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Exploring a gilded past: Grand Hotels of White Mountains exhibit

Tom Eastman Jun 14, 2019 Updated 21 hrs ago



The main exhibit area of the Museum of the White Mountains in Plymouth. The current exhibit on the area's grand hotels re-creates the iconic view from the Omni Mount Washington Resort's south-facing porch (seen at rear). (COURTESY PHOTO)

PLYMOUTH — Those looking to take a step back in time to the Gilded Age should visit the current exhibit at Plymouth State University's Museum of the White Mountains, "The Grand Hotels of the White Mountains."

Running through Sept. 12 (closed Sundays), this marvelous exhibit provides a learning experience for how the wealthy (whom Sen. Bernie Sanders would call the 1 percent) lived and played in the 19th and early 20th centuries here in the White Mountains.

Visitors will learn how, during the golden age of the grand resort hotels between 1880 and 1910, approximately 30 such hostelrys opened their doors to an elite class of tourists.



These gracious establishments were "grand" in that they provided room for 200 guests, with elegantly styled dining rooms, parlors and lobby spaces, incorporating not only recreational activities but cultural pursuits.

The exhibit also illuminates New Hampshire's White Mountains as a case study for the American Plan hospitality model, where guests paid one price for room, meals, activities and amenities — the precursor to today's "all inclusive" resort (think Sandals).

Providing a tour of the exhibit last Saturday was Museum of the White Mountains Director Cynthia C. Robinson of Plymouth.

It was a great way to appreciate the extensive display of 19th century White Mountain School of Art paintings, dining room china, hotel ledgers and even a vintage 1912 cash register on loan from Ellie Koepfel of the Wentworth Inn of Jackson.

Robinson co-curated the exhibit with noted grand hotel expert Bryant F. Tolles Jr. of Squam Lake and Concord. Tolles has written several books on the subject, including the extensively researched "The Grand Resort Hotels of the White Mountains: A Vanishing Architectural Legacy" (1998, David R. Godine).

According to Robinson: "The idea of doing an exhibit on the grand hotels has probably been on our list for five years, before I got here three years ago.



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"We have done exhibits on the White Mountain School of Art and summer camps, and last summer we featured the centennial of the White Mountain National Forest, so the time was right," said Robinson, a native of Long Island and a Skidmore College graduate with a master's in visual arts from Vermont College.

The goal is to give the visitor a sense of the elegance and resort way of life of the grand hotels, which enjoyed their heyday from the mid-19th century to about 1920.

That summer resort way of life came to an end with the advent of the automobile, which allowed people to experience more mobile vacations and made for shorter stays compared with the often monthlong stays at the grand hotels. Also contributing to the Gilded Age's demise was the disruption of World War I, economic upheavals and changing lifestyles.

The Plymouth exhibit is dedicated in particular to the five remaining White Mountains grand hotels, most of which are in our backyard: the Mount Washington Hotel (now the Omni Mount Washington), built in 1902; the Wentworth Inn in Jackson, dating to 1869; the Eagle Mountain House, also in Jackson, built in 1915; the Mountain View Grand of Twin Mountain (1866); and the Balsams of Dixville Notch, built in 1875, and currently awaiting renovation by ski resort mogul Les Otten.

The panels outside the lobby display paintings of other historic lodging establishments.

There is the Notch House (1829-54), which was operated by Thomas Crawford during the early days of White Mountain tourism at the top of Crawford Notch beneath the rock edifice known as Elephant Head.



A print shows the old Fabyan House (1873-1951), which stood near today's Drummond's Mountain Shop on Route 302 near Bretton Woods Ski Area before burning to the ground, a plight that befell so many of the old wooden structures.

Also on display is a vintage photograph of a railroad crew outside the Profile House in Franconia Notch. Visitors learn that the first Profile House was built in 1853 and the "New" Profile House followed in 1906. It was able to accommodate 600 guests but was lost in a massive 24-structure fire in August 1923 at the height of the season. (The parking lot for the Cannon Mountain Ski Area and Tramway is located just north of where the hotel once stood).

Entering the main room, Robinson noted that the exhibit has many ties to Mount Washington Valley, including late White Mountains history enthusiast Dan Noel of North Conway, who donated his 6,000-piece collection to help launch the museum, which is housed on the PSU campus in a former church.

Many of Noel's hotel ledgers were acquired at an auction at the historic Crawford House in 1977 before a fire in November of that year leveled the 1850s-era hotel. They are on view in the lower level of the exhibit along with many other items, including proposals made by Plymouth State students on keeping the surviving hotels vital in today's resort marketplace.

Along with Noel, others with strong ties to the region who helped start the museum were Steve Barba, former operator of the Balsams Grand Resort. Now living in Rhode Island, he donated his Balsams collection to the museum last year.

In addition, Barba was one of several White Mountains grand hotel experts to be interviewed on camera in video footage that can be viewed at the exhibit. Among them is avid collector and historian Dick Hamilton, 83, a North Conway native and longtime Littleton resident who served as president of White Mountains Attractions, and Carl Lindblade of Stowe, Maine. Lindblade is the longtime past Red Jacket Mountain View Resort general manager and former University of New Hampshire hospitality instructor.

Ellie Koeppel of Jackson, proprietor of the Wentworth Inn, which she owned with her late husband, Fritz Koeppel, is another interviewee, along with Jerry Owens, former hotel reservations manager for the Balsams; Cathy and Joel Bedor, former co-owners (with Wayne and Susan Presby) of the Omni Mount Washington Resort (then known as the Mount Washington Hotel); and Lisa Whitaker, human resources manager for the Omni Mount Washington.

Filmed by New Hampshire PBS, the interviews might be used as part of a planned documentary on "The History of the Grand Hotels," according to Robinson and Lindblade.

Robinson explained that the paintings on display were done by artists in residence at the various hotels, including Frank Shapleigh at the Crawford House; Edward Hill, Edward West Nichols and others.

As Tolles and other historians noted, the White Mountain School of Art paintings served as the original "postcards" for the area, helping to draw in early tourists.

The artist-in-residence tenures continued that trend, with visitors buying the paintings and bringing them back to places like Boston, New York and Philadelphia, further spreading the word about the beauty of the region. In addition, the railroads also were a key part of that effort, working with the hotels to bring in city dwellers for extended summer stays.

Many of the paintings on display have been loaned by private collectors who support the museum's mission to celebrate the history of the region, Robinson said.

“What I love about these paintings is they are timeless,” said Robinson, explaining that while some pieces use some artistic license to depict the mountain scenery, most are spot on and instantly recognizable to today’s mountain visitors.

“The way we feel about these paintings is the same way that people felt who came here 100 years ago, that an artist has captured a moment, or achieved a feeling about a particular place or depicted amazing colors, which speaks to the artistic side of it but also to our affinity for those places.”

Many of the paintings serve as a backdrop for a display that captures the essence of a grand hotel dining room. Here, table settings feature china from the Mountain View Grand, the Balsams, Profile House, Omni Mount Washington and the Wentworth, as well as fascinating menus from the era.

Nearby, a video display shows vintage photographs of grand dining rooms of hotels that are no longer standing — hotels like Gray’s Inn of Jackson, Deer Park of North Woodstock and one of the four original Glen Houses of Pinkham Notch (predating today’s Glen House, which opened last year at the base of the Mount Washington Auto Road and recently was awarded “Best New Hotel of the Year” honors by Yankee Magazine).

The dining display also provides an amusing list of do’s and don’ts for hotel servers from the Maplewood in Bethlehem, circa 1940.

At the far end of the main floor exhibit area is a nearly life-sized depiction of the South Veranda of the Omni Mount Washington, showing the view that the hotel’s original owner and builder, Pennsylvania coal magnate/Concord native Joseph Stickney (1840-1903) called his favorite, looking off to the south toward Crawford Notch.

In an interview earlier this week, Craig Clemmer, director of marketing for the Omni, and a lover of White Mountains grand hotel history, shared more on the subject.

“The hotel is aligned the way it is to take in that view of Crawford Notch,” said Clemmer, adding that after Stickney died, his widow, Caroline, commissioned an artist to create a depiction of that view using Tiffany glass for the family mausoleum in Concord.

Clemmer said he and fellow Omni staffers feel they are the stewards of the grand resort.

“There’s a lot of pride among folks that have worked here for generations,” said Clemmer. “Joseph Stickney had a vision for creating a grand hotel here in the mountains that we carry on today, making sure we continue things that harken to our history, but also making sure that we meet the travelers’ needs of today,” like the spa and meeting room space.

The Wentworth’s Koeppel shares a similar attitude, saying she and her late husband felt “privileged to own this piece of American history and to be able to restore it and bring it back. It remains our goal to provide that level of service.”

Craig Boyer, general manager of Jackson's 103-year old, 96-room Eagle Mountain House, said guests are drawn to the inn’s charm and scenic views, not to mention its popular veranda.

“It’s relaxed and comfortable, and of course, the views overlooking the golf course in summer and the cross-country ski trails in winter are spectacular,” said Boyer. “Not everyone has stayed in a place like this; they like the old-fashioned feel.”

He said the Eagle donated several items to the current Museum of the White Mountains exhibit, including a quilt depicting the inn created by valley artist Linda Gray.

According to Lindblade, “The grand hotels’ legacy for us today is that they set a standard of service to which we should continue to aspire.

Lindblade gave a talk Thursday at the museum about the World Economic Monetary Conference held in 1944 at the Mount Washington Hotel. He will be giving other lectures at the Bretton Woods resort this summer as part of its 75th anniversary observances of that milestone conference, which determined the path for the post-World War II economy.

Added Hamilton, “The grand hotels were really the tourism industry in the state in the 1800s, and they broadcast the fact that the White Mountains were the No. 1 vacation spot in the country.”

“I am pleased to see the legacy of the grand hotels being celebrated,” said Barba, who sits on the museum's advisory board along with Tolles and Hamilton.

Summarized Tolles, “In the late 19th-century and 20th century, the hotels were a vital, shining symbol of summertime leisure and recreation.”

Judging by the enduring popularity of the Omni, Eagle Mountain House, Wentworth and others — not just fading memories but actual proud members of that Golden Era — that sentiment certainly rings true today.

The Museum of the White Mountains is open Monday-Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Saturday 11 a.m.-4 p.m. For more information, call (603) 535-3214 or go to plymouth.edu/mwm.

The speakers list for this summer's "Grand Hotels of the White Mountains" exhibit features an interesting array of topics.

Unless noted, presentations are 5:30-7 p.m. at the Plymouth museum. Upcoming presentations include:

- June 19, "Grand Hotels as Summer Ritual," by R. Stuart Wallace.
- June 25, "The Early Taverns of the White Mountains," by James L. Garvin.
- July 6, 2 to 3:30 p.m., "Engaging Future Generations: Hosts and Visitors at the Grand Hotel," by Dr. Adam Keul.
- July 9, "As One Era Ends, Another Begins." by Mark Okrant.
- July 18, "American Plan Hospitality," by Stephen Barba.
- July 24, "Politics and Profit: The Sinclair House in Bethlehem, 1840-1880," by Rebecca W. S. More.
- July 30, "Life Downstairs: The Legacy of British Servant Culture on American Pop Culture," by Ann McLellan.
- Aug. 8, "Siting the Pemigewasset House within the Changing Landscape of American Tourism," by John Christ.

The Museum of the White Mountains is located at 34 Highland St., Plymouth. For information, call (603) 535-3214 or go to plymouth.edu/mwm

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