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The Crawford Path in the News

White Mountain history and the communications revolutions

Susan Schibanoff

Following his tour of the United States in 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville observed, “In America there is scarcely a hamlet which has not its own newspaper.” His claim is exaggerated, yet it is true that newspaper production had increased exponentially after the American Revolution. Spurred by the Postal Service Act of 1792, which subsidized the cost of distributing newspapers and permitted printers and publishers to send their papers to one another for free, and by the key role newspapers played in the new democratization of America, including federal political campaigns and
elections, the number of newspapers published in this country had swelled from approximately 40 in 1780 to more than 575 in 1820. By 1820, at least 50 newspapers were being published in New Hampshire, and that number doubled within a few decades. And as early as 1822, Daniel Walker Howe remarks, “the United States had more newspaper readers than any other country, regardless of population.” If every hamlet did not have its own newspaper, even the smallest, most remote villages at least had access to one in the early republic.

This proliferation of newspapers is part of what historians term the communications revolution in pre-1850 America. Scholars differ on precisely what constitutes the revolution, when it began, when it ended, and its causes and effects. Yet there is general agreement that the invention of electric telegraphy, successfully demonstrated by Samuel F. B. Morse in 1844, represents a “climactic moment in a widespread revolution of communications” in which the rapid expansion of newspapers played a prominent role. The purpose of my article is to suggest the value of this underused resource in the study of White Mountain history.

Allen H. Bent, who published the definitive bibliography of the White Mountains for the Appalachian Mountain Club in 1911, acknowledges that the field of newspaper articles “contains much valuable matter”; as an example, he cites an article from a Concord, New Hampshire, newspaper of 1826 as perhaps the earliest description of Franconia Notch and an ascent of Mount Lafayette. Yet, Bent admits without explanation, his bibliography has “neglected entirely” this resource. Bent does include a generous list of articles from magazines such as The Granite Monthly, The Atlantic Monthly, and Scientific American (volumes 11–32) and from Appalachia (volumes 33–42), but not from newspapers. Most likely, Bent’s complete omission of newspaper items reflects his inability to access this large, ephemeral, often localized resource. Modern White Mountain scholarship also largely overlooks early journalism resources and probably for the same reason—a heretofore lack of easy access.

Thanks to a later “communications revolution,” the digital one of our era, however, early American newspapers are now within convenient reach. Readex’s Web-based America’s Historical Newspapers (c. 2004– ) offers a vast and ever growing digitized collection of American newspapers from 1690 to the present, and I draw the material for this article from Readex’s online database. My case in point for the value of using newspaper resources in White Mountain history is the Crawford Path. I choose this example because the Crawfords’ trail is the oldest continuously maintained footpath in
America—in 2019, it celebrated its bicentennial—and thus its origin predates by decades most of the printed sources to which scholars typically turn for White Mountain history, starting with Lucy Crawford’s *History of the White Mountains*, first published in 1846.9

**Dating the Crawford Path**

On May 12, 1919, Allen Chamberlain wrote to Fred D. Crawford of Lancaster, New Hampshire, about the coming 100th anniversary of the Crawford Path.10 Crawford was a grandson of Ethan Crawford and great-grandson of Abel Crawford, the legendary trail cutters. A past president of AMC and member of the centennial committee, Chamberlain wanted to collect “all possible historical data” concerning the earliest days of the trail. He had consulted relevant published sources from the mid-nineteenth century, including Lucy Crawford’s *History*, the classic works written in the 1850s by Benjamin Willey, John H. Spaulding, and Thomas Starr King, as well as later guidebooks by Moses Sweetser, but Chamberlain suspected that there was earlier material that would be of “great interest in connection with this celebration.”

In particular, Chamberlain asked Crawford whether he knew anything about Ethan’s comment later recorded in the *History* that the cutting of the path was “advertised in the newspapers.”11 Such an ad, whatever form it had taken, might allow Chamberlain to confirm his conjecture that the trail was completed in June 1819. Chamberlain had looked through the files of the *Boston Patriot* for June and July of that year but found nothing. Perhaps it had been advertised in a Portland or Concord newspaper, he mused. Fred Crawford apparently knew nothing about the ad, much less possessed a copy of it, and arrangements for the celebration proceeded without it.

Chamberlain’s hunch that newspapers could provide the information he sought derived from his own experience. As a journalist, he had written on the White Mountains for the *Boston Transcript* and other news publications. As late as 1919, the papers were still covering the White Mountains in detail. The *New York Times*, for instance, reported the centennial celebration of the Crawford Path on July 6 of that year. There were even two tourist newspapers published in the White Mountains, the *White Mountain Echo* and *Among the Clouds*, to keep readers up to date on the mountains while they vacationed in them. Much of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century coverage was society news, the comings and goings of the rich and famous to one of America’s most fashionable summer playgrounds. The *Times’s* article on
the Crawford Path centennial, for example, concludes by noting that Mrs. Eleanor Ashby had arrived from New York to visit Mrs. William A. Barron at the Crawford House; the latter’s husband was the hotel magnate who owed the Crawford House and other White Mountain establishments. As Chamberlain intuited, however, earlier nineteenth-century newspapers are a rich source of historical information on the White Mountains as well.

Today, a century after Chamberlain unsuccessfully searched for the ad on the Crawford Path, it is relatively easy to find what he was looking for, thanks to Readex’s database. Chamberlain’s guess that the Crawfords’ ad might be in the Portland papers was correct, but not in June or July. Instead, on August 31, 1819, the Portland-based *Eastern Argus* informed its readers “with pleasure” that a new “foot way” had opened to the summit of Mount Washington. In contrast to the formerly traveled way through Adams (now the town of Jackson), the new path is “much shorter,” the announcement declared. Departing from the turnpike that passes through the notch, it considerably diminishes the “fatigue and difficulty” of the ascent, which was “very difficult in consequence of the numerous fallen trees, and thick shrubs, which were almost impenetrable.” The promotional piece in the *Argus* ends by noting, “Mr. Crawford, at whose expense the road was cut” also keeps a “house for entertainment” nearby and provides excellent guide service, “very accommodating to strangers.”

In the same week, the *Portland Gazette* published an ad that answers Chamberlain’s specific question of when the trail was cut. On August 24, 1819, this paper announced that the “excellent path” constructed “in June” from the road to the vegetation line made it possible to ascend Mount Washington “without extreme fatigue and a certainty of rending the firmest garments.” Reprinted in the *Concord Observer*, the *Salem Gazette*, and other regional outlets during the fall of 1819 and the next few years, these two notices in Portland papers are among the earliest, if not the first, published references to the Crawford Path. Only one known hiking trail preexisted the Crawford Path in the White Mountains: the so-called Gibbs’ path, circa 1809. It had fallen into disuse by the 1870s.

**Trails as Commercial Assets**

Early newspapers also provide a window into the larger social and economic history of trail-building in the White Mountains. That the Crawfords were quick to send off a notice of their new trail to the newspapers reflects their
awareness that the newspaper was the most efficient advertising medium of the era. Teamed with a supportive postal system, the newspaper waged effective war against America’s “first enemy” after independence, the “tyranny of distance,” a challenge to the vast new nation as well as to isolated locations such as Crawford Notch in 1819.14

Before the 1830s, the American newspaper was typically a large format, four-page publication, three-quarters of which was advertising, an allotment that Tocqueville later contrasted to the more limited commercial space in French papers.15 More than half the newspapers published in large cities in 1820 used the words mercantile, advertiser, or commercial in their titles.16 Despite their relatively high cost and subscription requirement, newspapers were widely read. As Charles G. Scheffen demonstrates, there was a vast “underground” readership that begged, borrowed, or stole newspapers and a significant proportion of deadbeat subscribers, whom publishers kept on their circulation lists to attract advertisers.17 For the publisher, the profit was in advertising, not subscription fees. And for business owners like the Crawfords, the profit was in their inns, not the associated trails per se.

Much like a real estate developer today who builds a recreational amenity such as a golf course to sell nearby condominiums, the Crawfords built a path to the summit of Mount Washington to attract paying guests to their inns. Unlike contemporary turnpikes, such as the one through Crawford Notch in 1819, there was no fee system to use the Crawfords’ path, but it behooved those who ascended it to stay overnight at Ethan’s or Abel’s inn and retain their services as guides on the mountain. The primacy of trails to the Crawfords’ lodging business is reflected in an item in the Crawford Papers at Dartmouth College entitled “White Mountains Mount Washington Hotel.” Signed by Ethan A. Crawford and dated July 1835, it appears to be ad copy that Ethan sent to newspaper editors either to publish verbatim or to use in composing their own publicity articles. It opens by singing the praises of his “spacious and commodious Hotel” and immediately mentions the hotel’s trail to the summit, “constructed on the best route after the whole region was thoroughly explored.”18

Safety over Scenery
The Crawfords knew how to market their inns, and they knew how to publicize their trail most effectively. The earliest newspaper ads for the path also reveal the Crawfords’ awareness that to increase their audience beyond a few hardy adventurers, they had to promote the trail as safe recreation, not a dangerous
ordeal, however “sublime” the scenery. Until 1819, ascending Mount Washing-
ton was almost exclusively the province of explorers, scientists, and fit college students; even so, it was an onerous bushwhack experience. If the Crawfords were to expand their lodging business, they needed a trail accessible to a wider audience and, more important, they needed advertising that overcame negative public opinion about the White Mountains—indeed, about mountains in general.

The Romantic era’s glorification of hill country and corresponding love affair with scenery sweeping the continent and England had not saturated all levels of American society yet. As the Salem Gazette of September 7, 1819, observed, through a “fearful view of the Mountains themselves” as well as “report” that has “vilified these noble mountains,” many have permitted “every wish to sicken and every exertion to be discouraged” to ascend Mount Washington. Further, “till within a few months ago,” climbing Mount Washington was so arduous that it would “deter any one from the labour, who was less than an enthusiast, or who possessed less than an iron constitution.” But now, the Gazette continued, with the new shorter, easier, and safer Crawford path, “more will be induced to tread” the mountains. . . . We can now advance with comparatively trifling exertion and not the least danger.” Throughout the first year of publicity for the Crawford path, regional newspapers repeated this pitch, stressing safety over scenery.

**Getting Guests to the Trail**

Ethan Crawford’s journalistic campaign immediately began to pay off; after the 1819 advertisement, he remarks in the History, “We soon began to have a few visitors.” As the volume increased, Ethan addressed the second problem concerning the new trail—its location. The Crawfords had situated the trailhead just north of the narrow gate of the notch, presumably because it was immediately adjacent to the turnpike (currently Route 302) that ran from Abel’s inn to Ethan’s inn, spaced some twelve miles apart. Nevertheless, the location still required visitors to stay eight miles south of the trailhead at Abel’s inn or four miles north at Ethan’s tavern. “L,” a man from New York, remarked in an 1820 excursion account published by the Columbian Centinel in 1824 that his party stayed overnight at Ethan’s inn and proceeded four and a half miles south on the turnpike the next morning to the trailhead. There, they sent back their horses and gigs; when they returned, as arranged, their horses were waiting for them. After the rigors of the overnight ascent, “L”
enjoyed the luxury of “being seated once more in a carriage.” He likely would
have enjoyed his excursion less had he been forced to walk back to Ethan’s.

The distance of the Crawford path from lodgings was potentially more
than a problem of inconvenience for guests who had to shuttle to and from
the trailhead. It could develop into a problem of competition if a rival built
an inn nearer to the path, as Ethan explained to a judge in Lancaster in 1834.19
In 1828, the Crawfords moved to block such a challenge by constructing lodg-
ings next to the trailhead at Elephant Head; younger Crawford son Thomas
managed it. On August 1, 1831, Henry James Tudor recorded in his diary that
he stayed at Thomas’s inn and began to ascend Mount Washington “directly
in the rear of the house.”20

In 1820, Ethan again addressed the trailhead proximity problem by building
a new trail, the second Crawford path, which led directly east from his existing
inn to the base of Mount Washington and ascended to the summit along the
approximate route the Cog Railway would use in 1869. In his letter to Judge
Upham, cited earlier, Ethan states, “In 1820 Charles J. Stewart and myself in
March ran a strait line to the foot of Mount Washington, spent three days,
and campt out two nites” to lay out this trail. By 1821, the second Crawford
Path was finished. Although the footpath started directly from Ethan’s inn, it
still covered more than nine miles to the summit. This led Ethan to address
the third problem associated with the path now that the ascent of Washington
had begun to appeal to a wider audience than hardy “enthusiasts”—its overall
length, nearly nineteen miles, which the press commented upon negatively.
On November 25, 1823, for instance, the Salem Gazette noted that a horse
or carriage can get no closer than nine and a half miles to the summit and
that “most visitors” are unable to walk that distance and return the same day,
requiring “a night in the open air or upon the ground under a bark hut.”

Ethan used the newspapers to communicate his intentions to upgrade
the initial six miles of the second Crawford path (today the Cog Railway
Base Road) into a carriage road, thereby reducing foot travel to the summit
to two and a quarter miles. The Gazette article of 1823 concludes by noting
that Crawford, who opened the footpath, is willing to make a “good carriage
road” to the base of the mountain “provided he can be insured the sum of five
hundred dollars to indemnify him for the expense.” A subscription has been
opened for this purpose, the Gazette wrote, and it urged all those “who ever
intend making a visit to the mountains” to consider investing a few dollars
“for their own ease and comfort.” But the next year, July 12, 1824, The Ports-
mouth Journal of Literature and Politics informed readers that Crawford had
concluded “not to attempt making a carriage way the present season”; instead, he had rebuilt “two good camps” at the foot of the mountain.

On July 1, 1828, however, the *Eastern Argus* was able to tell readers that not only had Crawford repaired the ravages to the turnpike from the devastating freshet of 1826 that had swept away the Willey family, rendering it “perfectly safe and pleasant for travelers,” but he has “made a comfortable carriage road to within about two miles to the base of Mount Washington.” Further, Ethan and Abel had erected large and commodious buildings just north of the notch for those who “may wish to visit Mount Washington from that place,” that is, the first Crawford path, as well as to witness the effects of the “great avalanches” of 1826. The text of ad copy dated July 1835, quoted earlier, boasts that Crawford’s road to the summit of Mount Washington, “constructed at great expense,” is now “in complete repair and is the only way by which the Mountain is ascended on the western declivity.”

168 Newspapers in Three States

In fewer than ten years, the Crawfords had cut two paths to the summit of Mount Washington and established inns at or a carriage road to their trailheads, not to mention constant improvement to these trails and the erection of camps and shelters along the way. Both trails underwent realignments and changes over the years, with the discontinuation of the second Crawford path after the construction of the Cog Railway in 1869. Nevertheless, together, the Crawford paths brought the ascent of Mount Washington into everyday reach and ensured its ever-increasing popularity. The Crawfords’ accomplishment is testament to their stalwart nature, but it also pays tribute to their business acumen, their awareness that publicity beyond word of mouth report was crucial to their success.

They were fortunate that the New England states were especially rich in newspapers as the Crawfords expanded and improved their assets. By 1819, in addition to the 50 newspapers in New Hampshire, neighboring states were similarly endowed. Maine had at least 18 newspapers by 1819, Massachusetts more than 100. Their editors were receptive to a variety of material about the White Mountains, also called the White Hills—America’s new playground. The article authors were more often men than women. Accounts of visits to the mountains and ascents of Mount Washington appeared frequently. Newspapers further created and then capitalized on reader interest in the White Hills by publishing such miscellaneous notices as the first snowfall on Mount Washington, as did the *Boston Commercial Gazette* on October 25, 1821, for instance.
And these early papers always appeared hungry for news of the Crawfords, who never seemed to miss an opportunity to promote their inns and trails.

**Bad Press**

Not all the news on the Crawfords and their paths was positive, of course. The papers published accounts of new rival trails from the east that claimed to be superior approaches to Washington. The path from the Hanson Farm in Pinkham Notch, for instance, is not only shorter than a Crawford route but “nowhere crossed by deep ravines or dangerous precipices,” according to a writer in the *Salem Gazette* of July 21, 1829. And firsthand stories of those dangerous precipices could undermine confidence in the safety of Crawford paths. A notable example is the “Ascent of Mount Washington by a Lady of Portsmouth,” published on September 9, 1843, by *The Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics*. The editor prefaces the piece with the observation, “We have seen many interesting accounts of visits to the White Mountains, but never before read one so graphic as the following.” It’s an accurate introduction to a piece that describes what it was like to ascend the Northeast’s highest mountain on horseback, presumably riding sidesaddle via the second Crawford trail, which had been converted to a bride path in the early 1840s. Mr. Fabyan was the lady’s guide. (Ethan had only returned to the Notch in 1843 after a temporary withdrawal, and Fabyan now owned his inn.)

The writer from Portsmouth mounted the celebrated horse named Colonel and commenced the ascent on a day near 90 degrees. The ride started out pleasantly enough but soon encountered “wet, muddy places” where logs were laid across the path and the horses stepped between them. “Their feet went so far down in the mud,” she writes, “I almost feared they would never come up.” The writer calmed herself only to encounter what seemed to be a “very irregular flight of stairs.” “The horse would place his foot on a stone once or twice to see if it were sufficiently firm, and finally conclude to go on one side of it.” As the trail grew steeper, perspiration dripped from Colonel’s face, and “he breathed so violently that I seemed to be riding on a pair of living bellows.” As she crossed the Ammonoosuc River seven times in the ascent, “the sound of horses’ feet on the rocks, and the water flying in all directions, were not particularly soothing. No bridges in this region, of course.”

Having ridden seven miles to the base of Mount Washington, the party dismounted, rested the horses, refreshed themselves at a spot then called Moss Cup Spring and then pressed on to the final two miles of steep climb before
them. “You never saw horses go over such a path; none but such as were trained to it could keep from falling and killing themselves and their riders.” The riders did not attempt to guide their horses; the writer herself “merely held the reins carefully so in case of accident I should not be off my guard.” On the final ascent, the trail passed so close to the abyss that the writer dismounted, “crawled away from the brink, and fairly clung to the rock.” Fabyan encouraged her to remount—“Not I,” she cried as she grabbed an outstretched hand, looked directly on the ground “so as not to become dizzy,” and made her way past the “horrible place.” Having reached the summit on foot with the aid of a hoe as staff, the writer received ample reward for her effort: “All fright and fatigue were amply repaid by the magnificence of the view,” but she still had to cross the “awful place” at the precipice on her return. The lady from Portsmouth concludes her account not with lavish praise for the guide, the sublime view, or the Crawford trail, but for Colonel, the trusty steed who carried her through the ordeal terrified but otherwise unscathed.

The Crawfords’ relentless effort to publicize their trails and inns also came in for ridicule. In the *Portsmouth Herald*, September 18, 1832, a correspondent lampooned Ethan’s plan to publish the guest register for his inn, “White Mountain Album.” The British travel writer Harriet Martineau, who visited Crawford Notch in 1835, remarks that the elder Crawford “almost insists that his guests shall write” their impressions and observations in his “pet album,” evidently with an eye toward using this material as publicity fodder. The *Herald*’s correspondent panned Ethan’s entries as a “flat and insipid” collection of the “same story told over and over again of the marvels, wonders, and experiences of those gentlemen and ladies who have ascended and descended the highest land in North America,” to which they sometimes attach “their original poetry or villainous dog-general rhyme.” “Galen forbid,” the correspondent continues, that Ethan ever execute his intention to “send his album to Boston for publication” and thereby “such nonsense find its way outside the gap of the mountains.” Ethan never published the album. Not all the news is fit to print.

On August 12, 1833, John Palmer penned an appreciative comment in the guest register of Ethan’s hotel after his ascent of Mount Washington with Nathan Ball of Boston: “God made the mountain, but Crawford made the road.” He praised E. A. Crawford as one “who has done much to facilitate” this ascent. Palmer’s association of the creator of the mountain with the creator of the road reflects Ethan’s near legendary reputation for turning the wilderness of Crawford Notch into a tourist mecca, if not paradise. Crawford’s
well-known fortitude, strength, and derring-do have been rightly celebrated as the engines of his accomplishment, but it was more than prodigious personal agency that made both Ethan and Abel the founding fathers of White Mountain tourism. Their endeavors were supported by the ideology of republicanism, which, Scheffen writes, created the belief that access to the news, and therefore to newspapers, was an American birthright. In the new republic of the United States, newspapers were the “book of the people.” The Crawfords settled the wilderness, hacked out trails, and built inns, but, in this book, they also wrote White Mountain tourism into existence.24

Notes
11. Chamberlain to Crawford.
12. The reference to torn clothing probably alludes to earlier ascents on the eastern side of Mount Washington through a “formidable hedge” of spruce and fir. This “zone of evergreens
has always constituted one of the most serious difficulties in the ascent of the White Hills,” although a path cut by Colonel Gibbs “much facilitates” the passage through them, according to Jacob Bigelow’s account reprinted in *The Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics*, August 11, 1821.

13. Other early functional paths made and used by Native Americans and white settlers may have developed into hiking trails, but no definite dates can be established. See Guy Waterman, *An Outline of Trail Development in the White Mountains, 1840–1980*, eds. Al Hudson and Judith Maddock Hudson (Randolph, NH: Randolph Mountain Club, 2005), 2.


19. Letter to Honorable Nathan Upham from Ethan A. Crawford. Crawford Papers, MS 626. Rauner Special Collections, Dartmouth College. This 1834 letter to Judge Upham of Lancaster concerns the poaching of Ethan’s trail by a rival, William Dennison, who wants “whole use of my road, and I am not willing to give him that privilege.” By using Ethan’s road, Dennison could claim that his route to the summit was shorter. See also Crawford, *History*, 48. In 1832, Dennison promoted his White Mountain Hotel by advertising it as located “one half mile from E. A. Crawford” and possessing “everything necessary to ascend the mountains,” including, presumably, use of Ethan’s trail (*New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette*, August 6, 1832).


24. In a work in progress, I examine early newspapers as “the people’s guidebook” to the White Mountains.

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