

Chapter One

IN THE BEGINNING

MOUNTAINS WERE INVENTED IN THE 19TH CENTURY. There had always been high places, of course, but the ancients usually thought that the gods lived there and avoided them for fear of giving offense. More recently, settlers considered mountains to be a piece of bad luck, a barrier to travel, and a hindrance to farming. One of my forebears was named Jemima Tute and she lived on the western frontier when the frontier was at the Connecticut River. There were two mountain ranges within reach, but no one in her family went hiking. If their eyes were open they were working, and they held off all the Indian attacks except the last one.

The high mountains of New England were approached slowly. They were first reported by a coastwise navigator in 1524, and early news was a mixture of wonder, dread, and confusion. One account was "A Voyage into New England," published in London in 1628: "This River (sawco), as I am told by the Savages, cometh from a great mountain called the Cristall hill, being as they say 100 miles in the Country, yet it is to be seene at the sea side, and there is no ship ariuse in NEW ENGLAND, either to the West so farre as Cape Cod, or to the East so farre as Monhiggen, but they see this Mountaine the first land, if the weather be cleere."

The ecology of the new world was not yet subject to rigorous study and some seaborne observers wrapped themselves in the mantle of whatever science as was available, so they attributed the brightness of that inland "Mountaine" to white moss. Others heard the optimistic accounts of distant sightings and early speculators, and thought it might be the sheen of precious stones. One gazeteer of 1638 brought less promising news; he pushed northwards from the Massachusetts settlements, but the track became difficult and he reported that the regions ahead were "daunting terrible," so he turned back.

If he'd persevered, he would have learned that the Cristall hill was Agiocochook, the highest point in the northeastern quarter of the North American continent. This distinction loomed large in the Indian culture of the region, and those natives dared not tread the heights that were reserved for the gods. When the summit was finally reached, the attempt was not inspired by any sense of adventure or scientific inquiry, it was politics.

That climb was made by Darby Field. He'd been living in the Massachusetts colony, then in about 1638 he settled in Dover, near the bustling docks of Portsmouth in New Hampshire's short coastline. At that time, leaders in Massachusetts were looking northward with a view to extending their realm. Governor John Winthrop and Richard Saltenstall were willing servants of the spirit of expansion that would characterize America, but they had not forgotten the sense of religious propriety that brought them to the New World. This meant that they had to deal with the natives that they found there, but they had to do it properly, with conferences and deeds.

Darby Field was a quick study and he learned several Indian tongues. He also had his eye out for the main chance, and he became a translator for Messrs. Winthrop and Saltonstall in their dealings with the natives. In particular they had to deal with Passaconaway, the principal chief of the Abenaki in the north. It seemed important to impress upon the natives that these European newcomers were not to be trifled with, that they were not afraid of either nature or gods. Darby Field decided that the surest way to do this was to conquer the throne room of their gods. So, in June of 1642 and in the witnessing company of an Abenaki, he found the untrodden top of Agiocochook. The prize was far more valuable than precious stones—this ascent helped convince Passaconaway to treat with the white settlers and trade away his lands.

The expansionist element in the Massachusetts colony lost no time in executing an intricate series of deeds with the Indians living in New Hampshire, but this was not the end of their ambition. They knew that the lands east of New Hampshire were more amenable to farming and better provided with access to the sea, so they looked to the territory that would become Maine.

When the negotiations were held, the delegation from Maine may have been surprised to learn that the men from Massachusetts already had maps of their lands. Darby Field had made a second ascent of Agiocochook in October 1642 and brought back reports of what he saw and gave them to his patrons in Massachusetts. As far as can be determined, that was the extent of high climbing in colonial New England.

It takes security from physical and economic threat before people feel they can take time off; that is to say, it takes vacations to turn daunting high places into something to be enjoyed, into mountains. The first vacationer of record in the hinterlands of New Hampshire was a person who had every right to feel secure in person and purse. This was John Wentworth, the last colonial governor of New Hampshire and probably its first tourist.

When the Honorable Wentworth took office in July 1767 he promised "to preserve the honor of the crown and advance the prosperity of the district." He was also "surveyor of the King's Woods in North America," which meant that he should see to it that a plentiful supply of trees suitable for ships' masts was provided to the king's navy. Two months after the governor took office he provided a further insight into the prosperity business. Portsmouth was the capitol of the colony and a circular advised the people that "John Wentworth gives notice that the General Court having empowered him to receive in demand 10,000 gallons of West India rum from the several towns in the state in lieu of taxes, he is ready for it and requests delinquent towns to hand it over."

This was a wide-ranging job description, and Governor Wentworth sought to escape the burdens of office and the hubbub of city life by building a second home on the shore of Lake Winnepesaukee, which lay at the beginning of the mountain region in the north. He spent his summers there from 1770 through 1775, thereby becoming the first New Hampshire vacationer of record, and he also built a series of splendid roads in the state. His visits were cut short by the stirrings of revolutionary sentiment and in 1778 he fled



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The Mount Washington Road

This splendidly hyperbolic view of the Presidential Range was published in 1872. The foreground shows the eight-mile carriage road to the summit of Mount Washington and the sunlight picks out "Camp House" in the lower right.

to a more comfortable situation among the Tories of Nova Scotia, never to reclaim either office or vacation home.

Agiocochook could be seen from the waters of Winnepesaukee and in 1784 it was renamed to honor the general who won the Revolutionary War: Mount Washington. Before long the stage drivers were persuaded to drive on for another day to reach the highlands and soon there were inns and hostelries to accommodate travelers. One prominent visitor was Anthony Trollope, the celebrated English writer who flourished in the years after the American Civil War. He wrote that he was amazed "that there was a district in New England containing mountain scenery superior to much that is yearly crowded by tourists in Europe."

Mr. Trollope spent a night in Jackson, ten miles southeast of Mount Washington, then he went through Crawford Notch at the southern end of the Mount Washington range and met Mr. Plaistead, who spoke in the simple patois of the yeoman farmer: "Sir! I have everything here that a man ought to want; air, sir, that ain't to be got better nowhere; trout, chicken, beef mutton, milk—and all for a dollar a day. A-top that hill, sir, there's a view that ain't to be beaten this side of the Atlantic, or I believe on the other. And echo, sir! We've an echo that come back to us six times, sir; floating on the light wind, and wafted about from rock to rock till you would think the angels were talking to you."

"That hill" was Mount Washington and the peaks and valleys in its range, once daunting terrible, were now stylish. New England was prosperous and this brought wealth, leisure, and rather unpleasant cities. All traffic was horse-drawn and calculations show that one million tons of manure fell in the streets of London each year, with proportional amounts in downtown America. Not only that, but when horses died on the job they were not always removed from the street very quickly. The heat of summer lent emphasis to these conditions and affluent families were easily persuaded to escape.

The security of empire and the leisure of aristocracy sent Englishmen into the high places of Switzerland in the 1830s, and those sons of privilege were the first great generation of mountaineers. Their fame became fashionable and was admired even by those who would not follow them, thus Queen Victoria's husband had a panoramic picture of the Mount Washington summit view on the wall of his study in Buckingham Palace.

The Edenic promise of Mr. Plaistead's oration was not a complete inventory of those echoing heights. He would have known that "the sheen of precious stones" reported by the coastwise navigators was actually rime ice or snow, which can accumulate on the Mount Washington range in every month of the year. Mr. Plaistead could see that, but he probably did not know why winter came to the range even in midsummer.

Mount Washington is 6,288 feet high, and the summit and its buttress ridges lie at the intersection of two jet streams in the upper air. These combine with the upslope on the windward side of the range and the high elevation of the crests to create local weather systems of sudden and extraordinary violence. In later years, scientists would occupy the summit of Mount Washington and measure temperatures of 60° below zero and winds of 231 mph, the highest ever recorded on the surface of the earth.

These lethal conditions would cause 140 deaths and uncounted desperate survivals in the years to come, but Anthony Trollope didn't know that. He followed Mr. Plaistead's suggestion and went to see the celebrated view for himself, and all he saw was the inside of a cloud. It was worse for Frederick Strickland.

FREDERICK STRICKLAND OCTOBER 1849

Frederick Strickland was a gentleman of substance and good prospect, the son of Sir George Strickland of Bridlington, England, who was a baronet and a member of Parliament. Frederick graduated in 1843 from Cambridge University, the school that taught Charles Darwin in the previous decade.

There was a lot going on then. Queen Victoria was in the second decade of her reign and Darwin was in the first gestures of his ascendancy. He'd gone from college to his five-year voyage on the *Beagle*, and upon his return he began to publish the essays that would be collected as *Species and Speciation* and lead to an enthusiastic but mistaken reading of his ideas. Darwin didn't think evolution is teleological—it has no direction or goal or end, evolution is what comes out in the wash. But it was convenient for English gentlemen of that era to believe that the whole history of evolution ended at English

gentlemen, destined as they were to achieve dominion over palm and pine and to know a good sherry when they tasted one.

Young Mr. Strickland was very keen on science; he would have been attuned to the Darwinian buzz at Cambridge and encouraged by the confident energy of his countrymen. In 1849, he went to see America. Frederick was twenty-nine years old when he sailed in the company of his brother Henry, and they spent several months touring the hinterland of the vast continent. Returning to civilization, the junior Stricklands reached Boston during the first week of October and took rooms at the Tremont House, whence Frederick's brother soon returned to England.

The travels of an English gentleman were dignified and the details were well-understood. Chief among them was the letter of introduction, a sort of pre-packaged reputation, and *The Boston Advertiser* reported that Frederick Strickland was "most respectably introduced (and) had become known to a considerable number of persons in this city and vicinity, by whom he was highly respected as a gentleman of amiable character, ardently devoted to literary and scientific pursuits." *The Boston Transcript* added, "He brought letters to some of our most distinguished citizens and was advised to visit the White Mountains by several gentlemen of science and taste in our community."

History is silent on the names of his new friends, but gentlemen of science and taste would certainly be found at Harvard College, where the faculty included geologist Louis Agassiz, geographer Arnold Guyot, and mapmaker George Bond. They had all been active in the White Mountains that summer, they left their names on the mountains they explored, and they might well have advised the young Englishman to visit the same region. Frederick stayed on in America after his brother went home, and in October 1849 he took the stagecoach north.

A measure of endurance was required to approach the mountains. A road had been built to provide a way for farmers in the upper reaches of the Connecticut River to trade in the markets of Portland, Maine, but it was not a trip that invited the casual tourist. The route led through what they called The Notch of the Mountains, soon renamed Crawford Notch, and the way was so difficult that the first person to make the trip had to lower his horse down one section with a block and tackle. Even after the road was improved,

the spur of commerce was barely enough to force the passage; "It was," said one rump-sore hero, "like driving a wagon up a brook bed."

Once Frederick Strickland was in the shadow of the mountains, he stopped in Crawford Notch at Abel Crawford's inn named The Mount Crawford House just south of Mount Crawford, then he went on to The Notch House kept by Thomas Crawford. Frederick came to the mountains with the intention of climbing the Crawford Path, a density of nomenclature that must have persuaded him that he'd come to the right place. The surroundings would have added to the assurance. Five years earlier, a traveler wrote that "the cavernous descent into which you look from the road is so savagely torn & distracted, so to speak, by the confused mingling of black depths and contending masses of old and young trees, & scattered & monstrous rocks, while the heights above are perhaps higher than anywhere else, that the scene is more imposing than in any other part." Another few hundred yards led to Thomas Crawford's door.

Two generations of this protean family built their hostelries for the convenience of farmers and tradesmen with accommodations that were minimal, but sufficient. Winter was the easiest time to travel because the streams and muddy swales were frozen and the Crawford diaries report that in 1819, "Lucy would many times have to make a large bed on the floor for (the travelers) to lie down upon, with their clothes on, and I would build a large fire in a large rock or stone chimney that would keep them warm through the night. It was no uncommon thing to burn in that fire-place a cord of wood in twenty-four hours, and sometimes more."

The next summer some pleasure-seekers inquired about climbing the mountains and seven of them signed Ethan Allen Crawford's register. Alert to this new commercial opportunity, he and his father Abel "made a foot path from the Notch out through the woods, and it was advertised in the newspapers, and we soon began to have a few visitors." This trail building would have been a prodigy of labor, but the Crawfords were used to hard work and Ethan was a giant of a man. He was over 6'2" in a time that counted 5'6" as well grown and he could lift a 500-pound barrel of potash two feet to the bed of their carrier. In present terms, the Crawford's path led three miles up Mount Clinton and another 6.2 miles along the ridge to the summit of Mount Washington. Then in 1840 Thomas Crawford's crew widened and graded their path for horse travel, which was considered to be the most

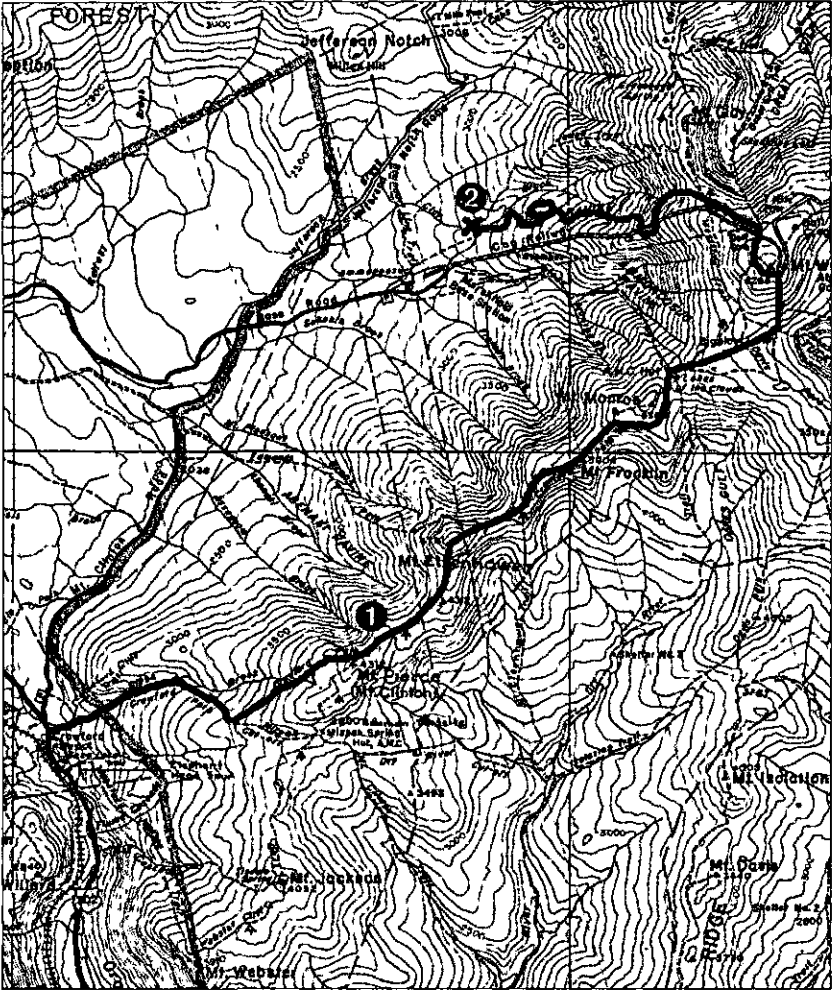


Crawford Notch, circa 1860. Early settlers had no way through the major mountain ranges of northern New Hampshire until a narrow gap was found in 1771. Today the gap is U.S. Rte. 302. This picture shows the route at about the time Frederick Strickland stopped at Thomas Crawford's hostelry, just beyond the rocks on the right.

reasonable way to ascend a mountain and, for the owner of the stable and the toll gate, the most profitable.

Thomas Crawford was keeping the family's inn beside the small lake at the top of the notch when Frederick Strickland arrived and announced that he'd like to climb Mount Washington. The innkeeper replied that the season for such an undertaking was past, there had been an unusually severe early-season storm and the snow up on the range was too deep for his horses to negotiate. Frederick thought that this country cousin was trying to shake him down for more money.

Thomas Crawford's cautions were rooted in something that he understood even if he couldn't explain it. Mount Washington is 130 miles north of



1. Frederick Strickland's guide and horses turn back
2. Body found below treeline

Boston and this puts the seasons as much as two months behind the down-country metropolis due to an indwelling global imperative. The summit of the mountain is more than 6,000 feet higher than Boston and each 100-foot gain in altitude is equivalent to moving ten miles north. By this formula, the summit is 500 miles north of Boston. Frederick Strickland would soon understand the effect of this rule, although he'd probably think that it didn't apply to him.

The English visitor came from a time and a culture that believed man could do anything, that triumph over nature was steady and inevitable and seemed to be confirmed by the recent propositions of the estimable Mr. Darwin. Thus strengthened, Frederick told Thomas Crawford that he was sure he could make the climb, he insisted that he could. Mr. Crawford agreed to provide a guide and horses and told him that if he did reach the top of Mount Washington he should not return by the Crawford Path, he should take the short route down by Horace Fabyan's bridle path, a three-mile route over the same terrain the cog railroad would follow twenty years later, then seven miles out along the Ammonoosuc River to Mr. Fabyan's hotel.

The English visitor seems to have been gaining in bravado, if not in wisdom. He said he didn't need any provisions for the long trip, but his host finally persuaded him to take a couple of crackers. Another Englishman was present, and he joined his countryman and the guide as they started up the Crawford Path on Friday morning, October 19.

Clothing is important here. Man is a tropical animal and nature does not protect him from cold. Darwin argued that the survival of a species depends on successful adaptation to a changing environment and the fittest among them survive best. Mr. Strickland would not have been worried. Consonant with the habits of his class while on a country outing, he would be wearing a shirt with high collar and floppy tie, a vest and hip-length jacket nipped at the waist, and tapered trousers. He'd been traveling with a large steamer trunk and here, facing the snowbound heights in North America, he put on his overcoat.

Ethan Allen had no education past his letters, but he was a natural civil engineer of the highest order and the location of his bridle path brought travelers to the crest of the Southern Peaks by steady and moderate grades. This is a delightful climb. The Crawfords' trail leads up the western slope of Clinton and as the prevailing winds carry moist air up the rising land it cools

and the moisture is wrung out of it. This slope is a forest primeval, with moss carpeting the ground and draping every tree.

The same atmospheric laws wring snow out of October air and although the valley weather was fine this day, a storm had just blown through and, as Thomas Crawford anticipated, the snow up on the ridge was deep. The Crawford's trail reached the ridgeline just north of Clinton, a place with scrub spruce from a foot to about eight feet high and far too dense to push through, which means it provides good shelter from bad weather. The small party went on northward along the ridge. The terrain here is gently rolling and it's almost exactly at timberline—on the open rocks for a way, then dipping into the dense spruce, then rising into the open again. On this day, it was also clogged with snow and very heavy going for the horses.

The party got some little way along the ridge from Clinton, but the snow was getting too deep for the horses. The trail would soon leave timberline behind and the climbers would be wholly exposed to the elements. The guide decided they should turn back; he did not want to risk either his horses or his clients on a trip that obviously could not go very much farther. Frederick Strickland wanted to keep going and the guide refused. Mr. Strickland was adamant; he said he'd go on alone. The guide implored him to turn back, but he was unmoved. Then the guide and the other Englishman returned to the valley and Frederick Strickland went on alone, heading for the summit of Mount Washington five miles away over increasingly steep and exposed terrain. He did reach the summit, then he found the Fabyan Path and started down the west side of the mountain.

The amenities were being observed in the valley if not on the heights and Thomas Crawford, knowing that Frederick planned to come down the Fabyan Path, sent his trunk on to the hotel kept by Horace Fabyan, near the place where the old Bretton Woods railroad depot now stands. Thomas went over the next morning and learned that Mr. Strickland was not there. He immediately directed that a search be started on the Crawford Path while he and Mr. Fabyan gathered a few more men and started up the Fabyan Path. This second search party found footprints in the snow about a mile up the mountain, well below the last of the difficult terrain and, it seemed to them, safely below timberline. They followed the track and it led to a small brook. They came to a pool and in it they found a pair of trousers and underclothes which proved to belong to Frederick Strickland. By then it was getting dark,

so the searchers repaired to the valley. The next morning Thomas Crawford and Horace Fabyan gathered a larger search party and they found the body about a mile from where they'd found the clothes; Frederick was lying face down in a pool of water with his head wedged between two rocks. His overcoat and his gloves were missing, and his torso and his legs were bruised and cut.

He had followed the Fabyan Path down the western slope of Mount Washington to timberline and then he lost the path among the trees. The searchers said that he'd circled around in the woods, crossing his own track and crossing the bridle path twice without realizing it. Finally he found a small stream which shows on modern maps as Clay Brook and leads to the larger Ammonoosuc River, which eventually reached Horace Fabyan's hotel in the valley.

Mr. Strickland was apparently still thinking clearly enough to follow the brook downstream, but blood in the snow indicated that injuries were slowing him until his final fall. The men in the rescue party were puzzled by the clothes they found in the pool. The body was examined by a physician and he suggested that when Frederick fell into the water his pants froze to his legs and he pulled them off so he could keep going, thus explaining the places where the flesh seemed to be stripped away. The doctor's education would not have included studies of hypothermia and the attendant drop in core temperature, but experience would have taught him that the combination of cold and water are lethal.

Frederick Strickland's body was taken back to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and he was buried near Green Briar Path in the Mount Auburn Cemetery, about a mile from the place where he first heard stories of the Presidential Range. He was the first person to climb Mount Washington in winter conditions, and he was the first to die there.