

Dogtown: Death and Enchantment in a New England Ghost Town
Prologue

The Prophetic Pictures

After crossing the Merrimack River, I turned onto Route 1A, continuing south through the picturesque towns of Massachusetts' North Shore. I was traveling on a hunch in search of an abandoned colonial settlement called Dogtown Common, or simply Dogtown, though it was not identified on any map I could find at the time. It was one of those October days that inspire thoughts of harvest, not a battenning down for winter. Traffic slowed through Newburyport, an archetypal New England town that keeps its collar buttoned. Kids sporting shiny jerseys in bright colors spilled out of cars parked roadside at a soccer tournament. Beyond the playing field and farm stands with pumpkins piled high, the landscape opened to tidal estuaries where gulls were lighting over mudflats and marsh grass in shades of golden taupe. The amber light warmed my skin, bringing a flush to my cheeks. I was feeling rapturous and inspired, dreaming of paintings coming to life.

I was on my way from Portland, Maine, where I lived during this 1999 autumn, to Gloucester, hoping to find the site that had inspired a series of paintings by Marsden Hartley. *The New York Times* has called Hartley "the most gifted of the early American Modernists," while *New Yorker* critic Peter Schjeldahl has written, "Hartley's best art looms so far above the works of such celebrated contemporaries as Georgia O'Keeffe, Charles Demuth, Arthur Dove, and John Marin that it poses the question of how his achievement was even possible." The answer, I had learned, was to be found in Dogtown.

Hartley, a peripatetic, lonesome soul, had been obsessed with Dogtown's primordial, highland expanse, which he painted on three

separate occasions in the 1930s. And while Hartley's Dogtown paintings helped lay the foundation for some of his later, greatest work, he also claimed to have been forever changed—and possibly healed—by his time there. As for me, I was obsessed with Hartley, these paintings, and the 1931 summer that he spent in this forgotten corner of America.

By official estimation, Dogtown is an unpopulated 3,000-acre expanse—some say more—that fills most of the geographical center of the island tip of Cape Ann, a crooked peninsula that extends ten miles seaward from Massachusetts' North Shore, twenty-five miles northeast of Boston. The end of this peninsula, where the city of Gloucester (population 31,000) and town of Rockport (population 8,000) are located, is an island settlers created in 1643 by cutting through fifty yards of marsh in the Annisquam (or "Squam") River. For most of American history, this island, which is nearly the same size as Manhattan, was accessible only by boat or a short drawbridge that crosses the colonial canal known as the "Cut." Though the nearby towns of Essex and Manchester-By-The-Sea and parts of Gloucester are situated on the peninsula, when people say "Cape Ann," oftentimes they are referring to the island alone. For added emphasis the islanders may say "this side of the Cut." No matter where Cape Ann officially begins or ends, most everyone feels that the air is different after the Cut is crossed. Perhaps because Gloucester and Rockport extend so far into the Atlantic Ocean, something does change. It is the end of the line. Beyond the roads and railway there is nothing but the sea.

The main roads around Cape Ann crest and fall over steep hills and tack hard on sharp corners as they follow the island's fifty miles of shoreline. Along them, smaller roads leading into the inland heart of this place climb steeply, if not suddenly, before narrowing, turning to dirt, and disappearing behind locked gates into the wilds of Dogtown.

Dogtown's terrain varies considerably from forest to field where one can stumble upon stone remnants of colonial homes, to swamp and bog and hill and dale. Much of this highland area, the former pinnacle of an ancient pre-Cambrian mountain, is strewn with a preponderance of giant boulders. These boulders, some of which measure more than

twenty-feet in height, are glacial erratics from the Laurentide ice sheet, the continent-sized Pleistocene epoch glacier that once covered half of North America.

Dogtown's northern end is pockmarked with abandoned granite quarries. A commuter rail track that runs between Rockport and Gloucester before continuing southwest to Boston cuts through the area's eastern edge. The Babson and Goose Cove Reservoirs demarcate its borders to the southeast and west respectively. Taken together, these features define an area that is roughly equivalent to three and a half times the size of Central Park.

Today Dogtown is heavily forested—much like it was before settlers cleared the forest primeval in the 1600s—which lends it a wilderness-like feel. But the area remained treeless for nearly three hundred years. Writing in his *Journal* on September 23, 1858, Henry David Thoreau described this sere, barren wasteland as the “most peculiar scenery of the Cape” and noted its “hills strewn with boulders, as if they had rained down, on every side.” These same rocks captured Marsden Hartley's attention seventy-three years later.

There is nothing majestic or idyllic in Hartley's gloomy paintings of Dogtown's large boulders. In Hartley's images, these rocks look like colossal macaroons, bones bleached from sunlight, gargantuan cheese cubes, smoked marshmallows, or giant chewed fingernails; one resembles a whale rising from the earth. A work called *Flaming Pool—Dogtown* stands apart from Hartley's other paintings of the area. *Flaming Pool* shows a small, gently hued body of water surrounded by brilliant red and orange flora and a pink and green sky. The place appears otherworldly, inspired, as if it could spontaneously catch on fire the moment a viewer walked away.

Hartley's Dogtown paintings are altogether unusual, a little clunky—even as early Modernist paintings of a Primitivist style go—hauntingly lonesome and entirely unpicturesque. But these images of rocks and earth thrive with profoundly felt distillations of energy. Though they evince a spiritual intensity that comes from Hartley's deep meditation upon form, shape, texture, color, and place, they are so

unusual as to seem almost unreal, as if they could only be found in *Ultima Thule*, the far flung, ancient mythical land believed to exist beyond the “borders of the known world.”

If Dogtown were indeed a life-altering place “so original in its appearance as not to be duplicated either in New England or anywhere else,” as Hartley claimed and his paintings suggested, I wanted to see it. When I told friends about these paintings their responses reminded me of a question posed by Elinor Ludlow in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Prophetic Pictures.” Before she sits for a celebrated portraitist (a fictionalized version of painter Gilbert Stuart), Elinor asks her fiancé, “Are you telling me of a painter, or a wizard?” “In truth,” he answers, “that question might be asked much more seriously than you suppose. They say that he paints not merely a man’s features, but his mind and heart. He catches the secret sentiments and passions, and throws them upon the canvass, like sunshine—or perhaps, in the portraits of dark-souled men, like a gleam of internal fire.” Hartley’s Dogtown pictures had their own strange, brooding gleam, that flaming pool, those talismanic rocks. Whereas Hawthorne’s magic painter has the ability to “raise phantoms at will, and keep the form of the dead among the living,” Hartley’s paintings seemed to have raised the spirit of an unseen ancient, American place and made it visible. Under Hartley’s brush Dogtown was shadowy, numinous, transformative. This was the Dogtown I wanted to find. Like a Doubting Thomas, I hoped to finger its wounds.

I made for Gloucester’s downtown with its wide harbor, close-set brick storefronts, mix of Georgian, Federalist, and Victorian architectural styles, fishing boats at their moorings, and waterfront warehouses. There were signs offering deep sea fishing trips, whale watches, and schooner rides, but no roadside markers leading visitors to Dogtown. The lack of Dogtown signage had much to do with the simple fact that Gloucester, which was initially settled in 1623 and incorporated in 1642, is America’s oldest seaport. For over three hundred and seventy-five years, this small city’s livelihood and identity has come from the ocean, not its hardscrabble, boulder-strewn interior. But there was more to the story. Many considered the place I sought to be dangerous. But I carried on,

wandering in and out of shops on Main Street. No one in Gloucester seemed to be paying their rent selling reproductions of Hartley's Dogtown paintings or Dogtown postcards or pet rocks. The free tourist maps did not list Dogtown in the area attractions. When I approached a middle-aged man heading towards a Sicilian café to ask him about the place, he waved his hand at me as though shooing off a fly, muttered something indecipherable, opened the café door, and yelled '*Buon Giorno!*' with gusto.

I walked the full length of Main Street and had nearly given up on my search when, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a wooden sign down a little side street. An image of one of Dogtown's most famous boulders—the Whale's Jaw, a rock cleft like a whale breaching twenty feet up from sea—advertised the Dogtown Bookstore. Hartley had made multiple drawings and paintings of this monolith. I ran down the street and found a set of stairs leading to a low-ceilinged, seemingly endless cavern filled with used books. Floorboards creaked and shelves sagged underneath the weight of titles about fishing-knots and barn-raising guides to Harlequin romances and old, leather bound copies of Cotton Mather's treatises. An Arctic Studies section filled a high shelf over the entry into a second, smaller, more densely packed room, but I could not find any books about Hartley or Dogtown.

Behind a glass case filled with scrimshaw, intricate knots, and old brooches, the proprietor, a man named Bob with a salt and pepper beard and wooden pipe, sat reading the newspaper. I asked Bob about Dogtown. He kindly told me a less detailed version of what I already knew from Hartley's writings and a Massachusetts guidebook: In 1650, an estimated forty to sixty families fled pirate and Indian attacks and created the highland Commons Settlement. After the Revolutionary War, this village was deserted but for some destitute war widows, witches, former slaves, and the dogs they kept for protection; the area became known as Dogtown at this time. By the 1830s, it was abandoned. Dogtown has remained unpopulated and relatively unchanged ever since.

I continued flipping through a box of hand-painted postcards of Gloucester Harbor and asked Bob if he went to Dogtown much. He replied

with a flat “Nope.” When I asked Bob why he chose the name Dogtown for his shop, he simply stated, “Cause I liked it.” Then my fingers landed on just what I had been hoping for: *The Dogtown Common Trail Map*. I bit my lower lip in an effort to suppress my excitement. Bob slid the map into a thin paper bag and handed me my change.

Today I find it ironic that I located a detailed map of this obscure setting in a bookshop. Dogtown is as much a labyrinth of stories as it is a jumble of altering topography; I was about to discover that it is easy to get lost in both.

As soon as the colonial settlers cleared the land, stories—mostly tragedies and mysteries—took to seed and continued to propagate. People would eventually tell me about a horrific event that took place in Dogtown on a rainy summer morning in 1984. When tragedy heaved its way into action there that year, the setting imposed an unofficial narrative on this event that would reach back through the centuries and forward into the future, which is where I stood, merrily counting my change and itching to explore the place Hartley had compared to Easter Island and Stonehenge.

I bounded out of the bookstore and crossed the street for the Sunny Day Café, spread the map across a small corner table, and ordered some coffee. Knobby, twisting green contour lines wrapped around abundant little hills and depressions. Trails drawn in black wound in myriad directions. Dogtown existed on a more modest scale than the wilderness areas I had hiked in Maine, but the map was mesmerizing; I wanted nothing more than to lose myself in this place.

The map gave driving directions to an entrance and parking area along with some trail descriptions. It also listed a series of elementary precautions: Carry a map and compass, wear bright colors and a “blaze orange hat” during hunting season, use insect and tick repellent. Two such warnings struck me as odd, unless they had been intended for children, which seemed unlikely: “Don’t go out alone” and “If you must explore by yourself, leave a note with location and estimated time of your return.” I had hiked and backpacked alone in remote wilderness areas and had never seen such warnings printed on a map before. What could

there be to worry about on an apparently densely populated island? There was no reason for alarm, unless people were the cause for concern, but this possibility did not occur to me at the time.

I asked the waitress, a woman with short, spiky blond hair, if she ever went to Dogtown. “We used to go up in high school to party,” she replied while refilling my coffee, “but not any more.” She turned to fill another customer’s cup then looked over her shoulder at me and said, “No one does.”

That was just what I wanted to hear. Solitude would increase my chances for meeting Hartley’s ghost, or so I hoped. I tried to picture Hartley with his piercing blue eyes, aquiline nose, and the hangdog expression for which he was known, studying this place. He would be in Dogtown. At the very least his paintings and the traces of his brush would be recognizable there.

As I exited the cafe, I noticed a lady with gold-spun hair sitting near the door. Her face was buried in a book titled *Simplified Magic*.

I got in my truck and threaded my way through the city streets, passing a sign saying, “Have a Whale of a Time!”

If I had known then what I do now, I might not have been in such a rush. There is something different about Dogtown. It is not simple and it is not magic in the strict or literal sense of the word. It transcends the events of that rainy 1984 Monday when a single human agent set into motion a chain of events that changed Dogtown forever. This particular individual is now long removed from the setting, but this tragedy tapped Dogtown’s centuries-old legacy of peculiar, melancholic tales, as if an aquifer had been filling up with such stories through the centuries, just waiting to be divined.

Years after this initial trip to Dogtown, I pieced together what transpired that 1984 day and the reasons why this rare colonial ruin had become neglected like a secret meant to be kept and hopefully forgotten.

The story goes like this.