

FRANCONIA NOTCH AND THE WOMEN WHO SAVED IT

by Kimberly A. Jarvis,
*University of New Hampshire Press,
University Press of New England, Lebanon, NH, 2007. 232 pp.
paper, ISBN: 978-1584656272*

Reviewed by Bryon Middlekauff,
*Department of Social Science,
Program in Environmental Planning & Geography,
Plymouth State University,
Plymouth, NH.*

This study grew out of a history seminar at the University of New Hampshire and following that a doctoral dissertation. Dr. Jarvis is currently on the faculty at Doane College in Crete, Nebraska.

This well-researched, extremely detailed examination of the movement to preserve Franconia Notch, New Hampshire is subdivided into eight chapters. Dr. Jarvis begins by discussing briefly the physical geography of the White Mountains and the Notch. She also effectively details the exploration and tourism history in the region, reviewing accounts from guidebooks, poems, fiction, drawings and paintings from the 19th century. The romantic notion of wilderness was spread by way of these media, encouraging people of the northeast to experience the frontier before it disappeared. Franconia Notch drew visitors very early in the history of New England tourism, well before any accommodations existed there.

She relates that the August 1826 landslide, stemming from a prolonged heavy rainfall event which killed the entire Willey family in Crawford Notch, attracted a great deal of attention, and subsequently, early tourists to the region. The story appeared in newspapers, magazines, scientific journals, and guidebooks.

Other features in the White Mountains and Franconia Notch, such as the Basin and the Flume, and Cannon cliffs gained notoriety in the late 19th century. Thomas Starr King proclaimed their majesty in a guidebook while Nathaniel Hawthorne wove several tales about the White Mountains, their beauty and uniqueness. Jarvis also discusses the “mystique” which developed around the Old Man of the Mountain as engravings, drawings, and later, photographs began to appear in publications. The Old Man became a symbol of New England stoicism and grittiness.

She recounts that tourism to the region was facilitated, as the upper middle class and the wealthy, reached deeper into the landscape first by stage coach then by rail. Accessibility continued to improve after the Civil War, bringing thousands of tourists to the region. With the expansion of cities in the northeast and their attendant pollution and summer heat, throngs were attracted to the White Mountains for their beauty, cooler summer temperatures, and clean air. Hotels were constructed to accommodate these visitors, and rail lines extended to facilitate

travel; the local environment began to feel the effects of increasing visitation.

The growth of cities in the northeast exerted pressure upon the White Mountains and ultimately Franconia Notch in another way, too. Timber cutting, driven by the need for wood products, employed a method where every tree, whether useful or not, was removed from vast tracks of land (clear cutting). The “rapacious timber cutters” as they were viewed by some, already having harvested trees from throughout the White Mountains, had their designs upon Franconia Notch. It was clear to many that though Franconia Notch was impressively beautiful, an outstanding subset of the White Mountains and had escaped the axe up to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it too was doomed.

The conservation movement in the United States has its roots in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; this movement coincided with the efforts to preserve Franconia Notch. Though many of the more famous campaigns to save landscapes were focused in the west -- to save the redwoods or to establish national parks like Yosemite and Yellowstone -- there were campaigns in other regions of the country as well. Movements in California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Maine and New Jersey provided impetus, encouragement and models for a Franconia Notch plan.

The heart of the book centers on the campaign forged by the New Hampshire Federation of Women’s Clubs (NHFWC) in association with other groups to save Franconia Notch from logging. Considerable attention is devoted to the evolution of the campaign to preserve the Old Man of the Mountain and Franconia Notch. The NHFWC, along with the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests (SPNHF), and the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) formed the grassroots movement which drove the conservation movement in New Hampshire. Their regional and national connections enabled increased momentum for preservation of the 6000 acre tract owned by a hotel firm. These groups recognized that there was a strong likelihood that the land would be sold to a timber company. Jarvis carefully details the organization of a plan to raise funds in order to purchase the land by the state of New Hampshire, The Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, and the New Hampshire Federation of Women’s Clubs. The purchase was controversial in that many in the legislature regarded the price as excessive. Initially, the state pledged \$200,000 of the agreed upon purchase price of \$400,000. The remainder of the funds was to be raised privately. The SPNHF developed a plan to increase public awareness, and organize the fund raising, while the NHFWC actually secured most of the funds. Jarvis carefully describes the activities of the NHFWC efforts to educate, raise awareness and fund raise.

Jarvis outlines the hotel development in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the White Mountains and Franconia Notch. She tells the story of the services provided in rather rustically elegant inns served first by stage coach, then by rail lines, and ultimately by roads. The wooden hotel structures were quite vulnerable to fire; Profile House, located approximately where the Cannon Mountain tramway is currently situated, was destroyed by fire in August of 1923, marking the beginning of the end of the lodging history there. The hotel owners at first decided to quickly rebuild the facility, but soon changed their minds. This allowed for negotiations for purchase of the property to begin.

The campaign for the preservation of Franconia Notch began in earnest in the autumn of 1927. The SPNHF wanted to preserve the Notch “in its noble, original form”. Recognizing that

this landscape had appeal beyond the boundaries of New Hampshire, the campaign leadership extended the boundaries of the fund raising effort to Massachusetts and to the nation as a whole because of its perceived national importance.

The campaign turned to “wealthy businessmen, philanthropists, and ordinary citizens” for the remainder of the agreed upon purchase price. One successful aspect of the campaign involved an appeal to the public to “purchase” a tree for \$1. One clever campaign tactic involved the use of a composite photograph which appeared in a Boston newspaper where the Old Man of the Mountain peered out over a Franconia Notch composed of stumps and fallen logs. The caption suggested what the Notch would look like if logging were permitted. The SPNHF and NHFWC fundraising was successful and the purchase of the 6000 acre tract was completed culminating in the transfer of the land to the state for a state park in 1928.

Franconia Notch and the Women Who Saved It is a remarkable contribution to the history of New England, the conservation movement, and to women’s history. It is thorough, well written, nicely illustrated with photographs and maps, and extremely well documented with end notes and an extensive bibliography. It is appropriate for use in tourism, women’s studies, women’s history, and environmental studies courses, as an example of tourism development, the women’s movement, and the evolution of the conservation ethic in the United States.