The NH Troubadour comes to you every month singing the praises of New Hampshire, a state whose beauty and opportunities should tempt you to come and share those good things that make life here so delightful. Learn More

"With this edition of The NH Troubadour, we say 'so long' for now. We also say thank you. Thank you for sharing your poetry, photography and incredibly memorable stories; thank you for welcoming us into your homes and communities and showing us firsthand the beauty of this wondrous state; thank you for singing the praises of your neighbors who selflessly enrich the lives of others. We hope that you have enjoyed this journey throughout the Granite State as much as we have, and that you continue to come back often to reflect on the last three years of the Troubadour, and the beauty of life here in New Hampshire."

Articles

- Feature
- Letter From The Editor
- Town
- Treasures
- Slice of Life
- Labor and Love
- Your Troubadour
- Our New Hampshire
- Trumpets

Search
Considered the father of the White Mountain School of Art, Thomas Cole first arrived at Crawford Notch in 1828. His final portrait of the area, A View of the Mountain Pass Called the Notch of the White Mountains (1839), is considered the movement’s greatest masterpiece and hangs prominently at the National Gallery of Art in Washington,
CRAWFORD NOTCH – The American artist Thomas Cole gaped both with wonder and trepidation at the beauty and unrelenting rawness of the mountain scene before him.

Cole, a landscape painter recognized as the father of the Hudson River School of Art, had completed a harrowing journey to get to this point, traveling by coach, ferry and finally foot through Franconia Notch to reach what could only be described as the calamitous intersection between humanity and wilderness.

It was the fall of 1828, and just two years prior, the patch of land on which he stood had been the site of one of the nation’s saddest news spectacles – a tragedy that, in the words of Dr. Robert McGrath, art history professor emeritus at Dartmouth, “laid bare the smallness of man and the grandeur, savagery and capriciousness of nature.”

In August 1826, a series of torrential rains had turned the dry, parched slopes of Mounts Willey and Webster into a landslide hazard. Hearing one evening what appeared to be a stream of rock and debris headed their way, the Willey couple and their five children evacuated their tiny cabin at the feet of the massive mounts in an attempt to escape. In a story forever ingrained in Granite State lore, the entire Willey family was enveloped and killed by the landslide – an avalanche that managed to miraculously sidestep their home leaving it untouched.

Much as the Smuttynose murders on the Isles of Shoals would dominate national headlines some five decades later, the story of the Willey House captured the country’s imagination for its sense of tragedy in a remote and unforgiving setting. The story would attract journalists from across the nation, inspire short stories from vacationing authors including Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, and, in turn, bring its share of scientists and adventurers to the region.

And artists. Cole, who’d built a following of painters capturing on canvas the pastoral countryside of New York’s Hudson River Valley, had a year earlier traveled to the White Mountains at the behest of adventurer and arts patron Daniel Wadsworth. Now as he stood in the chill of early fall observing the broken tree limbs, the rubble, the wild tangle of untamed mountainside, he saw something new, terrifying and unimaginably beautiful. “The site of the Willey House, with its little patch of green in the gloomy desolation, very naturally recalled to mind the horrors of the night when the whole family perished beneath an avalanche of rocks and earth,” Cole wrote in his diary on Oct. 6, 1828.

And so Cole began sketching, rendering in charcoals and later oils the uncharted landscapes that were up until now foreign to so many Americans and fellow artists. Cole’s depictions of the White Mountains – the culmination of which would come in his 1839 masterpiece A View of the Mountain Pass Called the Notch of the White Mountains, now displayed prominently in Washington’s National Gallery of Art – would not merely capture the attention of his compatriots but launch a movement whose thousands of vivid portraits many credit with transforming the region from wooded isolation to the nation’s premier mountain resort for more than 40 years.
Enthusiasts and historians like Richard Hamilton continue to hold portraits by Benjamin Champney and others in their private collections, while Warren Shoemaker at the Jackson Historical Society is creating the North Country’s first permanent museum collection dedicated exclusively to White Mountain art. (Photos: David Lazar)

“I think the capacity of these hills to inspire was utterly remarkable,” says Littleton’s Richard Hamilton, a White Mountain Art collector and historian, who recently launched with fellow enthusiasts a website (www.whitemountainhistory.org) chronicling in narratives and photos the development of the region. “The scenes these artists depicted were breathtaking in their magnitude. I don’t think there’s any question that the resulting school of art is one that stands up to any on the world stage, and in turn helped to popularize this area and open it to tourism.”

Indeed, in the years to follow, Cole’s initial sketches would catch like wildfire, starting all but a wagon trail for regional and fellow Hudson River Valley artists, alongside painters of world renown, to visit the White Mountains and capture the unspoiled vistas of Chocorua, Mount Washington, Echo Lake, Cathedral Ledge, the Flume, and of course, the Old Man of the Mountain. It is estimated that more than 400 artists in all set up camp from the mid to late 19th century in the North Country, their white umbrellas dotting the hillsides and marshes along the Saco River, as most famously captured by American legend Winslow Homer’s 1868 Artists Sketching in the White Mountains.

The result was what many have called America’s first art colony, a movement known as the White Mountain School of Art, whose practitioners specialized in giving nature an almost sublime, romantic presence and
showing man’s comparative smallness in its face. “It was an instance of taking something that appeared dark and scary and opening it up into something bright and luminous,” says Dr. Catherine Amidon, Director of Plymouth State University’s Karl Drerup Art Gallery and Exhibitions Program. “White Mountain Art was really about America finding its artistic identity.”

And the North Country finding its economic identity. With a roster of artists that included Asher Durand, Frederic Church, William H. Bartlett, Albert Bierstadt, Godfrey Frankenstein, John Frederick Kensett and, inarguably, the leader of White Mountain art, Boston native Benjamin Champney, who kept a North Conway studio for nearly 50 years, the portraits that emerged each year were as close to billboards for regional tourism as one could imagine. Champney, whose studio still stands in front of what is today the Red Jacket resort, would call Kensett’s iconic Mount Washington from the Valley of Conway (1851) “the best advertisement” for the region he’d seen. The canvas was purchased by the American Art Union, an organization whose mission was to popularize American art, made into an engraving, and distributed to some 13,000 Art Union subscribers throughout the country. The great lithographer and calendar printer Currier and Ives went further and published a similar print around 1860. It is believed that this single painting alone by Kensett did more to attract tourists to the White Mountains than perhaps any other.

And arrive, those tourists did. With the explosion by the 1850s of rail travel throughout northern New England, what was once an impossibly long journey by stagecoach to the White Mountains became infinitely more accessible. With Bostonians and New Yorkers attracted by what they’d heard and seen of the region and desperate for a cool, fresh and relatively close escape from the stagnant, sooty swelter of summer in the city, where drainage was all but nonexistent, a market quickly developed. By 1851, the completion of the Atlantic and Saint Lawrence Railroad with a station at Gorham transported travelers to within eight miles of Mount Washington. Horace Fabyan’s Mount Washington House in Crawford Notch now stood where Thomas Cole once stayed in the 1830s, while much larger establishments were soon built in Franconia Notch (the Flume and Profile Houses), in Pinkham Notch (the Glen House), and on even on the unforgiving summit of Mount Washington (the Tip Top House).
At their peak, the White Mountains featured more than 200 resorts, the largest concentration of its kind in the nation. The Profile House, where the current Cannon Mountain Tramway now sits in Franconia Notch, could accommodate up to 900 people. Most hotels burned to the ground, while a few, like Jackson’s Wentworth Hall and Eagle Mountain House still stand. (Image courtesy of Richard Hamilton; photos: David Lazar)

By the late 19th century, there was believed to be a greater concentration of grand resort hotels in the North Country than any other place in the nation, with some 200 hotels, inns, and boarding houses capable of accommodating more than 12,000 guests at any given time. Major hotels each had their own train station and an array of creature comforts considered the standard for their time, from gas lighting to elegant dining, lawn tennis, coaching parades and mountain guides. Businessmen from the city would frequently send their families up to these grand resorts for the entire summer, taking the train up themselves for the weekends. Just as the Isles of Shoals and the Connecticut River Valley would draw their share of summering celebrities, musicians and poets, so, too, did the grand resorts of the White Mountains, with guest lists including names like Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, Whittier, Bryant, and the celebrated British novelist Sir Anthony Trollope, who, in his 1862 book North America, would compare the region to Switzerland, declaring “much of this (White Mountain) scenery is superior to the famed and classic lands of Europe.”

The guests would buy art – lots of art. A frequent perk of any stay at a White Mountains resort was an artist-in-residence, a talented painter who was paid to capture in oils and watercolors what guests had experienced during their stays. Artists like Edward Hill at Profile House (where the Cannon Mountain Tramway now stands, capable of hosting more than 900 guests at its peak) and Frank Shapleigh at Crawford House could knock off a portrait of Echo Lake or the Old Man in a matter of hours, Dartmouth’s McGrath says. And while their paintings – which put food on the table, but never brought great wealth – lacked the detail of Champney’s or Bierstadt’s, their contribution was equally significant. “The art of this period did more to open up the White Mountains to tourism than perhaps anything else,” says McGrath, adding that the imagery even served as an effective propaganda tool for the North in the Civil War. “So much of it was word of mouth. Someone would visit a hotel like Crawford House or Profile House and would return home with a souvenir to hang on their wall. Their friends would then invariably see the painting and hear the story of the
amazing wilderness they’d just visited. And they’d then want to visit, themselves.”

While nearly all of the grand resorts of that day, built almost entirely from wood, succumbed to fire before it was through, several still stand today, including Jackson’s Wentworth Hall and Eagle Mountain House, Whitefield’s Mountain View Grand, and Bretton Woods’ Mount Washington Resort, the last of the grand hotels to be built.

John Frederick Kensett’s Mount Washington from the Valley of Conway (1851) is credited, perhaps more than any other painting, as being the greatest advertisement for tourism in the region. (Image courtesy of Wellesley College Museum; Photos: David Lazar)

Still, as the 19th century soldiered forward and America’s expansion westward yielded new discoveries, it was President Lincoln’s 1864 bill granting Yosemite Valley to the State of California and the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad in the 1860s that truly opened up the West and the Rockies to tourism and spelled a slow but certain decline in the White Mountains’ allure. Artists like Bierstadt and Edward Hill’s brother Thomas would all but make their careers painting the canyons and jagged, snow-capped peaks whose severity, remoteness and drama made the North Country appear almost tame by comparison.

While the White Mountains would maintain their popularity as a skiing and summering destination for eastern urbanites, the White Mountain School of Art by the end of the 19th century had all but disbanded, as artists moved west or elsewhere to take on the next great tableau.

The legacy of White Mountain art, however, remains indisputable both for its stamp on portraiture and its place in the telling of the American story. Across New England, White Mountain paintings frequently fetch five- and six-figure sums at auction, while hundreds live on in the homes of private collectors and enthusiasts like Hamilton, in the historic estate of longtime North Conway resident Evelyn Woodbury, and in the Littleton Public Library, where the walls wear a series of stunning Edward Hill images like medals.
While Thomas Cole is credited as the father of the White Mountain School, Benjamin Champney was its undisputed leader, living in his North Conway home and studio for more than a half century and producing masterworks like Saco River, North Conway (1874).

(Champney image courtesy of Wikipedia; painting image courtesy of NH Historical Society; Photo: David Lazar)

Plymouth State University’s Amidon is today overseeing a project to open a Museum of the White Mountains, the school using a former a Methodist Church in town as the site and benefiting from a dramatic bequest of art, images and artifacts from the estate of lifelong North Country resident and photographer Dan Noel. When complete, the museum will feature more than 8,000 images and objects and an additional 11,000 photos from the now defunct Brown Company paper mill in Berlin, focusing heavily on education from both a historical and scientific standpoint. As NH this year marks the 100th anniversary of the Weeks Act, which safeguarded much of the North Country from indiscriminate logging and created the White Mountains National Forest, the museum will show how art helped to cast a spotlight on the region’s changing landscape both through the timber industry and through the history of water and water use.

On a slightly smaller scale, the Jackson Historical Society is creating a museum of its own, transforming Jackson’s former town hall building into the North Country’s only permanent museum dedicated exclusively to White Mountain art, with at least 50 pieces on display at all times. For the society’s president and longtime art historian Warren Shoemaker, the paintings are as much about great art as they are about a region’s place in time and America’s continued development – from the feral wilderness Thomas Cole first witnessed on that chilly fall day in Crawford Notch to the postcard imagery of Kensett’s, Champney’s and Shapleigh’s canvases.

“What is great about these works is that these artists – many of whom came over from Europe or from the Hudson River Valley – painted exactly what they saw, so that tourists, when they arrived could recognize the scene and go right to where the artist had captured it,” Shoemaker says. “Very little of that has changed. Every one of these paintings will talk to you. They will tell you about themselves: what they are, where they are, when they were painted. They really are timeless.”

As are the mountains, scenery, and people who created and inspired them.

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