

Courtesy photos

The Museum of the White Mountains features many 19th-century paintings inspired by the landscape. **From top to bottom:** “Summit of Mount Washington in the White Mountains” by Ferdinand Richarddt, 1857; “Summit of Mount Washington” by B.G. Stone and Sebatier, 1858; “Morning Mist Rising,” Thomas Cole, 1830; “At the White Mountains,” printed by Frederick Gleason, c. 1875, courtesy of the New Hampshire Historical Society.

PLYMOUTH

# Shrine<sup>to</sup> the sublime

Museum an ode to White Mountains

By CHRISTINE HAMM  
For the Monitor

It's been nearly 200 years since artist Thomas Cole first took notice of the land he called “a union of the picturesque, the sublime, and the magnificent.” Cole's description of what surely sounded like God's country started a granite rush as artists, authors, scientists and vacationers came to the White Mountains to see for themselves what all the fuss was about. The ancient hills, long known for their beauty and resources by the native population, did not disappoint.

Nor does the Museum of the White Mountains, which opens to the public this Saturday on the campus of Plymouth State University. Less than a five-minute drive from Exit 25 off Interstate 93, the museum should become a first stop for anyone visiting New Hampshire's most-celebrated attractions.

Museum officials are careful not to compartmentalize the venue. It's “neither an art museum, nor a science museum, nor a history museum,” they say. “Instead, the MWM brings those disciplines and more together to foster a multidisciplinary understanding and experience of the White Mountains region – both physically and virtually – from its ideal location at the gateway to the White Mountains themselves.”

For those traveling on, the museum also offers a way for visitors to gain a broader perspective by coordinating the GPS on their cell phones with actual White Mountain sites.

The museum's inaugural exhibit, “Passing Through: The Allure of the White Mountains,” will be on view for the next year. But Catherine Amidon, former head of the university's Karl Drerup Art Gallery and now director of this new venture, is already making plans for two exhibits in 2014: the first on the relationship between geology, land use and people; the second on the history of White Mountain trails and the clubs and people who established and maintain them.

Amidon, a Massachusetts native, has been passionate about the region since she was a child, when her family often headed north for long weekends. Later, she worked in Appalachian Mountain Club huts, using her free time to hike, ski, rock and ice climb. Now her passion extends to the museum that elucidates and celebrates the landscape she loves.

For the past two years, she's been involved as the university renovated a former Methodist church into a striking,

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# WHITE MOUNTAINS

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contemporary gallery. The circular, once-stained glass window behind the sanctuary is now clear, sending a shaft of light into the former nave. The original beams punctuate the white walls, currently lined with an extraordinary trove of paintings, photographs, maps, journal entries, newspaper and magazine drawings, stereoscopic slides, and ephemera spanning two centuries. Viewed together, they tell a rich story of an evolving relationship between man and nature.

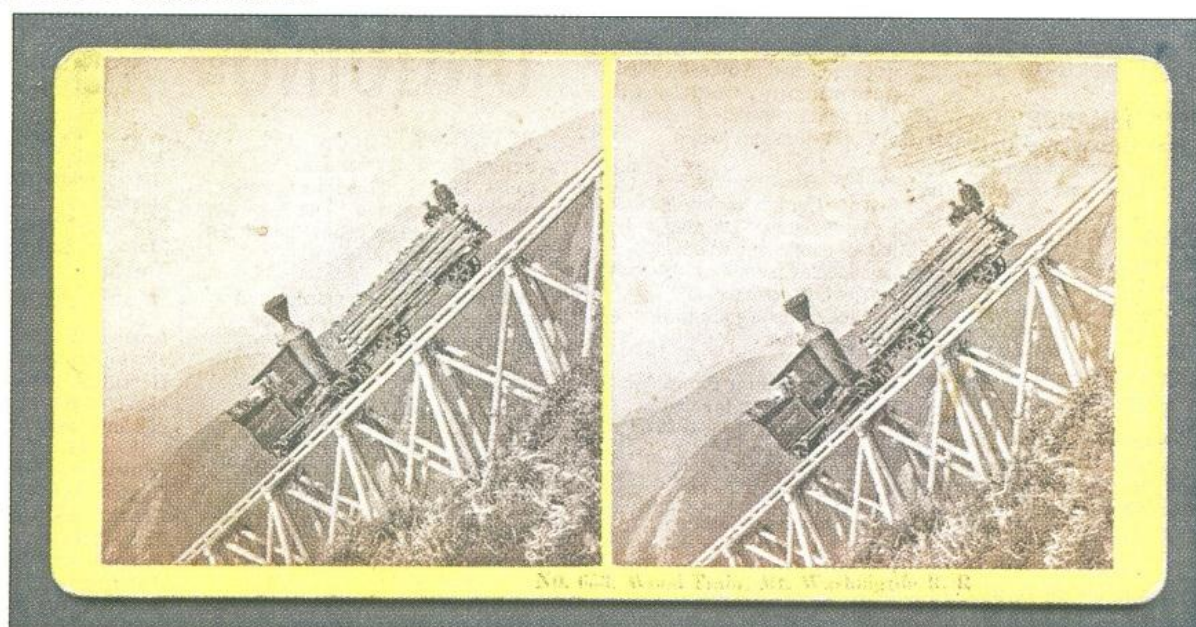
One of the earliest and more perverse of such connections was the tragic story of the Willey family, who settled in Crawford Notch. In 1826, they fled their home during a storm and later were found buried in rock and mud below the house, which had survived without damage. The capricious disaster captured America's imagination, prompting commentary by ministers, expeditions by scientists, and a basis for much poetry and prose, including Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Ambitious Guest." Once the road through the Notch was repaired, curious tourists came to see the site for themselves.

Among these was Thomas Cole, who arrived in 1827 with a wealthy art patron from Hartford. His oil painting, *Morning Mist Rising* is one of the show's highlights.

The next year Cole returned with another artist, New Hampshire native Henry Cheever Pratt, and a few years later, he convinced the celebrated Hudson River Valley painter Asher Durand to lift his depression by leaving New York for "the pure air of heaven" found in the White Mountains.

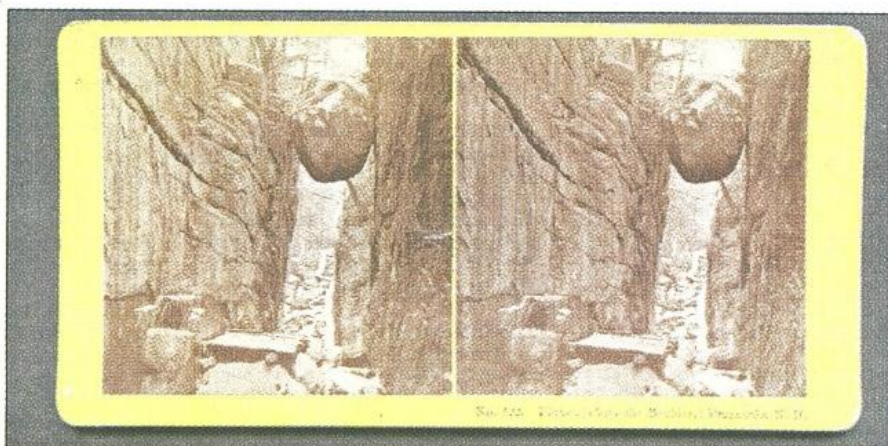
Durand came, the depression left, and others followed. These included what has become a whole school of artists: Benjamin Champney, Alvan Fisher, Samuel L. Gerry, Frederick Gleason, Edward Hill, David Johnson, Nicolay Tysland Leganger, Ferdinand Richardt and Frank Shapleigh, all of whom are represented in this exhibit.

At the same time these artists were celebrating the isolation of the region's natural wonders, access to the wilderness was becoming easier. Farm families, hurt by the collapse of the sheep market, began to open their homes and establish inns for paying guests. One enterprising family, the Crawfords, catered to visitors by offering a full range of services, including



Courtesy photos

Part of the Museum of the White Mountains Dan Noel Collection is "Wood Train, Mount Washington Railroad," (above) and "Flume Above the Boulder Franconia," (below), Stereoview card images by the Kilburn Brothers, date unknown.



fishing trips and guided hikes. They even kept bears and wolves to show off as pets and fired cannons to impress travelers with the echo.

By 1842, escapees from Boston and New York could take a train to Concord, then catch a stagecoach to travel north. Originally used for commercial purposes only, the White Mountain Stage Line and other companies had been offering regular runs for travelers from Concord and Portland, Maine, since the mid-1820s. They also offered trips through Crawford Notch to the northern Presidential and the northern end of Franconia Notch. True enthusiasts delved deeper by "tramping" through the woods.

By mid-century, the family of John Jacob Astor, reputedly the richest man in America, was among those using the wilderness adventure as an antidote to the growing ills of urbanization. But some visitors, such as Swedish tourist Frederika Bremer, viewed the increase in tourism as an invasion unworthy of the natural grandeur that inspired it.

Visitors "with noisy, unquiet company . . . do not seem to understand any other mode of enjoying nature than in talking, laughing, eating, drinking, and by all other kinds of noisy pleasures. They pass up the mountain laughing at full gallop," she wrote. "How unlike is this thoughtless life to that of nature, where the clouds come down as if to converse with the mountain."

An 1857 New York double-page newspaper clipping illustrates the type of amusement Bremer disdained. A half-dozen young women, overdressed in hoopskirts and bonnets, are joined by male companions in

jackets and ties, as all hold onto each other to scale a trail up and down Mount Washington. As one couple straddles a log to cross a ravine, it's obvious the whole party is having way too much fun for Bremer's taste.

Covering everything from both the ridiculous to the sublime, "Passing Through" tells a full story. With it, the White Mountain Museum has become a "must-see" introduction to the North Country.

The museum, 34 Highland St., Plymouth, is open daily except Mondays and holidays in the winter, and Mondays and Tuesdays in the summer. For more information, go to [plymouth.edu/museum-of-the-white-mountains](http://plymouth.edu/museum-of-the-white-mountains) or call 535-3210.

Covering everything from the ridiculous to the sublime, "Passing Through" tells a full story of the White Mountains.