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John Anderson

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# The Rusty Pitons

*In New Jersey, evidence of rock climbing 75 years ago*

**John Anderson**



NINE YEARS AGO, WHEN NEW JERSEY AUTHORITIES STARTED granting permits to explore the state's northern crags, rock climbers pulled themselves up the rock and noticed rusty gear fixed in it. And they realized that they were not the first.

On the southwest end of Musconetcong Mountain, they saw rusty, 1940-era pitons sticking out. They saw decaying iron rings and flat pitons in the rock of Green Pond Mountain. In these and many other cliffs in New Jersey, history may have missed the reality of technical climbing in the Highlands, in the northwestern part of the Garden State. Why? Scattered papers, articles, and the hodgepodge of old climbing gear left pounded into the glaciated rock formations all prove that climbers haven't ignored New Jersey.

Legal limitations held climbers back between the 1950s—when a state administrative code outlawed rappelling on state lands—until 2006, when the New Jersey State Park Service reopened access through a waiver system. Formerly closed sites on New Jersey's crags reopened for climbing nine years ago. The rusted iron rings and forged pitons inspired me to write this narrative of New Jersey's rock climbing heritage. This story includes climbers who may have trained members of the 10th Mountain Division. Very, very cool.

### Clues to Early Highlands Tramping

Hill tramping in Wales in the early 1900s led to ever evolving "contemporary" roped rock climbing techniques. Those who tramped and hiked around North Jersey before 1920 used those early climbing techniques to ascend ridges and summits. I have seen the evidence 45 miles west of Manhattan. There sits Cranberry Ledge, known locally as Panther Ledge. In the early 1970s, John Maurizi and his friends climbed in this 60-acre quarry. Between that time and 2006, a private landowner restricted access. Who climbed here before the 1970s, no one knows. However, found on a Cranberry Ledge roof today is a line of four 1930s- or 1940s-era square-cut bolts.

Could it have been Fritz Wiessner? Conventional wisdom holds that in 1935, the noted climber Wiessner spied something to the northwest while climbing on the Hudson Highlands' Breakneck Ridge. The story goes that he viewed a white escarpment—the Shawangunks of New York—and soon

*The angles and overhangs on the cliffs of Green Pond Mountain make for intense technical climbing—rated 5.8—and the chance to revisit history. In this rock, climbers have found rusty gear dating to World War II.* JOHN ANDERSON

after, he started exploring that range, which became hugely important for technical climbing. It seems likely that he must have climbed on the cliffs of New Jersey, which lie so close to the Hudson Highlands. At the time, Wiessner had just recently immigrated to the United States from Germany. He operated the Wiessner Ski Wax Company. Wiessner was not the first person who bridged skiing and climbing for recreation, but his impact on modern climbing is unparalleled. Wiessner was the vanguard catalyst of American climbing. No document exists placing him on a New Jersey Highlands climb; still, I think it's likely that Wiessner and his compatriots visited these climbing areas that were so close to those New York cliffs we know they explored. Could he have been one of the climbers placing hardware in the Highlands? If so, when did he do that?

### **American Indians and Early Trampers**

Native people's rock shelters and other traces of tribal inhabitants who traversed the Highlands remain. Climbing or bouldering at those sites is rightfully illegal. Indian footpaths became Colonial cart paths for iron-ore miners. The Highlands had the ore, luxuriant forests, fast-flowing streams from which canals were dug, and the proximity to markets. On today's trails leading to climbing sites, evidence of America's early iron industry can still be seen.

We have proof that hikers explored the New Jersey Highlands in the mid-1800s. The author of an April 1860 *Harper's Magazine* article on Green Pond describes taking the stagecoach from New York City to the stage stop in Newfoundland Gap, where lodging was available in the hamlet of Newfoundland (the site is now the New Jersey Transit bus stop). The author then presents his multiday hike among the iron forges and furnaces of Green Pond with the assistance of a local guide. His pen-and-ink illustrations highlight Green Pond and nearby cliffs and are accompanied by an account of climbing along Green Pond's ridgeline.

If one hikes, today, from the bus stop at Newfoundland to Green Pond, one crosses a meandering river valley with its marshy floodplain then travels through an expansive talus field, until one arrives along the shores of Green Pond Lake as did our 1860s author. The undisturbed, expansive, liberal, and forested inspirational views that accompany an ascent of the Green Pond escarpment remain the same as a century and a half ago.

An 1874 *New York Times* article directly states how one can take public transportation to Newfoundland and do a circuit hike at the Green Pond cliffs. The article appreciates how the cliffs are home to one of the largest colonies of mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) in the Highlands. Today, in the early summer months, the Green Pond precipice is prolifically blanketed and fully covered by mountain laurel, adding to Green Pond Mountain's natural beauty and wild character.

Guy and Laura Waterman in *Yankee Rock and Ice* (Stackpole Books, 1993) refer to climbers exploring the Timp Face and on the Ramapo Torn in 1908. A documented climbing injury, rescue, and evacuation can be found in an August 1909 edition of the *New York Times*:

The rugged side of the steep cliff rising from the shore of the little lake at Newfoundland, N.J., where the United Boys Brigade of America has its Summer camp, has proved a temptation to every youngster in the camp, and when nearly every other boy in Company C of Hackensack had climbed to the top of the cliff fourteen-year-old Waite Broughton... the youngest and smallest member of his company, would no longer be denied. . . . Even as the older boys watched, helpless to assist, Waite lost his balance . . . and pitched backward down the side of the cliff, his small body crashing through underbrush and shrubs and rebounding from rocks upon which the boy struck in his fall.<sup>1</sup>

In the early 1900s, New York Governor Theodore Roosevelt and New Jersey Governor Foster Vorhees joined a growing chorus of interested citizens who became the vanguard of advocates for designating the Hudson and North Jersey highlands as attractive destinations protected for outdoor recreation. The highlands served as an escape for thousands flocking from the oppressive heat and crowding of nearby cities. By the 1920s, local hiking clubs had established trails. Major William A. Welch, the engineer and first general manager of the Palisades Interstate Park, made trails that grew to nearly 400 miles in length. By 1931, a loose coalition of local and regional trail clubs joined under the umbrella of the New York–New Jersey Trail Conference (part of the Appalachian Trail Conference), which stewarded the trail system. This group has partnered with state park agencies and hiking clubs to establish and preserve a network of more than 2,000 miles of public trails in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> "Boy Soldier Falls Down 180 Foot Cliff," *New York Times*, August 12, 1909.

Wiessner and other climbers followed these trails around the New York City metropolitan area and among its lush crags and associated hills. Some of these hills hosted ski areas. Most of them are now closed.

AN EARLY DOCUMENTED REFERENCE TO CLIMBING AT GREEN POND, New Jersey, using “modern” roped techniques dates to the weekend of April 7 and 8, 1923. *Appalachia Bulletin’s* issue of April 1923 (XVI no. 8) announced that the Appalachian Mountain Club’s New York Chapter would run a weekend excursion to Newfoundland, New Jersey. It would be a short “rucksack trip” in the state’s northern mountains, in the vicinity of Green Pond. Climbers would scale rock; “trampers” would hike. Participants should expect “rough going.” The trip would cost \$9 a person, including room and board at the Newfoundland Inn at the base of the cliffs.

The 1921 edition of *The New York Walk Book* has a pen-and-ink sketch of two people using a rope while out tramping on a Highlands trail. This follows a specific written account of climbing the Palisades and at the Timp Crag. There is also mention of other sites where rock climbing took place.

Newspaper articles of the 1920s identify “rock-climbing clubs” in New York City. These types of documented references attest to cragging, tramping, and climbing in the early twentieth century. The description of a climbing route of the era was simple: “Scramble, than climb along a narrow ledge. Near the top requires some care.” Note that today the moves on the same climb are rated 5.6. “Some care?” Indeed—a fall here would be roughly 60 feet.

In September 1926, Raymond H. Torrey celebrated a wild hiking area in the Highlands in the *New York Times*. He wrote, “Other sites for climbing are found in and around the Highlands, notwithstanding the discomfort to reach.” That was then, this is now. And in summer 1927, the *New York Times* reported that rock climbing had come over from abroad and taken hold of adventurers near the city: “When one goes tramping in our own Appalachians, even in our own Interstate Park, nowadays, one is likely to meet a rock-climbing party,” the reporter wrote.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Wild Hiking Region Lies Two Hours Out: Hills Near Greenwood Lake Offer Skyline Ridge Paths—Up-tilted Ledges Provide Climbing Opportunities, Ruins of Abandoned Settlement, and a Labrador Effect.” *New York Times*, September 12, 1926. “Thrills in Rock Climbing: The Newest Sport Finds Hazards Near New York—Every Cliff a Challenge.” *New York Times*, August 7, 1927.



In November 1927, Lincoln O'Brien, Robert Underhill, and Percy Olton, climbing compatriots of Kenneth Henderson and members of a local New York City-area hiking club, published an article, "Rock Climbing in the New York Highlands," whose source I have been unable to pin down. Photos show a double bowline tie-in. (Underhill wrote about that rope technique in 1931 in the *Sierra Club Bulletin*.) The climbers wore suits while doing high-quality, hard climbing. Some of these routes climbed then are rated 5.8 today. The article is one of the earliest references to roped climbing taking place in the Highlands.

By the mid- to late 1920s, and into the 1930s, car trips to the Highlands were commonplace. Oil and car companies heavily promoted motor trips out of the city with brochures, maps, and photos. New immigrants from Scandinavia and Switzerland were attracted to the landscape of the Highlands because it reminded them of home. Some of them settled among the Highlands' glacier lakes. These people are believed to have brought winter sports—ski jumping, cross-country and downhill skiing, ice hockey—and cliff climbing to the Highlands.

In 1936, Hugo Meury, a Swiss immigrant, opened Craigmour Ski Area, New Jersey's first ski area, on Green Pond Road. Men who enlisted in the 10th Mountain Division skied there. After World War II ended, these veterans were influential in promoting skiing and mountaineering in the United States.

In June 1938, Olton published "New York Rock Climbs" in *Appalachia* (XXII no. 1). The long article detailed many climbing routes in the Highlands over the border in New York.

### **10th Mountain Division's Influence**

Most climbing in the New Jersey Highlands takes place on cliffs lower than 70 feet high, and climbers before World War II developed particular techniques for the unusual terrain. It started when trampers around the crags encountered a short cliff and, to get over it, used elementary mountaineering techniques. These pioneering climbs were rarely recorded, but Henderson's 1942 *Handbook of American Mountaineering* (Houghton Mifflin), the definitive manual of the time, proves that New Jersey was a training ground for those who formed the 10th Mountain Division during World War II. We know this because the book defines short-rope leads as only 80 feet long for two people. Only on low cliffs such as the Highlands would such a length

work. In 2015, still, 80 feet is the ideal rope length for New Jersey's crags. The longer ropes common today come in handy only on the few Highlands cliffs higher than 200 feet. Chapter 16 of the 1942 *Handbook* (called "Mountains of the Western Hemisphere") references the Appalachian Mountains being subdivided to "the highlands of the Hudson and the Reading Prong that have many good trails and faces for rock climbing."

The 10th Mountain Division training encompassed basic rock climbing (elementary mountaineering) techniques, fundamental skiing, and cold weather survival. The division fought to decisive victories in the mountains of Italy in 1944 that directly led to the end of the war in Europe.

Craigmeur, local ski area for those who trained in the 10th Mountain division, offered night skiing and a ski jump in the 1940s. Some division veterans belonged to the Watchung Amateur Ski Club, which also used the mountain. It is highly likely that these skiers also did technical climbing here. Photos of any such activities and records of participants were lost when the ski lodge burned in 1964. I'm still looking for primary sources that would place division soldiers directly on the cliff, actually climbing.

One we know skied in the Highlands was Torger Tokle, an Olympic-caliber athlete and record-setting ski jumper who ski jumped at Craigmeur before World War II. Tokle died in 1945 while serving in the 10th Mountain Division on Italy's Hill 928, William Lowell Putnam's book *Education of a Mountain Fighter* (American Alpine Club Press, 1991) reports. Tokle's family, settled now within distance of these Highland slopes, recalls that Tokle was not a climber.<sup>3</sup>

Other veterans of the 10th Mountain Division—William Boddington, Arnie Kirbach, Sr., Erling Omland, and others—skied with the WASC and other groups that explored the Highlands areas of New Jersey and New York, but it is unknown if these veterans climbed in the area. Conventional wisdom remains open to further research.

During World War II, Omland taught rock climbing in the 10th Mountain Division's Camp Hale. Omland also frequented the ski slopes of Craigmeur—but I have found no definitive record of him rock-climbing in

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<sup>3</sup> Putnam, who died on December 20, 2014, at age 90, helped found the Mount Washington Ski Patrol, held offices in the American Alpine Club and the Appalachian Mountain Club—Putnam served on the *Appalachia* Committee in the 1950s and wrote many articles for the journal—and had a long, distinguished history of alpinism tramped around the Highlands. In his book, Putnam notes he bunked below Tokle when they trained in Colorado.



the Craigmour/Hawks Cliff area. Nevertheless, Omland does mention in some of his correspondence that he had a cousin who climbed. And so I wonder if Omland was making a reference to climbing here with his cousin in his book, *Hill Echoes* (Marshall Jones, 1995). After completing a three-pitch climb in Colorado with two other members of the 10th Mountain Division who were also members of the WASC, he reported that the following conversation took place: “Helluva fine performance, quite a contrast to the ballast cliffs at Watchung (NJ).” There is no established record of Omland or a cousin climbing at Hawks Cliff, but Union County’s Watchung Mountain Reservation has established climbing sites—and I wonder.

Charles Woudenberg left his hometown of Paterson, New Jersey, for Colorado Springs after World War II. Woudenberg, a member of the 10th Mountain Division in Italy, was also a member of Putnam’s command during the war. Paterson has fine diabase cliffs and is but a short scamper to Green Pond and the Highlands. It is unknown if Woudenberg climbed. It is plausible that discussions between Putnam and Woudenberg about areas in the New Jersey Highlands took place, yet for all of the reasons one might imagine, they are lost in the gray mists of history.

There is documented proof that climbers placed iron at eastern Pennsylvania climbing areas in the 1930s and the 1940s and that climbers explored the Hudson Highlands and in the Shawangunks from the 1920s on. New Jersey’s top climbing areas—Green Pond, Craigmour, and Hawks Cliff—lie directly between these two regions, abutting the Hudson Highlands. Can one place a direct connection between 10th Mountain Division veterans and climbing at Hawks Cliff or on Green Pond? It is highly suggestive, by the location of the climbing gear found on the cliffs and placed via a climbing mindset woven into the regional climbing history, that some veterans may have climbed on Green Pond Mountain. Access to the cliff from the bottom of the ski runs is easily achieved via a short 20- to 30-minute walk. Further research is underway to clarify these and other elements of Green Pond’s climbing history. Who placed the gear found at Craigmour remains a mystery.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the North Jersey Caving Grotto used the cliffs in the 1950s to film a movie on caving and climbing techniques. In the early 1970s, John Rogers, whose family owned a Route 23 liquor store, photographed his climbs on Green Pond’s eastern cliffs. Steve O’Keefe, Michael Schneider, and others climbed on the cliffs and crags in the early 1980s. Steve’s out-of-print climbing guide (of which I have a photocopy) covers the eastern end of Green Pond Mountain. These eastern routes are also

documented by Paul Nick and Neil Sloane in their guide, *Rock Climbing New Jersey* (Falcon Guides, 2000).<sup>4</sup>

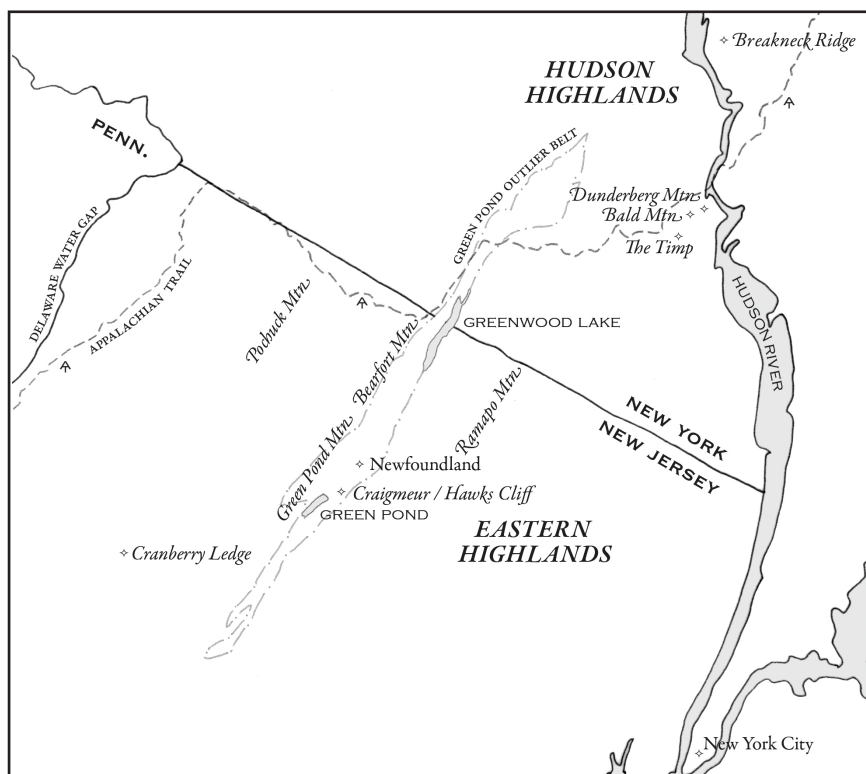
### **The Rolling-to-Rugged Highlands**

Most of New Jersey's climbing today occurs in the North Jersey Highlands, a 20-mile-wide band of ridges running northeasterly from Phillipsburg to the New York border, encompassing about 900 square miles. This terrain ranges from gently rolling to rugged. In a state known for its developed corridors, the Highlands include more than 130,000 undeveloped acres. The Highlands elevation averages 1,000 feet above sea level, with massive exposed craggy, parallel running ridges, talus-covered bedrock, and deep discontinuous valleys. The Delaware River splits the western Highlands at the Delaware Water Gap; the hills here include the Kittatinny Range and Wawayanda, Hamburg, Sparta, and Musconetcong mountains. Farther to the east are the Central Highlands Mountains: Bearfort, Kanouse, Copperas, Green Pond, Bowling Green, Schooley's, and Allamuchy. The seven-mile-long Greenwood Lake divides the Highlands. East of the lake, the more or less isolated hills of the Eastern Highlands group into the much-admired Ramapo Mountains. The Ramapo Torne folds northward into the Hudson Highlands, enclosing Breakneck Ridge and the Timp, Dunderberg, and Bald mountains. Steep Highland gradients and watersheds are cut by four major watersheds whose flows are captured by the reservoirs serving Newark, Jersey City, Hackensack, and other cities. The Green Pond Outlier belt of Paleozoic sedimentary rocks bisects the Precambrian crystalline rocks of the Reading Prong (Highlands Province). Over the border into New York State, the Hudson River pierces the eastern border of the Highlands. The ridge now called the Hudson Highlands is flanked by the United States Military Academy at West Point and Storm King State Park.

Climbers find, less than an hour's drive from New York City, crags and ridges 700 to 1,000 feet high, and here along the bases hide pockets for climbing and bouldering. Guidebooks to this area include Jon Crefeld's *The Powerlinez: Bouldering and Climbing in Ramapo's Torne Valley* (2011) and Marty Molitoris's *An Ice-Climber's Guide to the Catskill Mountains* (Alpine

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<sup>4</sup> The Green Pond Cliffs were featured in the AMC's magazine *AMC Outdoors* in 2006: "New Heights," by Tim Sprinkle, featured photos by climber Matt Calardo. The cover shot showed a climber on one of Green Pond's classic 5.10 routes.



*Forty-five miles west of New York City stand bands of cliffs in the Highlands region. This map shows several of the popular climbing areas described in this article.*

APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB/ABIGAIL COYLE

Endeavors, 2014). *Yankee Rock and Ice* (the Watermans' book) provides excellent climbing background on the nearby Hudson Highlands. National, state, and local agencies and private landowners work collaboratively, for the most part, to safeguard the Highlands as they strive to achieve a sustainable balance between preservation and economic development. In the entire Highlands region—both the Hudson and North Jersey stretches—geology, history, commerce, and tradition anchor climbing.

Colonial America's surveyor general, Robert Erskine, a resident of Ringwood, drew military topographic maps that could be considered New Jersey's first guide to climbing areas. The maps showed strategic overlooks where Continental sentries watched and set signal fires marking any advance of the British Army. Erskine's maps detailed overlooks and crags and defined the Pequannock River's Newfoundland Gap.

Climbing routes scale Windbeam, Kanouse, Green Pond, and Copperas mountains and a cliff known locally as Tory Rocks (northwest of Windbeam Mountain). The Highlands, looking over undisturbed ridges and valleys, feel so remote, but 45 miles to the east rises the New York City skyline. This reminds us that this remoteness is modern. New York–New Jersey mass development eroded and, in some cases, denuded the Highlands forests—until the modern movement to protect them arose.

### **Climbing Today on Green Pond Mountain**

Of all the grandeur found on these rediscovered cliffs, Green Pond Mountain's beauty tells the most dramatic story of the past come alive. Not quite a century ago, summer resorts near Green Pond Mountain offered "guided excursions to the cliffs." Such getaways were acclaimed destinations offering, as advertisements promised, "the curative power of Green Pond to promote rest, offer recreation and a change of the environment."

Green Pond Mountain offers a change of environment. This mountain is, for New Jersey, extremely remote. Green Pond Mountain (elevation 1,289 feet) is edged by the elbow of the Pequannock River, which flows south, piercing the Highlands escarpment at the Newfoundland Gap (elevation 724 feet). Northeast of the gap runs the ridge that merges eventually into the Shawangunk Ridge. Southwest of the Newfoundland Gap, Green Pond Mountain reaches to the Delaware River, 55 miles distant.

Climbing here today is a serious undertaking. First, you need a parking permit obtained from the Newark Watershed Development Corporation office in West Milford. You might have to park at a Newark Watershed parking area to gain legal access to a climbing area on state lands. Remember that any rescue effort here will take time.

Green Pond Mountain features two notable bands of cliffs. The eastern end of the precipice is known as Green Pond cliffs. Visible from Green Pond Road, County Route 513, these cliffs stand mostly under 150 feet. They are a "pudding stone" pink granite conglomerate that provide pitches 80 feet or so in length. Below the cliff is an expansive talus field that drapes over the underlying bedrock. Loose rock is present. We have found old pitons in this cliff directly behind the old Newfoundland Rail Road Station, directly next to roads and long-established hiking trails. Obviously, someone was climbing here long before today.

Nearly two miles west along the Green Pond ridge lies Craigmour, site of the former ski area, also called Hawks Cliff. This escarpment flanks a stratified valley formed by glacier drift. These cliffs rival those at the Delaware Water Gap. Federal, state, and local agencies manage public lands in and around Green Pond Mountain. Patterns of legal access to the area evolved to the current permit system. Climbing is prohibited on the area's federal lands.

This section of cliff ranges from 180 to 220 feet in height and exceeds 2,000 feet in length. At the base of these cliffs is a wonderful, large, and complex talus field. The adjacent talus field woodlands and the associated clefts along the Highland Ridge place one in a forgotten and remote corner of New Jersey.

Over the years, despite the risk, surreptitious climbing took place at Hawks Cliff. The remoteness, the undeveloped nature of the area, and the risk of potential trespassing fines and possible confiscation of climbing gear held climbers in check. In 2010, when access expanded, climbers bridged first-known ascents and explored the cliffs. In doing climbs along the escarpment, they found ring and iron pitons from the 1930s or 1940s. Also found on a ledge in this area, buried under leaves, was a World War II-era carabineer stamped "USA." Farther down the cliff, climbers found a well-worn, three-stranded, gold-line rope from an earlier era.



*Climbers pulled this rusty piton and ring from rock of Green Pond Mountain in northern New Jersey. Obviously, someone was climbing there a half-century ago.*

JOHN ANDERSON

WHEN AND WHO PLACED THESE RECENTLY EXPOSED BITS OF GEAR IS an unknown. On many a sunny autumn day out on the Highland ridges one can hear quite clearly the “clink,” “clink,” “clink” of a hammer driving a pin echoing from out under an overhang or out around a Highlands corner and a muted “belay-on.” When approached, nothing is present except a line of old rusted square-cut bolts.

New Jersey is an important climbing center—not just for those of us who love it today, but for its place in climbing history. And it remains a place that looks and feels wild, where climbers explore in the traditional manner. As Dr. Robert Dickinson said in 1930, “Discovery is supposed to involve remoteness.” If those rusty pitons could talk. . . .

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JOHN ANDERSON is a lifelong New Jersey resident, a climber since 1974, and registered nurse. He welcomes correspondence at [ingvarja@verizon.net](mailto:ingvarja@verizon.net) and extends thanks to “Wood Gnome,” Michael Schneider, researcher Christina Batal, Liz Holste, Laura Waterman, George Hurley, and the historical commissions in Rockaway Township, West Milford Township, and Kinneleon Township, for help dissecting Green Pond’s climbing history; and those who served in or were associated with the 10th Mountain Division during World War II. For a list of references Anderson consulted, see [outdoors.org/appalachia](http://outdoors.org/appalachia).



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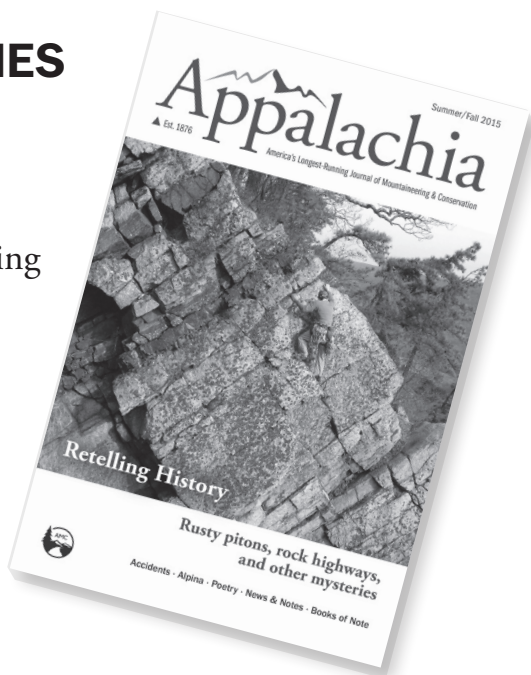
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