches or “erosional steps” that date further back in time the higher the elevation, leading to the description that you're “walking back in time” as you climb the trail. These levels have been precisely dated and identified by scholars, and are explained on the signs beside the trail.

“The trail itself was essentially a mitigation plan to help protect the site by allowing limited guided



visits, and to discourage illicit visits and looting,” adds Patrick. Together with others, including Indigenous people, Patrick helped plan the trail route and choose 10 locations for the plaques and art installations.

### **Fascinating Demonstrations**

Last year, student Olivia Fetterly brought enthusiasm and energy to her work as a tour guide on the

trail, showing how some plants were used by ancient cultures for food and to make useful materials, and by demonstrating how the stone was knapped or chipped to form tools.

Between an area called Mystic Ridge and the highest point of the trail, is a relatively flat area of ground that became known as the Habitation Area, because it is rich in artifacts like scrapers and knives that





◀ Climbing up the trail.

▲ Some of the site's artifacts displayed in Centennial Museum.



▲ Tour guide Olivia Fetterly inside the entrance to the trail.





▲ One of the permanent art installations depicting activities that might have occurred here thousands of years ago.

would be useful where people lived. Some of these tools were found almost a metre down in the ground.

A good explanation of how the Habitation Area and other terraces likely came to be is offered by Dr. Peter L. Storck, an archaeologist who was involved, with others, in studying the Sheguiandah site in 1991:

“Manitoulin Island probably first emerged as dry land around 10,500 years ago, shortly after ice retreat and the draining of glacial Lake Algonquin, which at its highest had risen to a level roughly 60 metres above Sheguiandah. For the next 500 years lake levels dropped steadily, exposing much of the Georgian Bay basin as dry land. It may have been during this period that Sheguiandah was first occupied, by the



▲ Olivia demonstrates flint knapping to make a stone tool.





▲ Olivia showing a large flaked stone tool.



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Late Paleo-Indian people who would leave their distinctive spear points and other tools in the Habitation Area behind Mystic Ridge.” This description is from Peter’s award-winning book *Journey to the Ice Age*.

### **Dig Souvenir**

A delightful touch at the end of the tour is that

each participant is given a souvenir booklet called Sheguiandah Archaeological Site Field Guide. It contains photographs, drawings, charts, information about the site and, from another source on Manitoulin, an actual flake of quartzite stone!

Patrick has this assessment of the trail: “By allowing guided access to the interested

public and locals, school groups and researchers, the unique history of ancient Indigenous mining going back to the Ice Age, is highlighted,” he says. “People take ownership and help protect and celebrate this unique Indigenous heritage.”

The tour takes about two hours and begins with a visit to look at the relevant

artifacts in the Centennial Museum. Tickets for the tour should be reserved through the museum by calling 705.368.2367 or emailing shegsite@townofnemi.on.ca. Ticket prices are \$31.50 for an adult or senior and \$15.75 per child. Group bookings of at least 10 people receive a 20 per cent discount. **NEV**





◀ Highest point of the Sheguiandah Archaeological Site Recreational Trail on Manitoulin. White quartzite from this site was used to make tools 10,000 years ago. At a break in the trees on the horizon can be seen Georgian Bay. PHOTO BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT.



▲ A keeper of a souvenir: this booklet summarizes important details of the trail's history and features. PHOTO BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT

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