

# Appalachia

---

Volume 69  
Number 2 *Summer/Fall 2018: Role Reversal in  
the Mountains*

---

Article 15

2021

## News and Notes

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

(2021) "News and Notes," *Appalachia*: Vol. 69 : No. 2 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol69/iss2/15>

This In Every Issue is brought to you for free and open access by Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Appalachia by an authorized editor of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu](mailto:dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu).

# News and Notes

## **The Cog Railway Pushes Forward with Plans for a Luxury Hotel Near the Summit of Mount Washington**

On a snowy evening a year and a half ago—on December 8, 2016—Mount Washington Railway Co. owner Wayne Presby sat before more than 40 members of the Coos County Planning Board in Lancaster, New Hampshire and announced his intentions of introducing more development on Mount Washington. The owner of the Cog Railway, a mountain train that has been taking passengers to the summit since 1869, is pushing forward with plans for a luxury hotel on the tallest and most iconic peak in the Northeast to mark the Cog's 150th anniversary. Calling the project Skyline Lodge, Presby proposes to build the 25,000-square-foot, 35-room luxury hotel and restaurant in the fragile alpine tundra at 5,600 feet of elevation, perched above the



*The proposed hotel would stand here, at 5,600 feet in the alpine tundra below Mount Washington.* ANNE SKIDMORE

cliffs of the Great Gulf headwall and along the historic Appalachian Trail. The hotel would be elevated above the 99-foot wide strip of land historically owned by the Cog Railway and encompassing the cog train tracks. Presby promises a place reminiscent of the old accommodations that occupied the summit for more than a century.

When the White Mountains were first being explored by settlers, the adventurous would travel to the top of Mount Washington on foot or (for a time) horse, via numerous paths, most notably the Crawford Path, which was completed in 1819. However, in 1861, when the five-year carriage road project was complete, the mountain suddenly became accessible for all. Hotels were built, and rebuilt, on the rocky and windswept summit all the way until 1980, when the last hotel was dismantled where the current visitor center resides. Mount Washington is widely considered one of the first tourist destinations in the country, and its popularity remains strong, with more than 300,000 visitors annually.

The Cog Railway construction was completed in 1869. For those who preferred the natural beauty of the higher summits, the development of the mountain must have been extraordinarily disheartening. As nineteenth-century hiker Charles Dudley Warner wrote about the Cog Railway operation in 1886,

Never again by the new rail can he have the sensation that he enjoyed in the ascent of Mount Washington by the old bridle path from Crawford's, when, climbing out of the woods and advancing upon that marvelous backbone of rock, the whole world opened upon his awed vision, and the pyramid of the summit stood up in majesty against the sky. Nothing, indeed, is valuable that is easily obtained.

Battles over ownership of the mountain frequented the New Hampshire court system. A telling sign of the mindset of that era.

When the news of the Skyline Lodge proposal broke in early 2017, it made both regional and national headlines. *The Wall Street Journal* headline read "Coming Soon: a Luxury Hotel With the Worst Weather You've Ever Seen." As time went on and word spread, opposition to the lodge became louder. A small group of climbers from the Mount Washington Valley region formed Keep the Whites Wild, a New Hampshire-based nonprofit organization. Their mission: "to preserve and protect the diverse biology, natural aesthetic, and intrinsic value of New England's White Mountain Region." They quickly

launched Protect Mount Washington, a campaign specifically designed to stop the Skyline Lodge proposal. The Protect Mount Washington campaign started an online petition just days after Wayne Presby spoke at the planning board meeting, and it has now received more than 19,000 signatures. The campaign hired an environmental attorney, Jason Reimers of BCM Environmental Land Law, to defend the recreational, ecological, and economic benefits that Mount Washington provides to the region.

In February 2017, two months after the announcement, six conservation groups, including The Nature Conservancy and the Appalachian Mountain Club, sent a joint letter to the Coos County Planning Board, arguing that the hotel plan would greatly undermine Mount Washington's important ecological, scenic, and cultural value as well as Coos County's own master plan.

The letter begins, "We write to express our deep concerns regarding the Cog Railway Company's publicly announced proposal to construct a hotel on Mount Washington, in the mountain's highly sensitive alpine zone...the developer [has provided] in public statements, in the media, and at your public meetings sufficient information for our organizations to express strong concerns about, and opposition to, the adverse impacts such a project would have on one of New Hampshire's most iconic natural and cultural resources."

In March 2017, the Protect Mount Washington Campaign submitted its own letter to the planning board, along with signatures from seven additional local and national conservation and outdoor recreation groups that included the American Alpine Club and the Access Fund. The letter states they will vigorously contest the siting of a hotel in fragile alpine environment and they support construction of a hotel at the Cog Railway Marshfield Base Station where "such a project could foster greater employment opportunity, will have less environmental impact and less strain on the mountain's infrastructure."

Today, we know more than we did in the hotel era about the alpine ecosystem's rarity and fragility. This is evidenced by zoning laws that protect Mount Washington and the alpine throughout the Presidential Range from development. These county ordinances

regulate certain land use activities in mountain areas in order to preserve the natural equilibrium of vegetation, geology, slope, soil and climate in order to reduce danger to public health and safety posed

by unstable mountain areas, to protect water quality and to preserve mountain areas for their scenic values and recreational opportunities.

This includes not allowing any use above 2,700 feet, including structures, that would be detrimental to those natural resources. The surrounding areas around the mountain were integrated into the National Forest system in 1918, but the Auto Road, Cog Railway corridor, and the summit of Mount Washington remained in private hands. Although the Cog Railway owns the land, zoning variances and special exceptions would need to be granted by the planning board if the Skyline Lodge building application were to be approved because of its place within the alpine zone.

The alpine areas of New Hampshire cover a little more than 4,000 acres, making up just 0.07 percent of the state's landmass. A majority of it lies in the Presidential Range, below the summit of Mount Washington and neighboring peaks. Approximately 70 species of plants are largely restricted to the alpine zones of the White Mountains, with three species (Alpine rattlesnake root, also called Boott's rattlesnake root, dwarf cinquefoil, and mountain avens) endemic or near endemic. The White Mountain fritillary and arctic butterfly, two species that are listed as threatened under the New Hampshire Wildlife Action Plan, rely on these plants for their survival. These species number only in the hundreds, and they exist solely in the narrow alpine elevation around Mount Washington.

The American pipit's only breeding spot in the White Mountains is Mount Washington. There, the pipits use alpine sedge meadow communities and fell-fields associated with cushion plants as their breeding ground. Scientists generally agree that plants do not recover quickly from damage in arctic-type ecosystems. Numerous studies have been done on the alpine plant communities around Mount Washington and the higher summits that focused on plant recovery after a disturbance event. Research has shown there is some recovery of the alpine plant community after a disturbance event, but the ecological value of that area is significantly diminished, as the variety of plants, especially rare plants, is not as rich as in the undisturbed plots.

As we went to press, Cog Railway had not formally applied for the hotel construction permitting through Coos County, but Wayne Presby told reporters that Skyline Lodge would move forward but not be built in time for the Cog's 150th anniversary in 2019. There is no evidence to the contrary, as

surveyors were seen in the proposed building area late last year. In December 2017, the railway company sent excavators from the base station up along their tracks and began moving soil, which could be interpreted as a step toward building the lodge.

Without any local or state permitting, the company cleared and widened an old utility trench scar that serves the summit buildings with the stated intention of driving passenger-carrying snowcat machines up and down the mountain.

The Cog Railway land is zoned as a “protected district” (PD6), and only certain recreational activities are allowed on that land without permits. This digging alarmed conservation organizations, and Keep the Whites Wild argued that the use of the land as a road intended to bring tourists to the summit of the mountain would be prohibited according to county regulations. Presby responded by stating he is well within his rights and told reporters that he had built a recreational trail, not a road, and didn’t need a permit. The debate sparked a letter from Keep the Whites Wild to the Coos County commissioners requesting that the commissioners cite the Cog Railway with violations and require it to restore the land that was disturbed. “This construction should have, by County definition, required similar permitting to Skyline Lodge on the local level, and a state level Department of Environmental Services Alteration of Terrain Permit,” Keep the Whites Wild wrote. The Coos County Commissioners forwarded the letter from KtWW to the planning board and asked for an advisory opinion. Planning board members asked Earl Duval, the attorney representing the Cog Railway, for more information concerning the road before a decision whether the Cog violated county regulations could be determined.

Winter relents to spring on the mountain, revealing budding alpine flowers that survived the long cold months. Delicate but hardy butterflies emerge, insects and spiders roam the lichen-covered rocks, and the American pipit returns to its breeding ground. In these warm months, hundreds of tourists and hikers reach the peak to experience the unique environment of Mount Washington. The peak’s history of tourism and development is the oldest and most extensive in the country. Its summit has seen generations of hotels and buildings, and its flanks are interrupted with an auto road, a railroad, and hiking trails. As the alpine environment feels the pressure of increased human traffic and our current age of climate change, it may be time to change history

to protect the diminishing resources that bring us up to Mount Washington in the first place.

—*Courtney Ley*

---

COURTNEY LEY is a climber, photographer, and writer who lives in Concord, New Hampshire.

### **Las Cruces, New Mexico: Three Hours Overdue and Late for Dinner**

Some years ago, on a visit to the Southwest, I was taken with the low, spiry mountain range on the eastern edge of Las Cruces, New Mexico. The unusually formed pinnacles, visually arresting, especially around sunset, resemble organ pipes, hence their name: the Organ Mountains. Local stories described one of the peaks, the 9,000-foot-high Organ Needle, as both inaccessible and the toughest day hike in the United States. I was intrigued. I talked it over with my staunch Connecticut hiker friend, Amerigo “Mig” Farina. He wanted to go because we’d never trekked in desert terrain. And Aric Rindfleisch—one of my first rock-climbing partners, then living in Arizona—said he would like to join us.

As we thought of the best time for this climb, we considered that we wouldn’t have to worry about altitude acclimatization, crevasses, icy slopes, or freezing temperatures. We would not need crampons or ice axes. The problems instead would be heat, carrying enough water, loose rock, and rattlesnakes. We settled for late September, hoping it wouldn’t be too hot. There is a dry heat, everybody always says.

The evening we arrived, tired as we were, we drove out to the house of Dick Ingraham, a retired New Mexico State University professor, longtime mountaineer, and an authority on the Organs. He drew a rough map of the route. We must hike up steep, rough, and rocky terrain before the final scramble up the Needle (which actually is a rather blunt mountain tower). Our main concerns would be finding the way through thick brush following an intermittent faint trail and avoiding turning into the wrong canyon.

Looking east from Dick’s terrace, we saw the tallest summit near the right end of the massif, a trapezoidal-shaped peak with its twin protuberances, an “ear” on each side. He pointed out some significant landmarks, all with

picturesque names: Cuevas, Yellow Rocks, Grey Eminence, Dark Canyon. The Dark Canyon is the splinter of sky between the Organ Needle and its right ear. That ear is actually a high, practically impassable wall.

The next day, while Aric was driving over from Tucson, Mig and I set out to explore the first few miles of our route. The trailhead is at Dripping Springs, a state-managed natural preserve. Two office staffers tried to dissuade us, saying that under best conditions it took even strong hikers upward of ten hours to get to the top and back. We'd run into this kind of official resistance before. My view of it was they thought they were dealing with dilettantes or climbers too old for this (Mig was 71, I 63 at the time). They referred us to "the boss," an affable guide who was much more receptive to our plan. He showed us the start of the route where it went into a small box canyon. It followed the north side of an impressive outcrop called the Cuevas (caves). The Cuevas is shaped somewhat like an elongated circus tent. It runs perpendicular (west to east) to the Organs that soar above it. That next night the Cuevas profile would be our most important guidepost.

We hiked to the foot of the Grey Eminence, a broad appendage of the Needle itself, where we stashed three quarts of liquids and a climbing rope. Thinking we'd have plenty of daylight, we started later that next morning so we could park within the fenced enclosure. Weaving through the cactus growth was hot work. More sun-sensitive than my companions, I'd smeared my face with zinc oxide and was cloaked like Sister Wendy, hat brim pulled over a bandana worn babushka-style, shielding my neck and ears. Aric held up a long stick bearing a furry spider, wide as a man's hand, the only tarantula I've ever seen. We reached our cache in about two hours. I took the rope and exchanged a partly consumed bottle for a full one, leaving 2.5 quarts for the return trip.

We went to the right of the Grey Eminence. Although there's a discernible path and small cairn markers to the left, Dick had advised us to go right. It's a long, steep rock chute, talus all the way to the top of the Eminence. At the top of the chute, crawling over rock and through heavy brush, we came onto the saddle. Here were massive junipers and a great vista toward our destination. The smog and fray of the desert city were thousands of feet below us and temporarily hidden from view. A wonderful wilderness look and feeling about that place—it was a perfect lunch spot.

After our lunch break, heading from the saddle into another brush-filled arroyo (a dry watercourse), we heard voices echoing off the giant buttresses and towers: female and male voices, other climbers. We crossed the arroyo

on a series of open slabs. When we reached a canyon opening to the right, Mig and Aric were certain it was Dark Canyon. I disagreed, but we turned in there. As we progressed up it, following a clear path and occasional stone piles along the left side, I was heartened, convinced now that my friends must be correct.

Mig was worried about time. It was 2:30 P.M.; we'd been at it over six hours. He was implying we should turn back. Jesus, no, I thought; we had to be close. "Let's at least see where this goes," I said. At the high end of the canyon, they were ahead of me again. I heard Aric holler, "Ed, here it is!"

"Does it look doable?"

"Yeah, it looks easy."

It surely did. Mig was standing at the base of what we assumed was the standard way up. It looked to be just 100 feet or so of easy rock. Aric was already on it, impulsively climbing up unroped. Mig was dubious. He was not a rock climber; it didn't look simple to him. I assured him he'd be safe on belay, but he declined. Too bad, he was so close yet wouldn't see the summit. It would be worse when, shortly, we learned that the usual route, which he probably would've tried, was about 60 yards farther along.

Carrying the rope, I followed Aric. He'd left his pack on a ledge partway up. As I joined him on the summit, "the kids" (as we called them—three gals, two guys, students from a nearby college) were already heading down toward that easier gully.

The view from the Needle is striking. You are close to the tops of the adjacent pinnacles, looking down on them. The tower drops abruptly to the valley floor extending west, not all that far, to Las Cruces. The dramatic drop-off from the small summit spooked us some—the plateau seemed to move slightly as though shifting in a wind—a touch of acrophobia. Aric said one of the girls had been weeping, apparently overcome by the exposure, vastness, or her elation at having made the top. Perhaps all of these things.

We put on our harnesses and uncoiled the climbing rope, preparing to descend. Then we started down, belaying each other from one ledge to the next. Near the bottom I spotted Mig below us, descending into the canyon. I hollered for him not to proceed alone. He said he would wait farther down Dark Canyon.

But then, with just one short pitch to go, Aric wanted to climb back up and exit from that gully. Although he'd sailed up this, he was uneasy down-climbing it. I guess I thought that was foolish, as we were almost down, but

what the heck, we'd get to see the other route. Mig would have to sit there waiting for us. In our excitement Aric and I were oblivious of the time.

Back in Dark Canyon I took a quick standing break, munching a green apple, savoring the juice. Dehydration was overtaking us. Mig had waited perhaps 45 minutes at the head of the canyon. I asked if he thought we'd be caught in the dark. "It is inevitable." From the stiff reply I gathered he was pissed. But the mood lightened when we caught up with the other group at the saddle. The guys were carrying the kind of plastic gallon water jugs sold in supermarkets. One of them offered us some of his water; making light of the generosity, he said it would ease his load for the trip down. These nice kids were giving away their emergency rations. At the Eminence we parted ways. They went right, we to the left—down that seemingly endless talus slope.

By the time we got to our warm water and Gatorade, it wasn't nearly enough. I thought we should drink some water and conserve the Gatorade, but Aric wanted it right away, and we soaked it up like dried sponges. He'd saved a package of miniature carrots—not my idea of a terrific snack, but each tiny specimen held a few drops of delicious moisture.

Shortly after 7 P.M. the sun went down in front of us. We heard the kids' voices as they scooted off downrange. Then it turned dark fast. In daylight we'd have had about an hour to go. A crescent moon in a starry cloudless sky was the only illumination.

Heading toward the silhouetted Cuevas, we were in and out of arroyos, stumbling along as best we could, trying to avoid the rocks and thorn plants. Cactus needles in our legs left purplish welts for many months afterwards. In fatigue, Aric's style was to push hard for a quarter mile or so, then flop down exhausted. Mig kept calling for us to hold up, unable to locate us in the dark. We could have simply sat it out until dawn, then walked out easily. The notion of an impromptu overnight on the high desert had some appeal—it was pleasantly warm, and we were all weary enough to nap on a sandbar or slab of rock. If we hadn't been so thirsty, we might have done that. We talked about the night-feeding rattlesnakes but for whatever reasons weren't too worried about them.

Aric climbed the bank of a dry creek bed and encountered a wire fence. He announced there was a trail on the other side, a groomed gravel trail that seemed to lead toward the Cuevas. Helping Mig over the fence I wondered where his stamina came from—he keeps himself skinny as a stick. I hoped that at his age—eight years hence—I would have such spark.

We got to the car at 10:30, having been out more than fourteen hours.

Arriving in his pickup truck, the caretaker was understandably upset. He had talked to the kids about us, set his truck lights blinking in our direction, and seen my answering flashlight signals from above Fillmore Canyon. But he couldn't have known we were all right. Mig told him, "No one is more contrite about this than we are."

"OK, all right," he said. He led us up to the visitor center where we took turns guzzling from a water fountain. Then he drove back down to unlock the gate for us.

To atone for having gotten them into this, I treated Aric and Mig to a supper of sorts, beer and soup at a late-night bistro in the university area. On the way back to the inn, we made a second stop at an all-night supermarket, seeking cures for our dehydration. Aric bought a six-pack of Coca-Cola. A large plastic jug of the stuff wouldn't do; he wanted six separate bottles to take him through the night.

Psyched from the adventure—elated we'd made it up there, then walked out OK in the dark—I couldn't get to sleep right away. My sister Linda lives in El Paso, and we had planned to meet her for dinner. About seven hours before, while with sinking feelings we were watching the sun disappear behind the city, she and some of her friends had been driving in from El Paso to join us, the no-shows. It was much too late to call and explain things.

Still gulping in liquids at 2:30 A.M., I was re-doing the climb in my head, picturing each stage of our route. It wasn't any great mountaineering feat but in many respects more gratifying than being led, roped to a guide, to one of the world's more famous peaks. I loved the long physical day in that rugged landscape.

Later our hostess at the inn would insist, incorrectly, that we'd been "lost in the Organs." True, we had strayed from anything resembling a trail, but in that open land and with the lights of Las Cruces aglow in the valley, there was never any confusion about where we were heading.

The day Aric left Las Cruces, Mig and I went searching for a desolate dirt road leading to a trail to a lesser mountain known as the South Rabbit Ear. We had trouble locating it, and we stopped a woman passing in a pickup truck. Somewhere in her 60s, wire-thin, sitting erectly in the driver's seat and wearing a black cowboy hat, she knew where we could find the right landmarks: a stone hut and the entrance to an abandoned mine.

Sometimes at night, when waiting to fall asleep, I'll think of that trip to the Organs and go over the stages of the route, like counting sheep. And in my mind's eye I'll see the black-hatted woman in her truck, nodding in the direction of the old stone hut and simultaneously point-shooting her finger at where we were supposed to be looking. Something uniquely Western even in this gesture. "Nope, lower," she'd said, correcting our gazes. "You're lookin' too high." Of course we would be.

—*Ed Fischer*

---

ED FISCHER lives in Glastonbury, Connecticut.

### **New Hampshire Halts Northern Pass Lines Through White Mountains**

The New Hampshire Site Evaluation Committee charged with key permitting authority over the now-infamous Northern Pass Transmission proposal voted unanimously on February 1 to halt the project. The Appalachian Mountain Club and a contingent of partner organizations, local residents, conservationists, and outdoor enthusiasts from across New England are rejoicing at the decisive ruling.

The SEC indicated that Eversource Energy, the utility company behind Northern Pass, had failed to ensure that its \$1.6 billion proposal for 192 miles of transmission corridor, including 132 miles above-ground line using more than 1800 towers up to 165 feet tall, would not unduly affect the orderly development of the region.

AMC and thousands of citizens plus officials from 30 of the 31 impacted towns have opposed the project since Eversource first proposed Northern Pass in 2010. The SEC saw through what was a poorly planned project and application whose technical flaws were outdone only by its misinformation. Eversource officials said in a statement that they are "shocked and outraged" by the decision and have already vowed to appeal—a process that could ultimately find them in New Hampshire Supreme Court.

—*Susan Arnold*

---

SUSAN ARNOLD is AMC's vice president for conservation.