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The Hancock Loop Trail, Then and Now

Reflections from one who helped build the trail

Douglass P. Teschner

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE FOUR THOUSAND FOOTER CLUB IN 1957 had a profound impact on the White Mountains, sparking interest in many New Hampshire peaks that, up until that time, had been rarely climbed. The Appalachian Mountain Club's 1963 *White Mountain Guide* noted, "Leading to the summits of several trailless 4,000-foot peaks are paths which are not maintained." These were typically minimally cut, hard to follow, and marked by rags or occasional cairns, although this changed dramatically as increasing numbers of people set their sights on climbing the 46. Galehead, then thought to be below 4,000 feet, and Bondcliff, believed not to rise the minimum 200 vertical feet above the connecting ridge to higher Bond, were both later added (after the U.S. Geological Survey topographical maps were updated) to make today's list of 48.

The 1972 AMC *White Mountain Guide* notes that the ascent of Mount Hancock "was at one time more or less arduous; it was remote, it had no trails, and it had been devastated by logging and by the 1938 hurricane." The guide went on to say that the completion of the Kancamagus Highway and trail-cutting work by the Four Thousand Footer Club and the AMC Worcester Chapter had made Hancock "readily accessible." I was part of the Worcester Chapter group that built part of the trail, and this is the story of how it happened.

North and South Hancock were two of the officially trailless 4,000-foot peaks, but a rough trail, leaving the established Cedar Brook Trail, was developed by early peakbaggers. This 4-plus mile, lollipop-shaped route appears as a line of dots, unlike the usual trail dashes, on the 1963 AMC Franconia region map and is described in that year's *White Mountain Guide* as, "harder to follow than regular trails and should not be attempted by inexperienced

parties.” The first mile followed old logging roads to a split where the trail to South Hancock went right and the route to the higher North Hancock left. The two peaks were connected by an obscure “herd path” along the connecting ridge. (Except for the landslide ascent described later, the current 4.7-mile Hancock Loop Trail closely follows this same route.)

The route up the North Peak was the most challenging part as it followed a prominent landslide, “in the form of a notched arrow with the point downward. The W branch of this easterly slide reaches high up in line with the summit and provides the route for the main peak.” This landslide, typical of those in the White Mountains, was a jumble of unstable rocks of various sizes, loose gravel, and exposed rock slabs—but for early peakbaggers it was seen as preferable to a steep bushwhack through the intense thicket of high-elevation spruce and fir.

In 1964, Cecil and Elaine Jones climbed Hancock along with their son Thaddeus (at age 10 then among the youngest to complete the 4,000-footer list). An article about their hikes in the *Worcester Sunday Telegram* of June 27, 1965, describes Hancock as the hardest. Cecil, a leader in the AMC’s Worcester Chapter, thought that there should be a better way.* The focus was on bypassing the slide and flagging the existing ridge route, leaving most of the remaining crude trail as is.

Work began in 1965 and was completed the next year after several trips, including one multiday encampment along the Cedar Brook in May 1966 where Elaine Jones, who was also leader of the Worcester Girl Scouts, cooked nourishing meals for our trail crew over an open fire. In addition to the Joneses, other trail-builders included Dave Fales, Gil Field, Tony Francis, Eric Engberg, Don Blomquist, Maurice Rogers, and me. In 1999, Elaine wrote me, “How well I remember the Hancock trips and camp—the second one was crossing the brook 5 times, with melted snow creating a depth and chill! Birds had stolen some of the colored tapes to mark the trail, and included pieces in nests!”

I began hiking through a Worcester YMCA summer camp and was eager to continue during the school year. No one in my family was interested in hiking, but camp counselor Brian Fowler suggested I reach out to the Worcester Chapter of AMC. I went on a Mount Washington hike with Cecil, who took me under his wing and recruited me for the Hancock project. It had

* My recollection of this history is bolstered by Cecil Jones’s June 15, 1967, article “Hancock Adventure” that appeared in this journal vol. 36, no. 3, pages 511–513.

never occurred to me as a teenager that I would be building a new trail, but the chapter was eager to have help, and I was thrilled to get to the mountains.

The section of trail bypassing the slide was initially flagged by Cecil and Philip Bender, paralleling the slide on its right (east) side and pretty much straight up the mountain. No one thought much about switchbacks back then or anticipated the kind of erosion we see today from heavy trail use. North Hancock had a viewless wooded summit, but on one work trip we lost the flagged route and discovered a boulder with a beautiful view. I mischievously spray-painted “1620” on this large rock, which was subsequently described in the 1972 *White Mountain Guide* as “a facsimile of Plymouth Rock that affords an excellent view” of Mount Carrigain and the Presidential Range.

The Hancock Loop was officially opened in 1966, even though the only significant new work was the section bypassing the slide; the other four miles received little work, although usage by an increasing number of peakbaggers would eventually make the crude path more obvious. It has been the route of choice and the only trail up Hancock ever since.

I kept in touch with Cecil Jones, especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s when I was on the AMC croo at Zealand Falls and Mizpah Spring



Looking down the Hancock slide in 1965. DOUGLASS P. TESCHNER

Huts. Cecil and Tony Francis led AMC's annual hut-to-hut range walk from 1967 to 1981. Today a multitude of guided hikes and AMC excursions exist, but the range walk was the sole official AMC guided trip across the hut system for many years. I later helped Cecil run his annual Mountain Medicine conference at Pinkham Notch (where I met my future wife in 1979). Sadly, Cecil died at age 59 in 1986.

After that, I was living in New Hampshire and overseas and completely lost touch with the Worcester Chapter until I read a 2016 death notice in *AMC Outdoors* that compelled me to write this letter to the editor:

I noted in the Sept/Oct 2016 issue the passing of Sue Hall, a lifetime member of Worcester Chapter since 1954. In the 1960s, I was a high school kid from Westborough who had been touched by hiking at Worcester YMCA summer camp. My family were not hikers, so I connected with the AMC Worcester Chapter where leaders like Ralph and Sue Hall, Gene Skevington, Cecil Jones, Charlie Fay, Mauri Winturri, Don MacDonald, and Dave Fales took me under their wing. Those folks helped launched me toward mountaineering adventures in Africa, Mexico, Europe, and across North America. It has been



The lower section of the slide on Hancock has become forested in recent years.

DOUGLASS P. TESCHNER

a long time since I lived in the Worcester area and, for 12 of the past 14 years, I have been overseas, but I look back in fondness to those early days with the Worcester Chapter.

Soon after, chapter chair David Cole invited me to speak at the Worcester Chapter's November 2017 annual meeting and 100th anniversary kickoff, which was a special opportunity to express appreciation to the chapter for getting me into the mountains as a kid after summer camp had given me that initial spark. My slideshow highlighted those early days and building the trail up Hancock. Former chapter chair Steve Ciras eagerly suggested we organize a chapter trip to Hancock to revisit that history, and I readily agreed.

I had been back to the Hancocks several times over the years, but it had been a while so, in June 2018, I did a reconnaissance, bringing along some old photographs and reascending the slide I had first ascended 53 years previously in 1965. The lower part is largely overgrown—it used to come all the way down and open up at the valley bottom next to the present trail. The upper slide, though, is still very active and as challenging as ever with loose rock and exposed slabs. Someone built a large cairn at the left/west branch of the downward arrow, and some adventurous hikers still take on the challenge.

Our July 2018 chapter hike was postponed because of flash flood warnings, but Steve and co-leader Charlie Arsenault rescheduled it for September 8, 2018, to coincide with the annual “Flags on the 48” that honors 9/11 victims with an American flag on each of the New Hampshire 4,000-footers.

Climbing the trail that day, I noted the severe erosion on the steep ascent paralleling the slide. I had heard some years ago that this section may have been rerouted, but, if so, it has the same character as our original—straight up the slope! Despite the best efforts of AMC trail crews to install water bars and rock steps, it is still in bad shape. Ditto for the initial steep drop off the South Peak, which we descended later in the day after crossing the ridge.

After raising the flag and honoring our country, I told the group some stories of the trail-building history, and several people joined me to find the “1620 rock,” which is not the same as the present outlook, which was obviously a later discovery. Vegetation has grown up all around “1620,” and there is no longer any view at all (and, of course, the spray paint is long gone).

It was a gorgeous day, and there were many hikers; the summit was very crowded. This is a big change from the 1960s when you might have seen one or two other parties. I was happy when my high school friend Eric Engberg, who was also one of the original trail-builders, made an appearance.

That same day, I noticed that the junction of the trail where it leaves the Cedar Book Trail has changed. My 1966 photo shows Cecil Jones admiring the new trail sign amid dense underbrush. Today that spot has heavily compacted soil with denuded bare ground multiple feet in every direction.

We like to think of mountains as unchangeable, but of course that is not true. This lesson came home to me years ago, the second time I hiked Mount Tom. My memory from the 1960s was a wooded peak with no view so, given that my policy is usually to return only to peaks I really liked the first time, I avoided returning to Tom. But when I went back up there in the 1990s, trees had blown down near the top, and the view was quite nice!

On Hancock there is obviously change as well. Plymouth Rock is overgrown and gone back to obscurity and a newer viewpoint has taken its place; also, a significant part of the lower slide has gone back to forest. Change is nature's way.

Human impact is tougher to reconcile: the heavy erosion and soil compaction, not to mention people stomping or sitting on alpine plants on higher peaks above treeline. So many more people are enjoying the White Mountains today and that is great, but it certainly puts pressure on the landscape and challenges us to find ways to better manage the resource. In any case, I am hoping that the Hancock Loop is still around to be enjoyed for another 50-plus years!

DOUGLASS P. TESCHNER, a leadership trainer and coach, lives in Pike, New Hampshire. He serves on the *Appalachia* Committee and has written many stories in this journal during the past five decades, including "The Last Gift" (Summer/Fall 2018) and "Africa Mountain Journal: 1971–2015" (Winter/Spring 2017). Contact him at dteschner@GrowingLeadershipLLC.com.