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The First Women on Katahdin: Was It a Race or Merely an Exciting Phase?

Cover Page Footnote

William Geller's history of the first women to climb Maine's highest peak, in 1849.

The First Women on Katahdin

Was it a race or merely an exciting phase?

William Geller



Editor's note: For some years now, we have been publishing amateur historian William Geller's stories about Maine's outdoor past. This essay relates obscure details of women on Maine's highest peak. As you will read, Geller stumbled upon the stories while working on something else. For more, see his paper, "The Mount Katahdin Peaks: The First 12 Women Climbers," available at digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistory/118.

THE FIRST TWO WOMEN WE KNOW TO HAVE CLIMBED KATAHDIN'S uppermost ridgeline did so on an August day in 1849. We haven't known much about them for generations. Elizabeth Oakes Smith, then 43, and a companion scaled Maine's tallest peak that August 11. The second woman remained unknown in the mountain's chronicles for 140 years. Finally, in 1989, the writers Laura and Guy Waterman mentioned only her name, Nancy C. Mosman, in their history *Forest and Crag* (AMC Books, 1989 and 2000, soon to be rereleased by SUNY Press).

I became curious about Mosman while researching the identity of another person, called simply "T," who climbed Katahdin in March 1853. While working on that mystery, which endures, I stumbled upon much more about the early conquests by women on Katahdin.

Since 1989 Mosman's name has appeared in two articles, with no other information about her. Nancy Crockett Mosman, born in 1822 and 16 years younger than Elizabeth Oakes Smith, grew up in Portland, Maine. In 1842 she married David Mosman, a successful Bangor hardware merchant, and they resided in Bangor. They raised two children, Mary and Fitz Howard, both born in Bangor before the ascent. Nancy was a supporter of and a contributor to the Female Medical Education Society and the New England Female Medical College in 1853. How Mosman and Smith knew each other remains unknown, but they both lived in Portland until 1838, and their families may have attended the same church.

The women climbing Katahdin in 1849 likely stopped to admire this view (a photograph taken at least 60 years after they were there) of Katahdin's Keep Ridge (left) and the northern Katahdin Peaks from Katahdin Lake outlet. They traveled by buckboard from Bangor to the Hunt Farm on the East Branch of the Penobscot River and nearly opposite the confluence of Wassataquoik Stream. They crossed the river in a bateau and took Rev. Marcus Keep's rough trail to Katahdin Lake. BERT CALL, COURTESY OF FOGLER LIBRARY, SPECIAL

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Smith was married to Seba Smith, a successful newspaper owner. Seba's success as a writer peaked in the mid-1830s, and the family's financial situation forced them to move in about 1838 to Brooklyn, New York. There, Elizabeth, who had always written, continued to do so with renewed vigor to support her family. Her writing of the 1840s started by focusing on folklore and spirituality and gradually progressed to public advocacy that included the women's movement. At the time of this trip, Elizabeth was a successful writer and recognized as a transcendentalist.

Some writers, offering scant support, would have a reader believe Smith and Mosman were in a race to be the first women on top. A group of five more women climbed just nine days later, along with Rev. Marcus R. Keep, a Maine minister who had pioneered climbs on Katahdin beginning in 1846. The Keep party members found a bottled birch bark note in a rock cleft below the summit of Pamola Peak on their way down from climbing Katahdin. The note began with a nod to Shakespeare before venturing into uncharted female territory:

Whereas, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them, and it is the privilege of man to carve out his own career, whether in the council hall, the battlefield, or the varied walks of literature and art; while women are doomed for the most part to regard these as Pisgah heights overlooking to her an interdicted land what wonder, then, that having achieved even an ordinary greatness she should be tenacious of its honors; what wonder if by the exercise of courage and endurance beyond her sex she has been able to reach a point never before attained by any of her kind she should desire to secure the glory thereof, to magnify her office as it were. Know then that we the undersigned did, on the day specified, reach to the highest point of Mount Katahdin; the first women who were ever here; the first and only women who have achieved the perilous and toilsome ascent. And lest it should be thought we arrogate too much to ourselves, we must acknowledge our indebtedness to the manly aid of David Mosman, Esq. and the most efficient and careful pioneering of our guide, Mr. James H. Haines, who certainly bore unwonted hardship in providing for our comfort as the unconscionable packs of each fully testified, and the aching shoulders therefrom we fear may bear painful witness. So much to the chance pilgrim.

Keep, who when his group found this note thought he had just led the first women to the summit of Katahdin, now understood his female companions

might have been beaten by nine days. We will never know if the women who left the note had reached the summit or not. Keep copied the note and sent it to the *Bangor Democrat*, which published it that fall along with Keep's account of the women he climbed with. Without those two acts, neither Nancy C. Mosman's name nor her motivation would be known.

The first and second female groups on Katahdin climbed within days of each other, but the third women's party, which I also learned of during my research, went out six years later, in 1855. I read letters of trip leader Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who was then a Unitarian minister in Worcester, Massachusetts. He was an ardent abolitionist, friend of Henry David Thoreau and Emily Dickinson, and women's rights advocate.

One of the documents I found listed the real names of the five women on that trip. Higginson had given pseudonyms in two earlier published accounts and subsequent writers have unknowingly used those made-up names as the women's real names. I have learned that the five women also used trail names, something we think of as a more modern hiking tradition. In a 1908 letter to the ornithologist Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, Higginson provided the key to the naming puzzle. The real names of the 1855 party—with corresponding character name, pseudonym, and Massachusetts town—were Lucy Chase (Pilgrim, Alice, Worcester), Sarah Chase (Quaker opera dancer, Fanny or Kate, Worcester), Martha Gordon (Stage struck nun, Fanny or Kate, Worcester) Mary LeBaron (Little Bo Peep, Mary, Worcester), and Rebekah Northey (La Fille du Regiment, Rachel, Salem).

LET'S RETURN TO THE SCENE IN LATE AUGUST 1849 ON PAMOLA PEAK, when the second group of women to go high on Katahdin found the first group's bottled note. They had just returned from the summit and might have wondered if the first group had beaten them. But was this a race? Were women hurrying that year to climb Katahdin first?

It's possible. That second group had publicized its plans. In September 1848 Caroline T. Eastman of Bradford, Maine, and Martha L. Mason of Bangor, Maine, volunteered for the trip that was for the expressed purpose of demonstrating that women could make the ascent. They set the trip start date as August 13, 1849. The trip was not kept secret, and apparently some people expressed skepticism and thought the attempt was ridiculous. The trip leader, experienced climber Keep, was confident, citing examples that included the significant farm work done by women.

During 1849, Esther Jones of Enfield, Maine, Almira Lowder of Bangor, and Hannah Taylor, who married Keep just before the journey, joined the party. John Lawton (a farmer) and Thomas Lawton of Passadumkeag, Maine (where Keep lived), were also on the journey.

Apparently the party started around August 13, camping on the way. They reached Pamola Peak and then crossed the Knife Edge, going on to the main peak, Katahdin. As they topped each of Katahdin's five major outcrops, each woman chose a name for a peak. Whether the names were ever put forth for official recognition is unknown.

All of the women who climbed Katahdin that year apparently believed in and wanted to demonstrate that females were capable mountaineers and should be able to share the mountain's glory. These women were representative of accomplished Maine women from large and small communities. Smith was a writer. Mosman was a medical educator. Eastman was a teacher in Old Town. Lowder became a member of the faculty of East Maine Conference Seminary of Bucksport; Jones worked at her parents' inn in Passadumkeag, farmed, and became a merchant. Hannah Taylor Keep worked alongside her clergyman husband. The women quieted the naysayers.

WILLIAM GELLER, a retired University of Maine comptroller who explores the outdoors in every season, has conducted extensive research on Maine's nineteenth-century life and written many articles for *Appalachia*. Visit him at sites.google.com/a/maine.edu/mountain-explorations/.