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Master of Path Grading

An appreciation of J. Rayner Edmands

Christine Woodside



THE FEW WHO RECORDED THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH JOHN RAYNER Edmands in the White Mountains of New Hampshire around 1900 said he was tall, bearded, and very long-legged. He dressed like a dandy, with knickers and a woven red sash. He strode purposefully and spoke kindly to kids who stayed at the Ravine House in Randolph. He led groups of men and women on camping trips to the Perch, a shelter he'd built below Mount Adams. When campers folded blankets "wrong," he'd demonstrate the "right" way. He told campers that they must wash their dishes using sand and no soap, directly in a stream.

This image fights with the idea I developed of him after I hiked his graded trails in the Whites. In August 2011, I convinced a group from a family camp that we should climb the Edmands Path up Mount Eisenhower. I'd traveled most of the trails in that area, but never this route from valley to summit. The elevation gain on the slope matched the quick scrambles of the Whites, 2,450 feet to the ridge, but as the trail approached treeline, it evened out. And the rock steps were small, like indoor steps. The treadway was smooth. I stepped on neatly intertwined, flat-topped rocks, fit in with each other like a jigsaw puzzle of paving stones. Many seasons of frost heaves had jumbled some of the stretches. But its integrity held. No glacier had magically molded this treadway. This was no accident, obviously. I knew I wanted to know the man who'd done this.

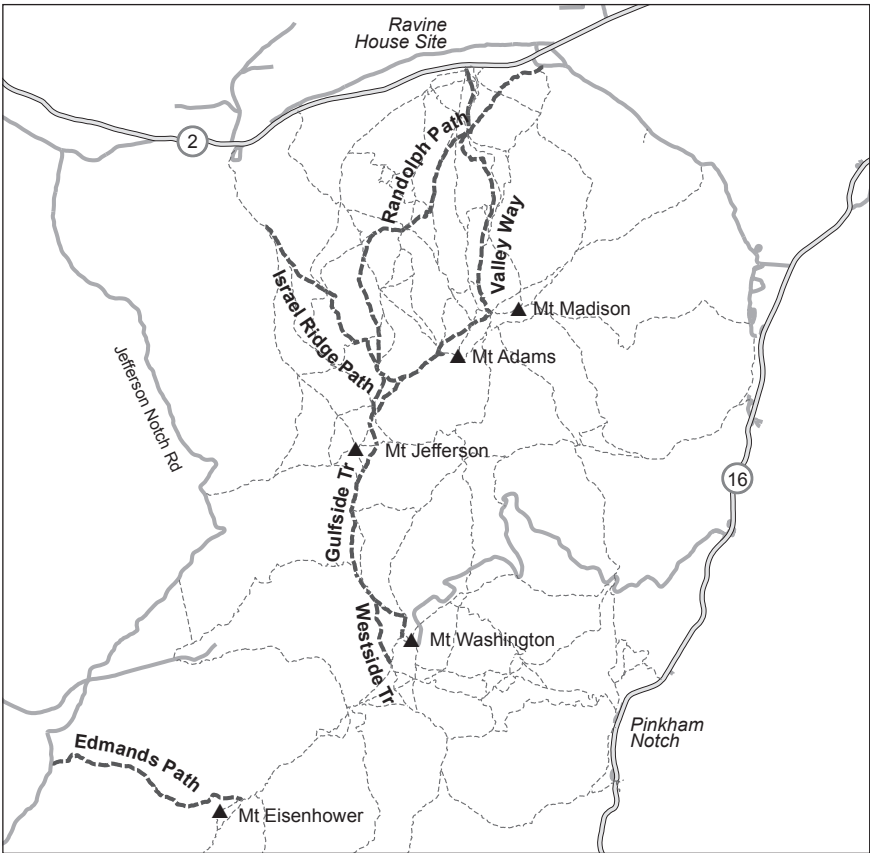
This was a man who around 1888 started making new paths in the White Mountains that followed the contours of the land. He adjusted the Israel Ridge Trail on Mount Adams, and he moved the Valley Way up Mount Madison. He made a route up Mount Pleasant (now Eisenhower) and set a route that wound calmly below the summits of Mounts Washington, Jefferson, Adams, and Madison.

Path building in the Whites started about 175 years ago as an exercise in moving people on horseback up to the ridge (such as the Crawford Path from Crawford Notch to Mount Washington and Fabyan's Path, today's Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail) and—more often—marking the scrambles. Jonathan G. "Jock" Davis built the Tuckerman Ravine Trail, the most famous route up Mount Washington, "for the more hardy and adventurous," as William Nowell had predicted in a report in *Appalachia* (June 1877, I no. 3). Around the same time, Eugene Beauharnais Cook and William Peek, summer

John Rayner Edmands followed the contours of the land whenever he could. Left, the Gulfside Trail below Mount Washington. JERRY AND MARCY MONKMAN

friends in late middle age, explored and built straight-up-the-incline routes such as the Air Line Trail up Mount Adams. Edmands didn't want to do that. He wanted something that the latest rains wouldn't run straight down.

AND SO I READ UP ON THE LIFE OF EDMANDS, AN ENGINEER WHO served as president of the Appalachian Mountain Club in 1886. After age 40, until his death at 60 from a stroke, Edmands devoted his summers to making good trails. Edmands designed, secured funds for, and oversaw the crews who built graded paths some people called boulevards. His trails also included the Randolph Path, the Gulfside Trail, the Westside Trail, and others. His dedication put him in the middle of the movement to protect the forests of the White Mountains. Edmands and his trail friends were appalled when logging



The Edmands-designed paths in the northern Presidential Range are shown here in darker lines. LARRY GARLAND/AMC

companies felled entire areas, slash caught fire, and rain eroded trenches in the barren land. “One of Mr. Edmands’s reasons for so rapidly developing the path and camp system on the Northern Slopes was his hope that so great an interest in, and love for, these forests could be aroused,” wrote Louis F. Cutter in a 1921 tribute (*Appalachia*, August 1921, XV no. 2). “That means could be found for purchasing and preserving the most beautiful parts before the forests should be made into lumber and pulp.” Edmands followed the logic that has guided many conservationists in history. Building trails gets people into wild areas. People who get into wild areas will fight to preserve them. Sadly, he died a year before Congress passed the Weeks Act, which protected the Whites against reckless logging by creating a national forest.

Edmands believed that the best trail or the most adventurous route was not the hardest scramble. This philosophy conflicted with those of his contemporaries, the region’s other major trail makers, icons such as Davis, Cook, Peek, and Warren Hart. Hazel de Berard recalled in *Appalachia* that Edmands began staying in Randolph at the Ravine House—a lodge situated with a view of King Ravine on the north side of Mount Adams—and passing time in Durand Hall, also in Randolph, early in the 1900s, when he spent summers scouting trails and directing crews that built them. “All of us, old and young, were familiar with every foot of the ground he was covering,” de Berard wrote (December 1956, XXXI no. 2). “His particular interest was in the grading of these paths, for he was determined to make them so smooth that anyone’s mother could walk to the summit of Mount Washington without the slightest difficulty.”

I call that hyperbole. De Berard often wrote wryly. (She wrote a poem for the journal called “The Lament of the Soft-Boiled Egg.”) It was in character for her to make some fun of Edmands. She was not a historian of trail technique; she was a comedian. Laughing at their obsessions in the mountains was a hallmark of early *Appalachia* writers.

Edmands’s methods marked a watershed in the Whites, proving that trails need not be rough underfoot. Women trampers kept themselves from tripping only by hitching up their long skirts. Navigating giant boulders and ledges created problems. “I invented a system of tying a strap around my hips and hauling up a fold of skirt through it,” de Berard wrote, “in front when going uphill, in back when coming down. The hem frequently caught on rocks, especially when I took a wild leap, or attempted to do so. . . . With the new Edmands paths, beautifully engineered, everything changed.

Large flocks of the hitherto ‘un-mountain-*fahig*,’ both male and female, streamed up the mountains like a transplanted tea party.”

Could she have meant this? De Berard’s recollection of Edmands and his purposes remains one of the few stories about Edmands. If he aimed for a boulevard, *why* did he? No one climbing any slope in the Whites could be called someone who took it easy. The mountains are not just hills. Using de Bernard’s verbiage, no trekker then, even in long skirts, would be “un-mountain-*fahig*.” No climb in the Whites is a tea party. On Edmands’s paths, after his crews finished levering the giant flat-topped rocks into place, the mountain trek eased. Men and women could make faster time. They might look around at the views, occasionally, because on an Edmands-designed path, they wouldn’t trip.

AN EARLY TRAGEDY, THE DEATH OF HIS WIFE, TURNED EDMANDS toward trail work, and the trail work itself was so onerous and endless that, I believe, it may have killed him at age 60, before his time. “For months he had workmen laboring on this mountain thoroughfare,” his obituary read, “which has attained the dignity of a boulevard across the hills. All this work was done by Mr. Edmands at his own expense, for pure love of the mountains and the desire to place them within comfortable reach of other enthusiasts.”

Edmands had grown up in Boston and graduated with a civil engineering degree in one of the first classes at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He worked his longest stretch as a librarian at the Harvard Observatory. He married Helen Atkins on October 26, 1885, in the Atkins mansion on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston. Only three years later, his wife and baby died—his wife a week after giving birth, and their infant daughter, a month later. This sorrow freed up his time; he did not remarry, but he spent a lot of time guiding friends in the mountains. And he liked graded trails. He visited the Rockies in 1888 shortly after his wife’s death and was impressed by the switchbacks. “The graded mountain trails made by miners and others in Colorado were a revelation to him, and he saw at once that similar paths could be made here,” Cutter wrote.

In 1891, Edmands began building shelters and making trails in the Whites. He believed, his contemporaries thought, that the Whites should be accessible to “persons unequal to very rough and vigorous exertion.” This may not capture the whole context of what he thought. Edmands climbed with very hardy women such as Harriet Freeman, a conservationist and strong tramper, and Emma Cummings. Cummings wrote detailed letters describing



The Edmands many people knew was the gregarious guide. Above, he strides with his long legs across a porch in Randolph, New Hampshire, sometime in the 1890s. AMC

a trip Edmands led up to the Perch for her, Freeman, and Freeman's nephew Frank Clark "Fred" Freeman in 1902. Edmands spent so much time on the slopes that he obviously really understood their contours, and how rain acted on them:

Mr. Edmands throughout the day called our attention to many interesting geological facts, such as the abandoned course of a brook, the water having been diverted at some time in another direction. A deep pool of water is generally to be seen at the foot of a waterfall, free from rocks, because the force of the water has pushed them ahead, until an accumulation of these rocks forms a barrier across the stream and they can be pushed no further.¹

¹See Arthur Stanley Pease, *Sequestered Vales of Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946, page 69.

Twine by the Mile

Edmands developed a method of scouting routes using a large ball of string. He tied the string to the trees, leaving it loose in case he had to cut or reroute. He hired local farmers, loggers, and carpenters to grade the paths, make water bars, and lay rocks to his specifications. He taught them to cut carefully into large tree roots, allowing the path to remain smooth but not killing the tree. In 1892, he started working on trails above treeline, including the Westside Trail and the Gulfside Trail below Mount Washington. Today these trails provide a gradual route between Lakes of the Clouds Hut and Madison Spring Hut.

Cummings wrote, "He related an amusing story of going into a store in Boston and asking the clerk for the price of string by the mile. The clerk replied that they usually sold it by the pound. . . ."

Edmands told such stories in the mountains because he wanted to show trampers a great time. He helped people of means and influence, such as the Freeman-Cummings party, safely into the mountains, where they'd fall in love with them and want to protect them.

But if he was a master at guiding and path making, Edmands was a shy activist. A movement to protect the forests had started; in 1902, the local Forest Commission had formed and met in Intervale, and a group had lobbied Congress in Washington. Freeman's prolific correspondence with the Reverend Edward Hale reported this. In August 1902, Hale wrote to Freeman that the meeting was "a perfect fiasco." They fought over whether the New Hampshire legislature or Congress would support forest conservation. "And so it ends that this board, formed since only to make a National Appeal, is to make none till it has waited until the Legislature has failed again," Hale fumed, going on to flatter himself and criticize Edmands. "Young James is the only man of sense and courage in the company beside myself. Your cousin Edmands talked a great deal, but is utterly afraid to *do* anything."

That's not exactly accurate. Hale had a mountain named after him, but Edmands had made paths—as fast as he could, before lumber companies obliterated them. He finished several of the paths—the Randolph Path rose gradually from the Ravine House to the Israel Ridge above treeline on Mount Adams. As logging advanced, he abandoned others such as a route he called the Highland Path that would have started at the Bowman trailhead and approached Adams from the west. "But it was not completed when the lumbering supervened," Cutter wrote. "Parts of the trail still exist in the forest, but much of it has been utterly destroyed."

Edmands began to urge his crews to work faster, trying to stay ahead of the timber cutting; “he hastened the work, using less permanent construction than he might otherwise have employed,” Cutter wrote, “and for this reason he invited to his camps and entertained there persons who might, he thought, help to lead public opinion.” On the northern slopes of the Whites, Edmands believed his work came too late, and so he turned to the Bretton Woods area. He restored the old Fabyan Path but relocated most of it, laying out a route up Mount Pleasant (what’s now Mount Eisenhower) that, on the high slopes, followed the contours of the land.

In his 1921 tribute, Cutter said that he thought Edmands would return to the northern slopes after he finished the trail up Pleasant. But Edmands sickened. Doctors sent him to Florida to convalesce, but while on that trip, he had a stroke and died. What he left behind was a web of trails that have endured amazingly well for more than a hundred years. One section of the Gulfside Trail never got graded. It’s at just that point of the trail where I start thinking that I can’t make any time on this trail. Then I realize that the rocks lie scrambled, as nature left them. On the rest of the Gulfside Trail, the surface is practically flat. That and the frequent cairns, another Edmands trademark, have largely survived.

Edmands hadn’t made easy paths for those who would sip tea. Just the opposite. Edmands took the hard road, putting his own health at risk so that trails would endure. His paths have lasted through a century of storms and frost heaves. Some of the trail blazers he knew had created paths following streams or the fall line of the slope—fastest way up, no grade, easy to mark, and easy for a storm to destroy. For them to debate with Edmands about which trail wore well strikes me as absurd.

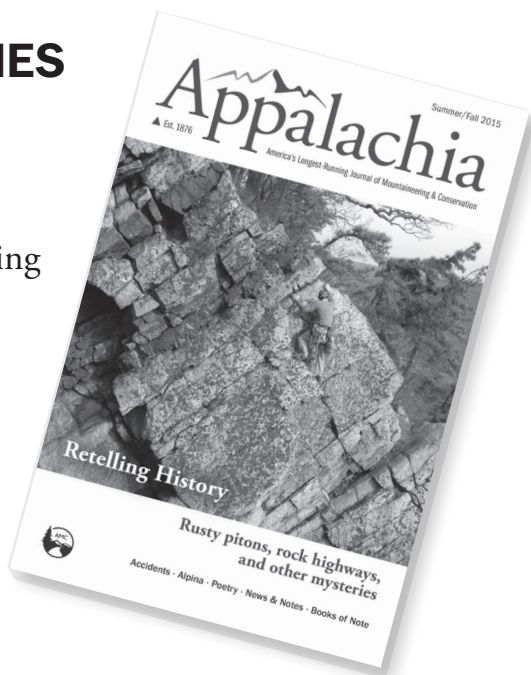
CHRISTINE WOODSIDE is the editor of *Appalachia*. Thanks to Sara Day, author of *Coded Letters, Concealed Love* (New Academia Press, 2014), for providing excerpts of letters from Emma Cummings; to Judy Hudson, archivist of the Randolph Mountain Club and author of *Peaks and Paths: A Century of the Randolph Mountain Club* (2010); and to Carl Demrow, for a better understanding of the trails.

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