

2015

## What Happened to the Thoreau Spring Plaque? The Story of a Maine Landmark's Two Names

Howard R. Whitcomb

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



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Whitcomb, Howard R. (2015) "What Happened to the Thoreau Spring Plaque? The Story of a Maine Landmark's Two Names," *Appalachia*: Vol. 66: No. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol66/iss2/6>

This In This 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).

*Back in Time on Katahdin*

# What Happened to the Thoreau Spring Plaque?

*The story of a Maine landmark's two names*

**Howard R. Whitcomb**



A MILE BEFORE THE SUMMIT OF MAINE'S KATAHDIN, NORTHBOUND hikers on the Appalachian Trail come to a convergence of two trails. Here, the trail maps tell them, will be Thoreau Spring, named after the writer whose efforts to reach the summit in 1846 were rebuffed by mist and intense winds. This spring had no name for a very long time, and its first one wasn't to memorialize Henry David Thoreau's excursions to northern Maine. The naming and renaming of the spring might seem a quirky story, but it reveals the important role the mountain played in the wilderness preservation movement and the creation of Baxter State Park.

The spring,<sup>1</sup> which lies amid the vast Tableland at an elevation of 4,636 feet, remained unnamed until 1925. That year Ralph Owen Brewster became the first Maine governor to ascend the state's highest peak. The commissioner of inland fisheries and game named it Governor's Spring in recognition of Brewster's climb. Only seven years later, the spring had a new name, to commemorate Thoreau's treks to the great forest regions of northern Maine, including Katahdin. What follows is the intriguing tale of the spring's renaming, the removal of the vandalized Thoreau plaque in the mid-twentieth century, and the installation of a replica in 2012. Today, after more than a six-decade interval, hikers reaching the spring are reminded once again of the extraordinary legacy of Thoreau's 1846 excursion as recounted in his classic essay, "Ktaadn."<sup>2</sup>

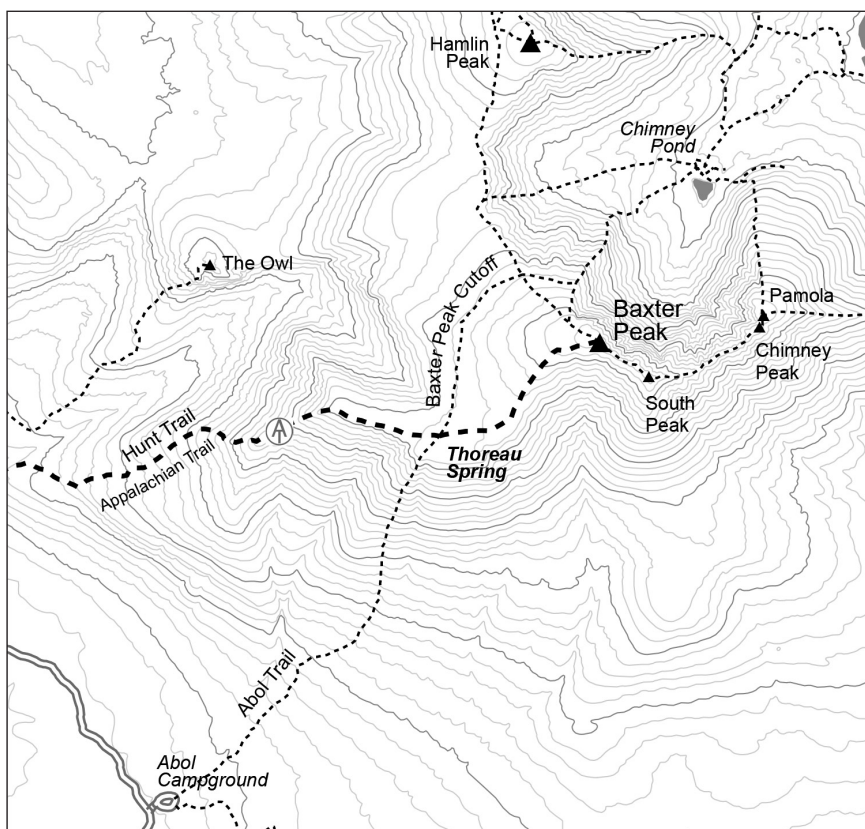
DURING THE SUMMER OF 1953, I CLIMBED KATAHDIN VIA THE HUNT Trail and regaled my friends with information gleaned from my trusty *Katahdin Section of Guide to the Appalachian Trail in Maine*, third edition (Maine Appalachian Trail Club, 1952). Upon reaching the spring, I might have recited to my compatriots the following passage describing the site: "This spring [Thoreau Spring] is frequently dry; formerly Governor's Spring,

---

<sup>1</sup>It is most likely a depression spring formed at a topographic low spot where the water table reaches the surface and a local discharge zone is created.

<sup>2</sup>*The Maine Woods*, published posthumously in 1864, included the "Ktaadn" essay. See Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, edited by Joseph J. Moldenhauer (Princeton University Press, 2004).

*Henry David Thoreau did climb Katahdin, but his diaries make clear that he did not pass the spring named for him. The first plaque, shown here c. 1932, disappeared mysteriously, years later.* COURTESY OF BAXTER STATE PARK



*At the junction of the Hunt and Abol Trails on Katahdin lies Thoreau Spring, a name that has less to do with the author and philosopher than it does with the wilderness preservation movement in Maine.* AMC/LARRY GARLAND

renamed in 1932 by Percival P. Baxter, marked by bronze plaque.” The guidebook also pointed out that three trails converged at the spring—the Hunt/Appalachian Trail, the Abol Trail, and the Baxter Peak Cutoff. Had I really been observant, I would have noticed that no plaque was to be found at the site commemorating Thoreau’s 1846 ascent and authorship of *The Maine Woods*, which included the “Ktaadn” essay.

In 2002, I embarked on a decade-long research project for Friends of Baxter State Park that resulted in the publication of *Percival P. Baxter’s Vision for Baxter State Park* (2005) and *Governor Baxter’s Magnificent Obsession: A Documentary History of Baxter State Park, 1931–2006* (2008). Much of the correspondence I reference in this article comes from the first of those works. While writing the latter volume, I inquired of park officials as to the whereabouts of the Thoreau Spring plaque noted in the guidebook. Their

response was that the park had no record of it having being installed, and if it had been, it was removed some time ago.<sup>3</sup>

Shortly thereafter, I talked with Brad Viles, a reporter for the *Bangor Daily News*, who stated that he had seen four bolt holes in a granite boulder in the vicinity of Thoreau Spring. That was sufficient for me to embark on a quest to solve the mystery of the missing plaque. That inquiry led back to the 1920s when two ambitious politicians, Percival P. Baxter and Ralph Owen Brewster, had formative experiences climbing Katahdin. In subsequent years, these two gentlemen would be inexorably linked over differing visions for the Katahdin region.

### Baxter's Vision for a Park

Baxter's vision for a state park at Katahdin to commemorate the centennial of Maine's 1820 statehood had its germination during his tenure as a state legislator from 1917 to 1920. But it wasn't until he climbed Katahdin in August 1920, as part of a large expedition, that a full-fledged legislative proposal emerged for a state park. Baxter envisioned the park as a means of addressing a shortfall in the state's publicly held wild lands, but in doing so, also preserving the mountain that he described as its "crowning glory."

Baxter's astute political acumen was revealed in his carefully orchestrated legislative initiative. When the legislature convened in January 1921, Baxter, a senator from Cumberland County, presided in the upper house as president of the Senate, and a fellow participant on the August 1920 expedition, Charles P. Barnes of Aroostook County, served as the speaker of the House of Representatives. Furthermore, Baxter appointed his half-brother, Senator Rupert Baxter, to the Committee on State Lands and Forest Preservation, which would consider the proposal. "An Act to Establish the Mt. Katahdin State Park" was introduced on January 25, 1921; two days later, Baxter delivered an address on the



*Percival P. Baxter, left, shakes hands with his successor as governor, Ralph Owen Brewster, in January 1925. The two did not get along, but they shared the cause of protecting Katahdin after Brewster climbed it.* COLLECTIONS OF MAINE HISTORICAL SOCIETY/MAINETODAY MEDIA, COURTESY OF VINTAGEMAIN-IMAGES.COM #23661

<sup>3</sup>Howard R. Whitcomb, *Governor Baxter's Magnificent Obsession* (Friends of Baxter State Park, 2008), page 12 (footnote 48). Hereafter cited as *Magnificent Obsession*.

proposal to the annual meeting of the Maine Sportsmen's Fish and Game Association, in which he stated,

The proposed park covers an area of 57,232 acres and comprises the whole of Mount Katahdin, and Katahdin Lake, of itself one of the most beautiful of all Maine's lakes. . . . The park will bring health and recreation to those who journey there, and the wild life of the woods will find refuge from their pursuers, for the park will be made a bird and game sanctuary for the protection of its forest inhabitants.<sup>4</sup>

But newly inaugurated Governor Frederick H. Parkhurst died on January 31. Baxter was elevated to the governorship. This unforeseen development dramatically changed the political fortunes of his park proposal. Baxter, as governor, was no longer in an advantageous position to orchestrate the deliberations on his bill. His 1921 Katahdin centennial park proposal was never reported out of committee, and a proposal in the 1923–1924 legislative sessions had a similar fate. In a reflective “time-capsule” letter of November 1924, shortly before leaving office, he didn't allude to his ill-fated proposal for a park at Katahdin.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, private citizen Baxter remained resolute for the remainder of the decade that a state park should be established at Katahdin.

In 1924, Baxter did not seek reelection. Brewster was chosen as his successor. Brewster's election was not without controversy, as evidenced by ex-Governor Baxter's vehement criticism of Brewster for not having repudiated the endorsement of the Ku Klux Klan during the Republican primary campaign. The resulting schism profoundly affected the men's relationship in the future.

The following summer, Brewster became the first incumbent to climb Katahdin. Brewster's hiking party included his wife, Dorothy; George B. Dorr, superintendent of Lafayette (now Acadia) National Park; Willis E. Parsons, commissioner of Inland Fisheries and Game; and Roy Dudley, the revered game warden based at Chimney Pond, who served as one of the guides. After ascending via the Saddle Trail, the Brewster party reached the summit by

---

<sup>4</sup>*Magnificent Obsession*, p. 307. Entire texts of the legislative proposal (Eightieth Legislature, Senate No. 19) and the Fish and Game Association address, including map, can be found on pages 291–309.

<sup>5</sup>*Magnificent Obsession*, pages 310–312.





*On Katahdin, a spring would not sit unnamed. The first governor to climb the mountain, Ralph O. Brewster, received the honor—but only for a few years.*

BERT CALL COLLECTION, UNIVERSITY OF MAINE ORONO

midmorning. The governor's party explored the vast Tableland and had lunch at the spring at the convergence of the Hunt and Abol trails. Subsequently, Parsons authorized that the previously unnamed spring be named Governor's Spring in Brewster's honor.<sup>6</sup>

As early as 1919, Baxter inquired of Garret Schenck, the founding president of Great Northern Paper Company, to discern the corporation's potential interest in selling land for a forest reserve in the Katahdin region. The overtures to Schenck were summarily rebuffed, and it was more than a decade before Baxter received a sympathetic hearing at Great Northern. In 1930, with the paper company under the new leadership of William A. Whitcomb (no relation to me), Baxter was able to acquire, with his personal funds, a 5,960-acre parcel that embraced the major part of the Katahdin massif. This was the first of 28 parcels, totaling 201,000 acres, that Baxter acquired and deeded to the state of Maine before his death in 1969. The deed of trust for the initial parcel, dated March 3, 1931, provided the definitive expression of Baxter's intent for the new park:

---

<sup>6</sup>The chiseled marker read as follows: GOVERNOR'S SPRING/NAMED IN HONOR OF GOV. RALPH O. BREWSTER/THE FIRST GOVERNOR TO CLIMB KATAHDIN WHILE IN OFFICE/WILLIS E. PARSONS, COMR.

. . . said premises shall forever be used for public park and recreational purposes, shall forever be left in the natural wild state, shall forever be kept as a sanctuary for wild beasts and birds, that no roads or ways for motor vehicles shall hereafter ever be constructed therein or thereon, *and that the grantor, during his lifetime, retains the right to determine, and to place whatever markers or inscriptions shall be maintained or erected on or within the area hereby conveyed.* (Italics added)

—State of Maine, *Private and Special Laws of 1931*, chap. 23

The last portion of this trust provision sheds light on the nomenclature issue at the heart of this article.

In short order, the legislature decreed that Katahdin's summit be renamed "Baxter Peak" (April 2, 1931), having formerly been "Monument Peak," and that the new park be called "Baxter State Park" (March 23, 1933). However, it was left to Baxter to recommend other changes in nomenclature per the reservation in the deed of trust. On April 21, 1933, he wrote to the Honorable W. C. Mendenhall, director of the U.S. Geological Survey, regarding changes to the topographic map for the "Katahdin quadrangle." First he attached a certified copy of the legislative resolve naming the park. But, more important, he enclosed a copy of the trust provision that gave him the right to determine and to place markers and inscriptions within the area donated to the state, along with a park map with the designation "Governor's Spring" highlighted. Somewhat disingenuously, Baxter claimed that the spring's previous designation had "no historical background."

He reported to Mendenhall that a bronze tablet, about 18 by 12 inches, had been erected at the spring with a new designation, "Thoreau Spring," in honor of the man who first brought Katahdin to the attention of the people of New England. Finally, Baxter conveyed the new marker's inscription:

THOREAU SPRING  
HENRY DAVID THOREAU, 1817–1862,  
PHILOSOPHER, NATURALIST, AUTHOR  
ASCENDED MT. KATAHDIN IN 1846 AND  
WROTE "THE MAINE WOODS", ONE OF THE  
EARLIEST AUTHENTIC DESCRIPTIONS OF  
THE GREAT FOREST REGIONS  
OF NORTHERN MAINE



### **Congressman Brewster's National Park Proposal (1937–1938)**

One can assume that former Governor Brewster wasn't particularly pleased with the renaming of the spring. It wasn't long before the relations between Baxter and Brewster turned for the worse.

In March 1937, Congressman Brewster introduced legislation to create a national park at Katahdin. The enabling legislation provided a ten-year window, whereby lands could be acquired by public or private donations. It was estimated that the total area of the proposed national park could reach more than 400,000 acres, or roughly twice the size of present-day Baxter State Park. A powerful ally of Brewster's, Myron H. Avery of the Appalachian Trail Conference, argued that there was a lack of adequate supervision in the new state park and that the state of Maine was not in a "position to care for this area and provide the necessary maintenance, protection, and other facilities so urgently required."<sup>7</sup> Incidentally, it was because of Avery's persistence that Katahdin's Baxter Peak became the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail, rather than Mount Washington.

A literal firestorm ensued upon Baxter's return from a trip overseas, and for the next year he aggressively lobbied, with the invaluable assistance of The Wilderness Society, to defeat the legislation.<sup>8</sup> By that time, Baxter was actively exploring additional acquisitions in the immediate vicinity of his initial gift and wasn't about to have "his" park converted into a national park.

Baxter expressed vehement opposition to the national park proposal in a letter to his nephew John L. Baxter on April 14, 1937: "Nothing has disturbed me for a long time as much as this and although I feel confident that while I am alive and well nothing can be done, of course something might happen to me and then Brewster might accomplish his purpose." Baxter attributed Brewster's motives as "first to injure me and second to get some political advantage by being instrumental in having a National Park in Maine."

---

<sup>7</sup>Myron H. Avery, Extension of Remarks of Hon. Ralph O. Brewster, *Congressional Record*, 75th Congress, First Session, June 9, 1937.

<sup>8</sup>The Wilderness Society actively lobbied against the national park designation, and the Appalachian Mountain Club also opposed the designation, as described by Ronald L. Gower in "Katahdin: Its Past, Present, and Future" in *Appalachia*, June 1937, XXI no. 3, pages 449–450. He states that the "Council of the Appalachian Mountain Club on May sixth VOTED: That the Appalachian Mountain Club go on record as opposed to H.R. 5864 'To provide for the establishment of the Katahdin National Park . . .'"

No congressional action was taken on Brewster's proposal, and it died at the adjournment of the 75th Congress in 1938. Brewster never reintroduced it. Baxter concluded, years later in a letter to Great Northern President Whitcomb, "In all modesty I can say that had it not been for my opposition, Brewster's bill would have become law."

### **The Mystery Begins to Unravel**

Baxter State Park Director Jensen Bissell learned in fall 2008 that Viles, the Bangor Daily News reporter, had discovered the four bolt holes in the face of the granite boulder near the trail junction at Thoreau Spring. Bissell hastened to visit the site. At that point, however, the park director had to decide if he should replace the plaque at all. Foot traffic could damage sedge meadow habitat.

Meanwhile, I worked with John W. Neff researching a photographic history, *Baxter State Park and Katahdin* (Arcadia Publishing, 2012). The collaborators found in park archives a photograph of the Thoreau Spring plaque embedded in a granite boulder, thereby providing verification that it had been installed, as Baxter had reported to USGS Director Mendenhall.

Bissell continued to work quietly on the possibility of installing a replacement, still not knowing if the plaque had been stolen or removed. On August 22, 2012, 80 years after the initial installation and more than 160 years after Thoreau's ascent of Katahdin, a replica of the original commemorative plaque was placed at Thoreau Spring.<sup>9</sup>

No one knew what had happened to the 1932 Thoreau Spring plaque. My own recent discoveries provide intriguing clues. *The AMC Guide to Katahdin*, ninth edition (Appalachian Mountain Club, 1949) referenced the Thoreau Spring plaque; however, a July 1950 supplement to that trail guide said that it "has been removed to prevent further vandalism."<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, Baxter, in a June 17, 1952, letter to BSP Superintendent Helon Taylor, indicated that he would like to have the Thoreau plaque reinstalled, if it could be "straightened out." This established the plaque's

---

<sup>9</sup>See Jensen Bissell, "Thoreau Spring Plaque," *Forever Wild: Newsletter of Friends of Baxter State Park*, 2012, XI no. 4, pages 4 and 8.

<sup>10</sup>After publication of the AMC's *July 1950 Supplement*, AMC guides made no further reference to the bronze plaque; however, the Maine Appalachian Trail Club did not eliminate references to the marker in its guidebooks until 1975.



*The new plaque, installed in 2012.* COURTESY OF BAXTER STATE PARK

whereabouts and explained in what way it had been damaged, perhaps by someone attempting to pry it off the face of the granite boulder. We also know that it was never reinstalled. It probably remained at Taylor's house, the de facto park headquarters at the time, on the shore of Upper Togue Pond. A fire leveled that house in January 1967. That offers a plausible explanation of what happened to the earlier plaque and an extensive collection of park records. It is conceivable that the Thoreau plaque was hauled away with the rest of the rubble. Taylor retired as park superintendent several months later.

Maybe it is superfluous to ask what happened to the plaque because its replacement now commands its rightful place at the Tableland spring, not far from where inhospitable weather compelled Thoreau, without reaching the summit, to descend and rejoin his companions that September day in 1846. One would like to think that as Thoreau approached the ridge near what is now South Peak, he looked back toward the southwest, as the clouds momentarily lifted, and saw, below, the vast Tableland that is home to the spring that would eventually bear his name.

---

HOWARD R. WHITCOMB of Georgetown, Maine, is co-author, with John W. Neff, of *Baxter State Park and Katahdin* (Arcadia Publishing, 2012).

---

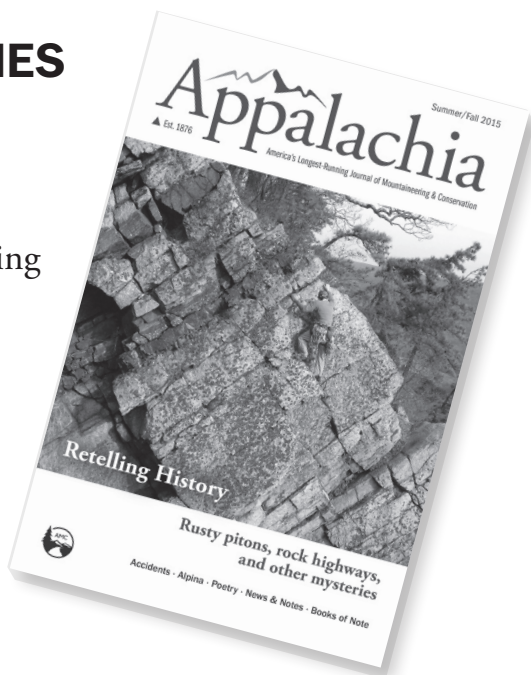
*"I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features."—Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber*

---

## SUPPORT THE STORIES YOU LOVE!

Start or renew your *Appalachia* subscription today, and keep reading America's longest-running journal of mountaineering and conservation.

Visit **outdoors.org/appalachia** for a special offer: 36% off the journal's cover price. That's three years of *Appalachia* (6 issues) for only \$42. Or choose a one-year subscription (2 issues) for \$18—18% off the cover price.



Inside every issue, you'll find:

- inspired writing on mountain exploration, adventurers, ecology, and conservation
- up-to-date news and notes on international expeditions
- analysis of recent Northeastern mountaineering accidents
- book reviews, poetry, and much more

Subscribe today at **outdoors.org/appalachia** or call 800-372-1758.



Subscription prices valid as of September 2021. Prices and offers subject to change without notice. For the most up-to-date info, visit [outdoors.org](https://outdoors.org).