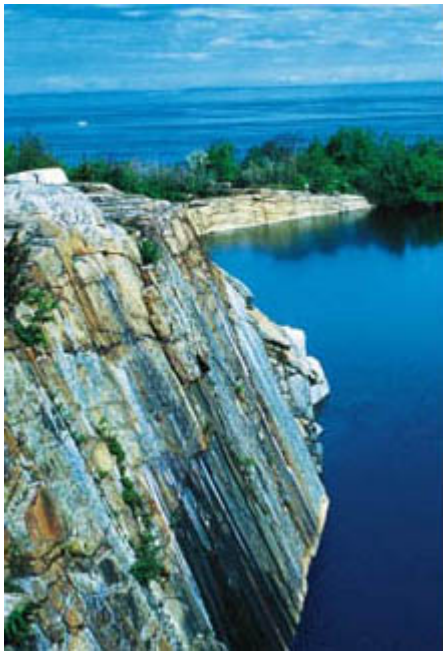
Venturing Out



There was a time in my life when I fell asleep at night reading Penelope Leach's childrearing bible, *Your Baby and Child* (New York, 1978). "Housework can seem like a pleasant play all over the house if the baby is bounced on the bed that is being made, plays peek-a-boo around the furniture and has a duster to wave," Leach cheerfully advised. Shopping, too, "can be a treat. He will enjoy riding in a cart, helping himself to things off the shelves, opening the packages and sampling the contents . . . Accept the inevitable and let him help himself to something innocuous, like a small box of raisins."

Right. Now try three dusters and three boxes of raisins.

Since taking three babies grocery shopping is far from "pleasant play," I spent much of the first two years of my triplets' lives hanging out in our house or in the backyard, in our Olympic-sized sandbox. But after that, little by little, we began venturing out. When the kids turned two and wanted to walk, rather than be walked, around the block, I mustered my courage and opened the front door. A ten-minute stroll turned into an hour's scramble. But before long we found ourselves "hiking" up local hills (it was years before we made it to the top).

Still, however much fun, none of these early outings was about anything except the present: the bee sting avoided, the skinned knee bandaged, the snack consumed. On a trip to the Bridgeport Zoo, I tried to get Lily to focus on an impressive array of barnyard animals. What held her fascination did not flap, bleat, or moo. She was most interested in the water fountain, of course.

Of course, because, for many years, young children—whether they are triplets or not—are focused on their bodies and on what those bodies can do in the world.

They want to move, to climb, to test the limits of their own locomotion. Eventually, they ask questions about how things have gotten to be the way they are. In about their eighth year, children develop a sense of time and an ability to abstract that connect stories with pasts. They begin, that is, to think historically.

I admit that I was impatient for this stage to arrive. Though I have loved all the phases through which my children have moved, I was hungry for a chance to explore the world beyond our yard and the immediate present. In the back of my mind, I held Laura Trim, the mother of a childhood friend, as a model of historian and parent. "Mrs. Trim," a woman with an unquenchable passion for life and fun, pursued her interest in place and past as a nonteaching, lay historian. She recruited her kids and their friends to evaluate "outings and adventures within a one-hundred mile radius of Dallas." Not satisfied with sitting around and watching TV, Laura wrote a local cult classic, *North Texas, Every Nook and Cranny*. She did the research, identifying spots such as the "Knights of Pythias Castle Hall" in Fort Worth ("There's a knight in shining armor right in the middle of downtown!") and had the kids illustrate. I wanted to be able to venture out, to load my car and explore, Trim-style. Feather dusters and bed bouncing be damned.

We moved to Boston, epicenter of historical tourism, just as Lily, Max, and Sam were on the verge of being ready to think historically. Since we arrived in 1998, we have sampled Boston's historical offerings liberally, visiting among others, the Freedom Trail, Lowell Mills, Old Sturbridge Village, Plimoth Plantation, Blue Hills Trail Museum, the Essex Shipbuilding Museum, Hammond Castle, the U.S.S. Constitution, Battleship Cove, the New Bedford Whaling Museum, the Sandwich Glass Museum, Provincetown Tower and Museum, and a host of small, local historical museums and societies. Though we have enjoyed these immensely, best of all has been a little-known spot, a model of historical and environmental preservation that explains how people and place changed each other.

Fig. 1. Halibut Point State Park. Photo by John Nove, Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management.

About a forty-five minute drive north of Boston in Rockport, on Cape Ann, Halibut Point State Park is an unusual example of a brilliantly conceived historical site. A slice of dramatic New England coast, Halibut Point (so-named because eighteenth-century sailing ships had to "haul about" to clear the rocky coast) is home to an abandoned nineteenth-century granite quarry, a modest visitors' center, and a World War II-era watchtower. The State Department of Environmental Management (DEM) and a private land trust jointly administer the seventy-acre site. About twenty years ago, real estate developers eyed the spectacularly beautiful spot for home construction. A local citizens' group successfully pressured the state to buy and preserve the property, keeping it

out of developers' hands. What they saved were the remains of Babson Farm Quarry, a place riddled with clues hinting at more than a century of stories about geology, ecology, and industry. The site was home to crusty New Englanders who employed increasingly mechanized machinery to wrest granite—*grainy*, hardened, molten magma made of quartz, feldspar, and hornblende—from the ground. As early as the late seventeenth century, farmers and fisher folk using iron hand tools crudely cut wheels of the stuff to serve as mooring stones, slabs of rock combined with sturdy tree trunks that they sunk in harbors to tie up boats. In the 1840s, Rockport Granite Company began quarrying at the site. By the 1880s, workers on Cape Ann—as in so many parts of the world—adopted the latest explosives and steam-driven power tools to quarry on an unprecedented scale, linking the region to distant markets, including Havana and New Orleans. By the Great Depression, granite quarrying on the site had all but ended.

Thinking more about the area's fragile environment and beauty than its history, the DEM chose the site to install a domestic-scale renewable energy system. The state constructed a visitors' center powered by solar panels and a wind turbine. The park opened in 1981 but the very same neighbors who had lobbied to preserve Halibut Point complained bitterly about the turbine's look and noise, so the state dismantled the turbine, leaving the center more or less without a cause.

In the late 1990s, the DEM hired John Nove, a Tufts-trained biologist with a background in education, to direct Halibut Point's visitor services. Nove, who recently left DEM to pursue private research, wanted to create a setting where children and adults would be provoked to talk about the wealth of clues left from the old quarrying days. "I didn't just want them reading stuff off of a wall," Nove said. With a total budget of about $25,000, he wrote a self-guided tour and hand built brief exhibits in the visitors' center that focus on renewable energy, the watchtower, geology, and the human history of the area. Finding and arranging abandoned granite blocks in various stages of refinement, Nove made it possible for visitors to see and touch the process of nineteenth-century quarrying. Kids who arrive never before having thought about the way slabs of rock become paving stones or curbs leave Halibut Point with a visceral understanding of chipping, cutting, and polishing. They also learn to contemplate questions about the basic mechanics of leverage: in times when workers didn't have access to hydraulic cranes and front-end loaders, how did they move tons of stone from quarry to shore? Nove wisely incorporated a brief film demonstrating the use of clever, low-tech hand tools to emphasize the answers. In the 1970s, Walter Johnson, the elderly son of a former quarry foreman, taught himself the old techniques he'd seen his father employ in cutting and splitting rectangular blocks of the heathery gray granite that runs in seams along the shore. Nove featured the film, which plays throughout the day inside the visitors' center, alongside a small exhibit of turn-of-the-century hand tools, including dog-hole drills, derricks, and deadmen. No matter how many times we tour the visitors' center, my kids insist on watching the short film. No matter how many times they have seen Johnson chalk and mark his

stone, tap his mallet, and break the stone evenly and neatly down the center, they let out audible gasps. “I was interested,” Nove told me, “in helping people make sense of the world.”


Fig. 2. Visitor’s center, Halibut Point State Park. Photo by John Nove, Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management.

Nove’s genius rests on his ability to get children to think about this one particular place as it is now and as it has been over the course of the past two hundred years. His low-budget but nonetheless inspired curatorship encourages visitors to appreciate Halibut Point from a time before human inhabitants of Cape Ann became interested in granite through a time when they could think of little else. “Certain sites speak to us,” editor Peter Ginna observes in his essay, “Taking Place,” “because in visiting them, we confront the past in a tangible, immediate way.” Nove’s exhibits on local birds and animals, as well as his explanations of quarrying allow us to know this spot on the Atlantic Coast, this edge of America, tangibly, immediately. Some places, Ginna explains, stimulate “the historical imagination,” because they help us see that we can’t separate events and actors from their location. Nove’s enhancements make Halibut Point a place where children can sensitively imagine relationships between people and place. Visiting Halibut Point, my kids feel and smell what it was like to work stone out of the ground, to cut it by hand, and to load it into ships. Walking in downtown Boston, if they spot gray stone with distinctive parallel grooves, they wonder aloud if they’re looking at granite quarried from Cape Ann.

When we spill out of the van into Halibut Point’s parking lot, Lily, Max, and Sam sprint down a wide, shady path toward the visitors’ center. Sometimes, I can barely believe I’ve reached a stage in parenting where the only thing I need to yell is “Look out for poison ivy!” No matter their mood when they get in the van, by the time they are running down that path, the kids are excited and ready to explore. They know they can tour the visitors’ center, climb the watchtower, take part in an historical scavenger hunt, or just ramble down to the coast, where we all scramble over upended slabs of quarried granite pockmarked by tide pools filled with sea anemones, starfish, hermit crabs, and snails. On clear days, we eat sandwiches, gazing up the coast to New Hampshire. Legs and minds stretched, the kids have ventured so far from home that the whole world is their backyard. If they want a water fountain, it’s because they’re thirsty.

Halibut State Park is open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. from Memorial Day to Labor Day. The rest of the year it’s open sunrise to sunset but since the tide pools do freeze in winter and the granite along the coast gets slippery, winter isn’t a great time to scramble along the shore.

Further Reading: Laura Trim, *North Texas, Every Nook and Cranny* (Dallas, Tex.,

1975). William E. Leuchtenburg, ed., *American Places: Encounters with History, a Celebration of Sheldon Meyer* (New York, 2000).

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