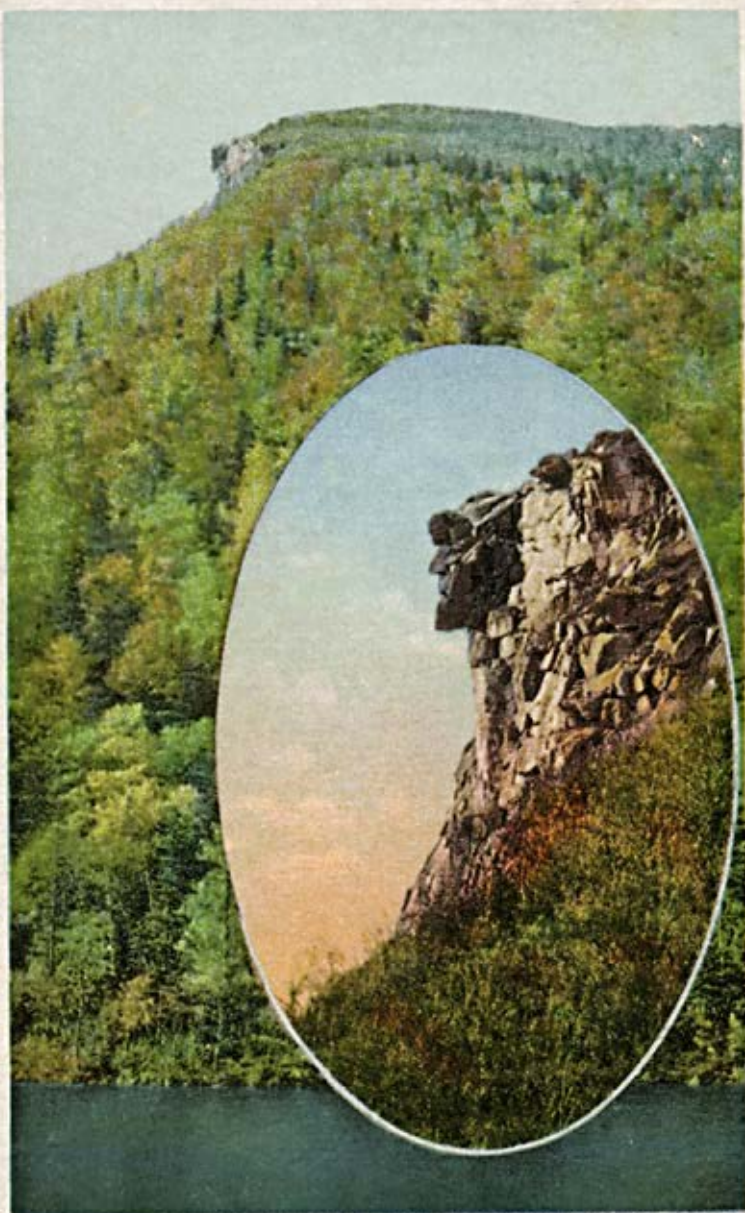


AN ENDURING PRESENCE:

The Old Man of the Mountain



12504 PROFILE LAKE AND OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN, WHITE MTS., N. H.

Twenty years ago, the Old Man of the Mountain fell from its perch high above Franconia Notch.

Many admirers in New Hampshire and beyond mourned the loss. For more than 200 years the jagged ledges that formed a human profile promoted New Hampshire's identity, inspired works of art and literature, and symbolized the beauty and fragile environment of the White Mountains.

The Old Man of the Mountain helped make the White Mountains one of the most popular tourist destinations in the Northeast. Nineteenth-century writers imbued the Profile with qualities often used to describe beloved leaders, ancient philosophers, or even gods. Then and now, the image has appeared in art, advertising, signs, and products. Its use ensured recognition far beyond first-hand viewing experience.

The fragility of the Profile had been well-documented since the mid-nineteenth century. From 1916, individuals and work crews made repairs to protect and preserve the Old Man. In turn, the Old Man played a central role in protecting and preserving Franconia Notch. It was a symbol and focus for establishing a state forest, memorial park, and environmental legislation.

Despite its absence, the Old Man continues to play an outsized role in the lives of so many people in the state and around the world.

Today, Profile Plaza in Franconia allows visitors to recreate the viewing experience that enthralled visitors for almost two centuries and honor those who played a role in its modern history. In tangible and intangible ways, the Old Man remains an enduring presence in New Hampshire.

Interactive 3D model, *Imagery of the Old Man of the Mountains on Cannon Cliff*
(Image by Matthew Maclay)



Edward Hill, *Echo Lake, White Mountains, New Hampshire*, 1878, Oil on canvas, 20" x 36". On loan from P. Andrews and Linda McLane



The Draw for Creators

Nineteenth century artists and writers were drawn to the White Mountains for its picturesque beauty and rugged terrain. Cataclysmic natural events and awe-inspiring views attracted people interested in experiencing and depicting the beautiful and the sublime aspects of the region, and exploring deeper meanings that might be found in nature.

In the first decades following its documented discovery, the Old Man was not remarked upon with any great enthusiasm. Thomas Cole, often called the father of American landscape painting, visited the Notch in 1828 and sketched the Profile in his notebook. He commented that the “bold and horrid features” were “too dreadful to look upon in my loneliness.” He expressed his discomfort with the entire scene, “The stillness of this lake and the silence that reigned in this solitude was impressive ... the sublime features of nature are too severe for a lone man to look upon and be happy.” British writer Harriet Martineau was not moved. She responded indifferently in 1838. “The sharp rock certainly resembles a human face—but what then?”

By mid-century, however, many more appealing characteristics were attributed to the Profile. Several writers, including Nathaniel Hawthorne,

depicted the Old Man as a benevolent overseer: ancient, stoic, and wise. Tales of the Old Man’s role in Indigenous cultures were widely published. Dozens of poems and odes paid homage to the Profile.

Artists who traveled to the White Mountains made sure to include the Old Man as part of their itinerary. Paintings and photographs depicted the Profile surrounded by clouds, bathed in sunlight, or silhouetted by the moon. As tourism grew, artists, many of whom were employed by hotels, also pictured the leisure activities enjoyed in the Notch and elsewhere. Edward Hill, the Profile House artist-in-residence for fifteen years, painted numerous images of the Old Man, and other sites in the Notch which guests eagerly purchased.

Becoming a Destination

In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the White Mountains became one of America’s first tourist destinations. The rugged beauty of the White Mountains embodied an emerging national pride in the American landscape. In the 1850s, the introduction of rail travel provided easy access from Boston and New York City, and visits to the White Mountains increased. Travelers were armed with guidebooks that told them where to go, what to think, and how to feel.

The Old Man was a must-see tourist attraction, with most guidebooks providing suggestions for best viewing times and locations. Since most tourists stayed for multiple weeks, they had many opportunities to experience a clear, if not inspiring, view.

Minister, orator, and writer Thomas Starr King's wildly popular 1859 book *The White Hills, Their Legends, Landscape and Poetry* was equal parts reminiscence, literature, guidebook, religion, and philosophy. Starr King advised a visitor to journey to the base of Profile Lake after an "August shower, late in the afternoon." There one would discover "the mists ... smitten with sunshine, break as they drift against its nervous outline, and hiding the mass of the mountain which it overhangs, isolate it with a thin halo, ... as if a mighty angel were sitting among the hills, and enrobing himself in a cloud vesture of gold and purple."

In Franconia Notch, inns and hotels were built to accommodate the large numbers of visitors arriving to see the Old Man, the Flume, and the Basin. Early hotels in the region, the Flume House and the Lafayette House, were precursors to the grand hotels. The largest of these, the Profile House, occupied the land between Echo and Profile Lakes. The owners continually improved the property until the Profile House could comfortably accommodate 600 guests with numerous recreational activities in the shadow of the Old Man. The evening brought a multi-course meal, an impressive wine list, and a concert or theatrical performance. In 1923, the Profile House was destroyed by fire and never rebuilt.

Profile House, Franconia Notch, postcard, 3.5" x 5.5", 1915–1930. Museum of the White Mountains. Gift of John W. and Anne H. Newton





New Hampshire Fire Insurance Company, *Trade Sign*, 1873, Reverse painted glass, 24" x 32". On loan from Manchester Historic Association.

Stony Observations

From the late eighteenth century, the high altitudes and rocky peaks of the White Mountains attracted amateur and professional scientists to the region's botany, mineralogy, meteorology, and geology.

The Profile drew geologists who researched the meteorologic and geologic events and glacial movement that formed its five ledges. They examined the unique qualities of Conway granite, the specific stone type forming the Profile. Scientists also studied the effect of changing weather patterns on the fragile site.

Comprehensive geological reports that paid particular attention to the Old Man were submitted by state geologists in 1844 and 1878. They included sketches and renderings alongside facts and figures. Geologist Charles Henry Hitchcock was well aware of the instability of the structure in his report in 1878. He warned readers, "I would advise any persons who are anxious to see the Profile...to hasten to the spot."

In the mid-twentieth century, seismologists and engineers conducted numerous studies to determine whether proposed construction of the interstate would further destabilize the Old Man. Geologists continue to research the glaciation of the area of the Profile, and since 2003 have examined the series of events that led to its fall.

The Face of NH

*“Men hang out their signs indicative of their respective trades;
shoemakers hang out a gigantic shoe; jewelers a monster watch;
and a dentist hangs out a gold tooth;
but up in the Mountains of New Hampshire,
God Almighty has hung out a sign to show that there He makes men.”*

—ATTRIBUTED TO DANIEL WEBSTER

For many people in New Hampshire and beyond, the Old Man represents meanings and values that are associated with the state's history and identity. When author and orator Thomas Starr King called the Profile a “most attractive advertisement” in 1859, he referred to its ability to interest travelers in the wonders of Franconia Notch and the White Mountains in general. The epigram attributed to Daniel Webster expands upon Starr King's assessment of the Old Man, implying that the presence of the Profile signifies that the best of humanity was made in New Hampshire. This high-minded association has likely contributed to the icon becoming a symbol of pride and identity for New Hampshire's history, culture, and values.

Despite its twenty-year absence from the cliff, politicians and protestors continue to incorporate the Old Man's image in their messaging, as do the New Hampshire Boy Scouts and several state and municipal agencies. The state emblem, introduced in 1945, features the Profile encircled by the state motto “Live Free or Die.” The Old Man is prominently featured on New Hampshire license plates, licenses, state trooper vehicles, and road signs. Chambers of commerce, small businesses, beer and liquor brands, clothing stores, and tourist stops still use the image in their advertising as an easily recognizable symbol of the state.



State of New Hampshire License Plate, 1926. On loan from Michael Mooney and Robert Cram.

A Clear-Cut Argument

When the Profile House was destroyed by fire in 1923, owners Frank and Karl Abbott made the difficult decision not to rebuild. Their 6,000-acre property, purchased just two years before, spanned the Notch and included Cannon Mountain, the Old Man, the Basin, and the Flume. The father and son duo considered gifting the entire property to the state to preserve its unspoiled beauty.

To recoup their devastating financial losses, however, the Abbotts contemplated selling the timber rights of the Notch to logging companies. This caused enormous public concern. For decades, harmful effects of logging in the White Mountains—clear cutting, fires, air and water pollution, and clogged waterways—had plagued New Hampshire residents and tourists.

The Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests (SPNHF) turned to state officials to help save the Notch and its sentinel, the Old Man. The governor and state legislature voted to establish a state forest and war memorial and pledged half of the \$400,000 asking price if matching funds could be raised. SPNHF and the New Hampshire Federation of Women's Clubs launched a successful fundraising campaign in October 1927. The visage of the Old Man was an important symbol of these efforts. It personified both the threat to, and the significance of, the Notch. Saving the Notch meant saving the Old Man.

The Franconia Notch State Forest and War Memorial was dedicated on September 15, 1928, to “the men and women of New Hampshire who served the nation in time of war.” Speaking at the dedication ceremony, Governor Huntley Spaulding emphasized the symbolic connection between those who served and the Profile. “As the Old Man of the Mountain faithfully guards this highland pass, so they have helped to guard, in America and around the world, the cause of Liberty.”

Suspending Fate

By the late nineteenth century, it was apparent that the five ledges forming the Old Man of the Mountain were in a precarious state. Many hikers had called attention to the forehead ledge, which seemed to be sliding forward. A *White Mountain Echo* writer feared, in 1878, that one of the “glories of Franconia Notch ... will have to be counted among the ‘has-beens’ of the grand old Granite Hills of New Hampshire.”



Mable Russel Geddes
Scrapbook, Edward Geddes
Repairs, c. 1916, Black and
White Photograph, 2.8" x
4.5". On loan from Littleton
Area Historical Museum.

A fall seemed imminent, yet, with some assistance, the Old Man would continue to cling to its perch for over a century. In 1916, Edward Geddes, a quarry supervisor from Massachusetts, spent eight days installing a system to slow the deterioration. The quarryman designed a series of turnbuckles to prevent the ledges from shifting too far while allowing for seasonal expansion and contraction. The State of New Hampshire funded the project, despite it being private land, recognizing that the Profile was of great value to the state. In 1937, Geddes returned, made some additional repairs, and confirmed that there had been no further movement of the ledges.

In the following decades, volunteers and state workers continued to ensure that the Old Man remained. In 1958, the State appropriated funds for annual inspections and repairs. From 1960, Niels Nielsen, a state bridge maintenance supervisor, participated in and then led the annual project. He was given the honorary title of "official caretaker" in 1987 by Governor John Sununu. The gregarious Nielsen gave frequent interviews about the importance of the Old Man and his commitment to securing the rock ledges. He said, "if the Old Man can be preserved for even one extra generation's view, then all the past, present and future efforts will have been worthwhile."

A Last Glimpse

Dick Hamilton, President of White Mountain Attractions, dedicated his life to the White Mountains and mentored many people and organizations who shared his love for the region. Every evening as he drove home north through the Notch he would glance over his shoulder. "Goodnight, Boss" he would say. On Friday, May 2, 2003, his last good night was uttered, prophetically, the Profile obscured by clouds, "Goodnight, Boss, wherever you are."

On the morning of May 3, 2003, a Franconia Notch State Park trails crew discovered that the Old Man of the Mountain was gone. Within hours many people whose lives and livelihoods were entwined with the Profile gathered in shock, sadness, and confusion. Governor Craig Benson convened a task force to explore options for "revitalization" of the Profile. Many ideas, reminiscences, and opinions were shared with the committee via public meetings, emails, and websites.

After months of deliberation, the Old Man of the Mountain Revitalization Task Force announced that no replica of the Old Man would be constructed at its original location. Instead, they proposed plans to develop appropriate tributes at the base of Cannon Mountain stating, "Man was able to help preserve nature's work for a short time. But this symbol of New Hampshire's natural beauty and of its people's independent spirit will endure if we choose... We recommend against the creation of an artificial object on the site itself." Today, Profile Plaza honors many who played a significant role in promoting and maintaining the Profile throughout the past two centuries. In addition, special "profilers" allow visitors to recreate the thrilling view of the Old Man as they look up from the base of Profile Lake.

Dick Hamilton, *David and Debbie Nielsen*
Checking out the Old Man, c. 1990, Color
photograph, 6" x 4". Museum of the
White Mountains, Gift of the Old Man
of the Mountain Legacy Fund.



The Old Man of the Mountain

Facts and Figures:

- Perched on the cliffs of Cannon Mountain (often called Profile Mountain)
- Sat 1,400 feet above the ground with Profile Lake below
- 45 feet high
- 7,200 pounds (approximately)
- Made of five slabs of Jurassic Conway Granite (a coarse grain pink granite)
- Age: unknown—formed some time between 10,000 years ago after the retreat of the last continental ice sheet and first sightings by Native Americans (date unknown) and white settlers (1805)
- Created from glacial plucking, erosion and rock falls on the south side of the glacial landform that comprises Cannon Mountain
- Fall discovered on May 3, 2003



**Museum of the
White Mountains**
at Plymouth State University

