

Mohawk Rock: First Descents in Massachusetts

Contributed by Andy Howard

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Thin Cover in the Mohawk Trail Slides. [Photo] Andy Howard

I skittered across the top of Eastern Gate Slide and surveyed the serene, wind-swept surface below me looking for safe harbors of powder to make my turns. Cool, grey bedrock breached the snow in enough places to temper my hope of an uninterrupted descent. I leapt into my first turn, and the thin layer of crusty snow beneath me gave way revealing a sheet of ice.

I'd been salivating over the prospect of skiing the Mohawk Trail Slides ever since the previous summer, when, on a whim, I had decided to run the back roads from Albany to Boston. Following the faded tracks of Mohawk traders, my detour took me past the site where the mountain gave way that August morning one year ago. Three rocky scars caught my eye. They begged to be skied...the only question was when.

A late-December storm dumped more than a foot on western Massachusetts, and the window of opportunity was opened. Armed with photos and a geological survey of the slides, I cajoled my buddy Gered into giving up a Green Mountain powder day for the first-documented ski descents on these newly created landmarks.

So on that blustery January day we walked along the edge of the road below the slides, debating which to ski first. We settled on Eastern Gate, the widest of the three. Two eight-foot, semi-circular walls shaped like keyholes guarded the bottom entrance and stretch some 20 yards upward. Rising farther, the slide reaches nearly 900 linear feet and ascends 460 vertical feet. The average slope angle of 28 degrees puts it roughly on par with White Heat at Sunday River.

Eyeing the bony landscape, I waded through a waist-deep debris field at the base and started to climb onto one of the knolls that form the keyhole. My ski boots made little purchase on the frozen ground, so I quickly grabbed crampons and axes from my pack.

Savoy Mass routinely tops the list for snowfall totals across the state, and I was optimistic that the 20-inch base reported by NOAA was on the low end—the slides are north-facing, and I was dreaming of chest-deep powder. But they were far from loaded, and buffed by wind instead. Although this meant low avalanche danger, the bedrock beast lurked at every turn.

Gered and I ascended the edge of the slide in the trees to save the few skiable lines available. In some spots we sank to our knees, while in others the teeth of the crampons barely disappeared before scratching at the frozen earth. I could see reservation slowly building on Gered's normally enthusiastic face. The prospect of telemarking in these kneecap-crushing conditions was terrifying to him.

After a half hour we reached the uppermost section of the slide, where Gered gingerly dropped in. More chess match than shred, he worked his way through a narrow top section until he found space to kneel and push a few wide turns. The slide path was too narrow, and the exposed rocks too scattered for him to get any rhythm. He stopped just above the keyhole to watch my descent.

These were my first turns of the season—I was nervous. I skied into the widest part of the slide pondering the bedrock monster and what other horrors might lie beneath the thin layer of snow. That's when the crust broke loose to ice.

After a second of slipping, I was back in powder. I jumped into my next turn, but the tails of my skis scraped on rock, tripping my balance. I pointed toward a wide-open line I had picked while climbing.

For a few moments, the climbing and stumbling up the frozen ground, the hidden bedrock, and the two-hour drive all made sense. The turns were weightless and soft. Snow sprayed left, then right, then left again. The steep and challenging slide stretched out below me, and I was in control. Warm sun cut through the wind, and I let out a loud "whoop" as I sailed downward. I had been waiting nine months for just that moment.

Then, as quickly as the feeling arrived, it was gone. The sickening screech of metal on stone returned me to reality. My momentum carried me over a hidden rock, and over the front of my skis. I popped out of one binding, landing on my back in a merciful pocket of snow.

Before long I was back on my skis, pushing out a couple more turns before stopping at the top of the keyhole. I spied a pocket of powder and jumped down into the half-pipe. Had there been more snow, it would have easily been skiable. Not on that day. I sidestepped through rocks and exposed dirt to the snow fanning out below and carved a few more turns before reaching the road.

With enough time to ski one more slide we set our sights on the most westerly. We dubbed it the Flemish Bastard, after the Mohawk chief who earned his name terrorizing 18th Century French settlers. Like its name suggests, it stands apart from its sister slides in its terror-inducing, narrow steepness at the top.

Much like our previous climb, we worked our way up the side finding pockets of deep snow next to dust on dirt. Gered hacked like a madman with his ice axe, removing branches that blocked one of the larger powder deposits.

Upon reaching the top, we set our packs down to rest and eat lunch. We sat there, and I thought of the joy that had struck me while skiing Eastern Gate. "I love backcountry skiing," I remarked. "How else can grown men have an excuse to climb stupid shit like this and then slide down it?" Gered nodded in agreement.

Gered made first tracks again, ducking under a small tree that leaned over the middle of the slide and raked at us from above. I warily picked my way left and right across the top of the slide and under the tree trying to find anywhere I could

manage to link more than a couple turns between exposed rocks. It wasn't until the bottom, where the snow was deeper, that I opened up a few turns and arrived at the roadside.

As we walked back along the road to our cars, I looked at the bluish-green ice on the river and thought of the massive destructive forces that churned on that August day right where we walked and earlier skied. And I also thought of the joy I felt for a fleeting moment on the Eastern Gate.

Andy Howard is a contributor to Vermont Sports Magazine and runs the website noreasterbackcountry.com.

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