

## **Scenic Areas of the White Mountain National Forest**

*“Scenic Areas are places of outstanding or unique beauty that require special management to preserve their qualities. This type area will be maintained as nearly as possible in an undisturbed condition.”* Secretary of Agriculture Rules and Regulations from 1960.

### **Scenery in the Era of Tourism, Railroads and Logging: 1880-1911**

Few people know much about the designation of scenic areas on the White Mountain National Forest (WMNF). Even fewer can identify all ten designated scenic areas even though they may have visited them or saw the boundaries marked on trail maps. The purpose of this article is to tell the fascinating story of designated scenic areas and to encourage the reader to visit and appreciate these special areas.

Scenery played an important role in the early tourist history of the White Mountains. Artists and vacationers came in large numbers to enjoy the majestic views, clear streams and green forests starting in the 1880's as the passenger railroads reached the mountains. The White Mountain School of Art played an important role in heralding the beauty of these mountains.

The coming of the railroads brought more than tourists and artists. It brought the lumber barons who had previously skipped the White Mountain forests because of their inaccessibility. Most White Mountain rivers were unsuitable for driving logs but the technological advances of the steam engine made railroad logging practical. The huge demand for lumber for a growing America attracted investment and large-scale removal of the lush mountainsides covered with spruce forests.

New Hampshire led the nation in spruce production for the decade of 1890-1900 with production peaking in 1907. This level of harvesting was both unsustainable and a cause of concern with the paper mills who needed a steady and reliable supply of wood fiber. Hotel owners and tourists alike bemoaned the loss of forest cover. Business owners and industry often relied upon waterpower that became more erratic as a result of widespread deforestation causing fluctuations in flow. Forest fires in 1903 alone burned 85,000 acres or 10% of the White Mountain region.

This extensive devastation of White Mountain and Southern Appalachian forests from overharvesting and forest fires led to the development of the forest conservation movement starting around 1900. A coalition of business owners, conservation organizations, citizens and politicians joined together to call for protecting the White Mountains and Southern Appalachians. This movement succeeded after many attempts to pass legislation known as the Weeks Act in Congress in 1911.

The Weeks Act was named for Congressman John W. Weeks of Massachusetts who served as the floor manager in obtaining passage. Congressman Weeks had a White

Mountain connection having been born in Lancaster, NH in 1860 and growing up on a farm. Weeks originally tried to use scenery protection for justifying the protection of these mountains. Speaker of the House Joseph Cannon said “Not One Cent for Scenery” causing Weeks to go back to the drawing board. Weeks came up with a better reason that also met the constitutional objections that some had expressed.

The wording in the preamble describes the Weeks Act as *“An act to enable any State to cooperate with any other State or States, or with the United States, for the protection of the watersheds of navigable streams and to appoint a commission for the acquisition of lands for the purpose of conserving the navigability of navigable rivers.”* This was certainly an interesting choice of words but it met the intent of the coalition supporting the preservation of the mountain forests and scenery. The result today is that we have 41 National Forests in 24 eastern states that protect 20 million acres of forest.

### **The Era of Forest Protection: 1911-1961**

The White Mountains in 1911 looked far different then they do today. Many of the hillsides had been cutover and burned over. Very little of the virgin forest remained. The first land acquired for what was then the White Mountain Forest Reserve was the Pike Tract in Benton, NH acquired on January 2, 1914 followed a few weeks later by a large swath of land on the Northern Presidential Range and the Wild River region. By 1918 enough land had been acquired so that President Woodrow Wilson designated the White Mountain Forest Reserve a national forest (WMNF).

The early foresters recognized the importance of acquiring not just “the lands that no one wanted” that were barren of trees but areas in the mountains that had not been cutover and had a good forest cover.

Jack Godden of the WMNF wrote in 1965 about Forester William Logan Hall in 1919 writing to the Chief of the U. S. Forest Service describing his efforts. *“Acting under your instructions, I have endeavored to work out a practical plan for retaining the original forest growth on the crucial area of privately owned land in the White Mountain Purchase Unit. On the remaining private lands in the White Mountain Purchase Area, in view of the probability of their subsequent acquisition by the Federal Government, in view of the essential nature of their forest as watershed cover, and in view of their recreational importance, a determined effort should be made to retain the original forest growth on areas of considerable size.”* What Hall was describing was his strategy to acquire lands that retained a forest cover.

In the 1920’s informal agreements were made by the government foresters to prevent logging or road building on several especially scenic areas that had been acquired for the WMNF. These informal agreements worked for four decades until official designations and formal management plans were made starting in 1961.

### **Early Efforts to Conserve Areas of Scenic Beauty**

The WMNF has a long history of citizen and conservation organization engagement in land protection. Efforts started in the 1890's to protect the mountain slopes that would bear fruit with the passage of the Weeks Act. Two examples directly related to future scenic areas are noteworthy.

Randolph 1895 Case Study: The Boston and Maine Railroad completed the railroad between Whitefield and Gorham in 1892. Soon the trains that brought the tourists in were hauling the logs out as logging companies moved in and started cutting off the rich spruce forests of the Northern Peaks. The residents of Randolph, a major center for hiking, were concerned. The residents looked on with horror as the clear cutting extended two miles up the steep slopes. Many of their favorite trails became impassable due to slash.

The Appalachian Mountain Club acted in 1895 to save a small patch of primeval forest next to several popular waterfalls along Snyder Brook. The club purchased a strip of land from Laban Watson that was 600 feet wide and a little over a half mile long. The price was \$400 for 36 acres of old growth hemlock, spruce and hardwoods. The AMC donated the land to the WMNF in 1937. Today as you walk toward Snyder Brook the change from regenerating hardwood forest to old growth hemlock and spruce is abrupt and dramatic. These ancient trees tower up to 90 feet in height and with a measured age of 370 years give us a picture of what much of this area would have looked like before the extensive cutting began.

Waterville Valley 1928 Case Study: Another noteworthy area preserved was in the Greeley Ponds area near Waterville Valley. This area retained its old growth forest and was about to be reached by a logging railroad when public pressure under the leadership of Philip Ayres and Allen Chamberlain convinced the U. S. Forest Service to acquire it in 1928. Hurricanes in 1938 and 1950 damaged some of the old growth forest but the area around the ponds retains its wild appearance and many old trees remain.

### **Informal Agreements Lead to Formal Management Plans and Designation**

The informal agreements to protect outstanding scenic beauty and old growth forests became more formalized in 1960. The Multiple Use – Sustained Yield Act required the Forest Service to develop plans that considered every National Forest resource including “*wood, water, wildlife, forage and recreation*”. This meant that the land and resources would be managed to ensure a continuing supply of forest products and services in perpetuity for “*the greatest good to the greatest number of people in the long run.*” Recreation was considered to be the dominant use in those special areas that had been identified and protected by the early foresters.

**When were scenic areas formerly established?** The formal establishment of designated Scenic Areas occurred on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Weeks Act in 1961. Forest Service Chief Richard McArdle on October 6th made the announcement at the celebration of the Weeks Act at the Crawford House Hotel, within sight of one of the areas, the Gibbs Brook Scenic Area.

Scenic Areas established on October 5, 1961 by Regional Forester Hamilton K. Pyles:

- Gibbs Brook: 900 acres of old growth forest along the Crawford Path.
- Pinkham Notch: 5,600 acres including Tuckerman and Huntington Ravines.
- Snyder Brook: 36 Acres of old growth hemlock, spruce and maple.
- Sawyer Ponds: 1,130 acres with two ponds nestled under Mount Tremont.
- Lafayette Brook: 990 acres along the brook to the summit of Mount Lafayette.
- Rocky Gorge: 70 acres including a gorge and small pond along the Swift River.

Scenic Areas established on October 22, 1964 by Regional Forester Richard Droege:

- Greeley Ponds: 810 acres of old growth forest near Waterville Valley.
- Nancy Brook: 460 acres of old growth spruce forest and two remote ponds.

Scenic Area established on January 10, 1969 by Regional Forester

- Lincoln Woods: 18,500 acres of remote forest near Shoal and Ethan Ponds. (1,200 acres today).

Scenic Area established by the 1986 WMNF Plan:

- Mount Chocorua: 6,100 acres around the summit of Mount Chocorua.

**What happened to the 10<sup>th</sup> Scenic Area?** The Nancy Brook Scenic Area became the Nancy Brook Research Natural Area (RNA) in 2005. The protection level for an RNA is higher than for a Scenic Area, although most people would not recognize the subtle management differences.

**What happened to the Northern Peaks Scenic Area?** There was a proposed 11<sup>th</sup> Scenic Area called the Northern Peaks Scenic Area. The boundaries covered the northern and western slopes of Mount Madison, Adams, Jefferson, Washington, Monroe and Eisenhower (then called Mount Pleasant). Residents of Randolph objecting to a timber sale near Bowman responded by lobbying for a new scenic area to prevent timber harvesting on the northern peaks. The proposed Northern Peaks Scenic Area was rejected in 1969 on the grounds that existing protection was adequate. The proposed timber sale was dropped.

**What is the largest Scenic Area?** The largest Scenic Area was formerly Lincoln Woods at 18,500 acres from 1969 to 1984. The creation of the 45,000 acre Pemigewasset Wilderness by Congress in 1984 reduced the size of Lincoln Woods Scenic Area to a mere 1,200 acres on the western slopes of Mount Willey. Today the Mount Chocorua Scenic Area at 6,100 acres is the largest.

**Who designates Scenic Areas, RNA's and Wilderness?** The Eastern Regional Forester in Milwaukee, Wisconsin has the authority to designate Scenic Areas and Research Natural Areas. Only Congress can designate Wilderness.

**Why was Mount Chocorua not included in the Sandwich Range Wilderness?** I found a reference by Charles Burnham of the AMC in Appalachia (Winter 1985 page 158) that alludes to an agreement to make this area a Scenic Area. I infer that Wilderness designation for this iconic peak would have been controversial. Manmade overnight trail shelters, including the historic Jim Liberty Cabin and Camp Penacook would have to be removed. Mount Chocorua has a high density of trails and Wilderness Act implementation could clearly call for a reduced trail density, a reduced level of trail maintenance, and a reduced level of use by implementing a permit system.

**Are motorized vehicles allowed in Scenic Areas?** The 2005 WMNF Plan and specific scenic area management plans address motorized use. The Pinkham Notch Scenic Area allows for administrative use of special snow tractors for Snow Rangers in Tuckerman and Huntington Ravines. Route 16 bisects the Pinkham Notch Scenic Area and there is also a public road adjacent to the Rocky Gorge Scenic Area.

**What is the White Mountain Forest Plan Management Area for Scenic Areas?** The White Mountain Forest Plan describes management areas as “the grouping of land areas allocated to similar management goals.” All of the scenic areas fall under Management Area 8.5 (MA 8.5). Even though each scenic area has a specific management plan the overall purpose is to manage these areas for their outstanding natural beauty.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not represent those of the US Forest Service.

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### **Visiting the Scenic Areas of the White Mountain National Forest**

**Snyder Brook Scenic Area (1961):** This 36 acre stand of old growth hemlock, red spruce and northern hardwood forest follows the lower reach of Snyder Brook. Elevations range from 1300-1600 feet. Parking is available at the Appalachia parking lot on US Route 2 in Randolph. The AMC acquired the land in 1895 to preserve the scenic beauty around Gordon, Salroc and Tama Falls. The club donated this beautiful area to the U. S. Forest Service in 1937. The Brookbank and Fallsway Paths maintained by the Randolph Mountain Club provide the best opportunities to see the old growth forest and water falls.

Rocky Gorge Scenic Area (1961): This scenic area is located along the Kancamagus Highway, eight miles west of Conway. The Swift River plunges 20 feet over broken granite ledges. This 70 acre area of natural beauty also features Falls Pond, hidden away behind a glacial esker covered with red spruce and white pine forests. Parking is available and the 1-mile long Lovequist Loop Trail circles six-acre Falls Pond. Fishing is permitted in the Swift River with a valid state license but no swimming is allowed due to the dangerous jagged rocks and turbulent stream.

Lafayette Brook Scenic Area (1961): This 990 acre scenic area is located in Franconia with access provided to a viewing point near the Hugh Gallen Memorial at the north end of the Franconia Notch Parkway and a side road (formerly Route 3) that starts opposite Route 18. This scenic area features spectacular views of Mount Lafayette and an old growth spruce forest on the back slope of Eagle Cliff. A 12-mile loop hike that strong hikers may want to try in good weather starts at the Greenleaf Trail. It is 2.7 miles to the AMC Greenleaf Hut and a short distance down to Eagle Lake, which is in the scenic area. Another mile brings you to the summit of Mount Lafayette, sixth highest peak in the White Mountains. Follow the Appalachian Trail north over the North Peak of Mount Lafayette and then descend via the 4.7-mile long Skookumchuck Trail to the Franconia Bike Path. It is a four-mile walk back on the paved bike path to your vehicle near the start of the Greenleaf Trail.

Gibbs Brook Scenic Area (1961): This 900-acre scenic area along Gibbs Brook has a large amount of old growth red spruce and yellow birch. The area is a candidate Research Natural Area because of its natural condition and lack of any previous logging. The oldest maintained trail in America, the Crawford Path, built in 1819 runs through the center of the scenic area. The scenic area starts a quarter mile above Route 302 across from the AMC Highland Center in Crawford Notch. The nearly two-century old trail climbs to a shoulder of Mount Clinton, named for an early botanist who explored this area and for whom *Clintonia borealis* is named. The old growth forest here is home to the American marten, fisher and a variety of birds including spruce grouse, boreal chickadee, gray jay and black-backed woodpecker.

Pinkham Notch Scenic Area (1961): This 4,200 acre area includes Tuckerman Ravine, Huntington Ravine, Crystal Cascades and Glen Ellis Falls. The Mount Washington Auto Road, Davis Path, Glen Boulder Trail, Wildcat Ridge Trail, Wildcat Ski Area and the Old Jackson Road bound the Pinkham Notch Scenic area. The Tuckerman Ravine Trail to Hermit Lake is perhaps the best trail to experience this area. The Alpine Garden was formerly part of this scenic area but is now a designated Research Natural Area.

Sawyer Ponds Scenic Area (1961): The Sawyer Ponds Scenic Area occupies a deep basin area and is reached by a one mile hike from the Sawyer River Road in Livermore. The 1,130-acre area features Sawyer Pond, a 44-acre pond over one hundred feet deep in places and smaller Little Sawyer Pond with a depth of 28 feet. Much of the forest is old growth spruce and northern hardwoods. An old burn between Owls Cliff and Mount Tremont features paper birch. This is a beautiful place for an autumn hike.

Greeley Ponds Scenic Area (1964): the 810 acre Greeley Ponds Scenic Area contains an area of old growth red spruce, two mountain ponds, and rugged cliffs between Mount Kancamagus and the East Peak of Mount Osceola. The U. S. Forest Service acquired the property after a public campaign by the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests and other citizen groups. The easiest access is from the Kancamagus Highway using the Greeley Ponds Trail for 1.4 miles. The trail formerly continued to Waterville Valley but Hurricane Irene washed the trail south of the lower Greeley Pond away in 2011. There are no current plans to rebuild the trail.

Nancy Brook Scenic Area (1964-2005): The 460 acre scenic area along Nancy Brook was designated a Research Natural Area as a result of the 2005 White Mountain Forest Plan. This former scenic area is now 1,590 acres in size and has another designation as a Nancy Brook Virgin Spruce Forest and Scenic Area under the National Natural Landmark program. This is believed to be the largest old growth spruce forest in the northeast. The Nancy Brook Cascades and Nancy and Norcross Ponds can be reached after a 4.5-mile hike by the Nancy Pond Trail from a trailhead on Route 302. The area is well known by serious birders who seek the spruce grouse, black-backed woodpeckers and boreal chickadees that are found here.

Lincoln Woods Scenic Area (1969): Originally the largest designated scenic area at 18,500 acres, the current size has shrunk to 1,200 acres. Concerns over proposals to build a highway through the Pemigewasset wilderness (small w) connecting the Kancamagus Highway to Route 302 through Thoreau Falls and Zealand Notch led to intense efforts by organizations such as the AMC to seek designation by Congress as a Wilderness. A 1966 letter from Forest Supervisor Gerald Wheeler to AMC President Preston Saunders indicated that the Forest Service preferred to use the faster approach of scenic area designation by the Regional Forester and seek a higher level of protection in the future. This higher level of protection was achieved in 1984 when Congress designated the 45,000-acre Pemigewasset Wilderness, which included most of the former Lincoln Woods Scenic Area. Today only a small remote area remains between Whitewall Mountain and Mount Willey. The land was acquired in 1936 from the Parker-Young Company for \$2.50 an acre! Visit the former scenic area using the Ethan Pond Trail, Shoal Pond Trail and the Twinway.

Mount Chocorua Scenic Area (1986): This is the last area to be designated and was created as a result of the 1986 White Mountain Forest Plan. The size is 6,100-acres and features Mount Chocorua, an iconic New Hampshire Mountain peak. The area almost became part of the Sandwich Range Wilderness but it appears that Wilderness designation would have had adverse effects on this popular hiking area and backcountry facilities such as Camp Penacook and Jim Liberty Cabin. There are numerous trails that ascend Mount Chocorua and perhaps the Piper Trail is the most famous and popular. I like the Chimney Falls Trail and the Carter Ledge Trail, where an uncommon stand of Jack Pine can be seen.

Northern Peaks (Proposed 18,000 acre Scenic Area): No discussion of designated WMNF Scenic Areas is complete without mention of the proposal to designate the Northern

Peaks of the Presidential Range as a scenic area. The proposal came about as a controversy between the WMNF and local citizens in Randolph who objected to a proposal by the U. S. Forest Service to have a timber sale in an area on the lower slopes of Mount Bowman in Randolph. The proposal would have included the northern and western slopes of Mount Adams, Madison, Jefferson, Clay, Washington, Monroe, Franklin and Pleasant (now Mount Eisenhower). The U. S. Forest Service felt that the current level of protection was adequate and in the end the proposal for a timber sale and a scenic area was dropped.

In summary, the history of designated scenic areas on the WMNF provides a fascinating picture of early efforts to preserve areas of outstanding beauty and old growth forests. Today nine of ten designated scenic areas remain while the Nancy Brook Scenic Area was designated as a Research natural Area that carries a higher level of protection. Visiting each of these scenic areas will give the reader a better understanding of this aspect of White Mountain National Forest history.