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“Old Man” Thompson, White Mountain Guide

A mountain was named after him—and then unnamed

Julie Boardman

ALLEN “OLD MAN” THOMPSON WAS ONE OF THE MOST CAPABLE and colorful White Mountain guides in the nineteenth century. He led people through the wilds of New Hampshire without a compass and never lost his way. He learned woodcraft from some Mohawks and could build shelters that provided protection from the heaviest rains. He could hook dozens of fish from a mountain stream and then produce a delicious repast. He also entertained clients with an astonishing variety of anecdotes and stories.

At the height of his years as a professional guide, Thompson could point to a 4,260-foot-high peak on the Zealand Ridge and boast that it bore his name. Today Mount Thompson is known as Zealand Mountain. It’s unclear why the change was made. A newspaper article written by one of Thompson’s clients and a report written by a leading member of the Appalachian Mountain Club suggest that the guide probably didn’t deserve to have his name on a mountain.

Thompson’s background was unlike that of any other guide. He was born in 1814 in Woodstock, Vermont, but he left home during his youth to live with some Mohawks. Thompson reflected on this experience in an 1887 interview with a reporter for *Among the Clouds*, a newspaper published on the summit of Mount Washington:

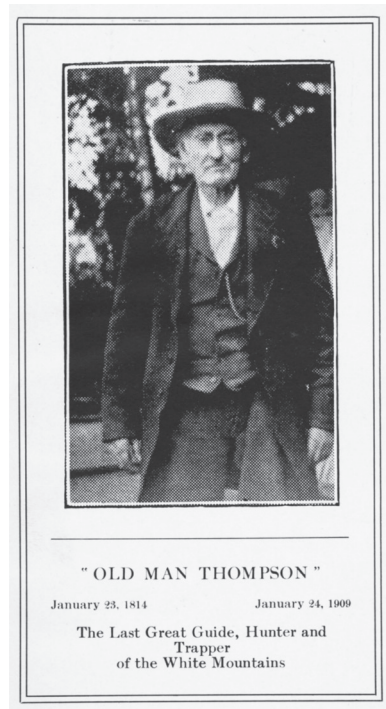
My parents having died when I was two years old, I was given to a man to be brought up, but he and I failed to agree on the proper method of bringing up a child in the way he should go, and I became restless and determined to seize the first possible opportunity for gaining my liberty. Well, it came through an Indian chief. I went to a Vermont town to see a horse-race. . . .

Well, it was there I met a Mohawk Indian chief named Wanawah, who had come to the race to sell baskets and skins. When he asked me to return with him I wasn't long in making up my mind to do so. Wanawah was a grand noble fellow who ruled the remnants of the Mohawk tribe. He had received a good English education, and he became not only my friend but my instructor, teaching me all manner of woodcraft, and what was still better, surveying—a thing I've been a thousand times thankful for.

Thompson was 17 when he went to live with the Mohawks. He departed two years later and soon had a chance to use his surveying skills in the White Mountains. Thompson told the *Among the Clouds* reporter that he went to Bethlehem, New Hampshire, in 1835, “the year of the great Eastern land speculation.” There he found a job surveying land and estimating the amount of timber on it. The hunting and fishing were good around Bethlehem, so Thompson stayed. His decision probably also had something to do with Larinda Barrett, a young woman from Bethlehem whom he married in 1836.

Like most White Mountain guides, Thompson was a jack-of-all-trades, and he found many ways to support his family, which included six children by 1850. He farmed, surveyed, fished, hunted, trapped, worked for a lumber company, and even turned his cottage into a Bethlehem inn known as the Sportsman's Home. He made alpenstocks from native woods and concocted refreshing summer drinks out of roots and herbs. He sold both items to the guests at the big hotels in the Bethlehem area.

With the knowledge about the surrounding wilderness he had acquired as a surveyor, it's not surprising that Thompson also took up guiding. The territory he knew best was near



This commemorative illustration from an old book remembered him as a hunter and trapper from a bygone era in the White Mountains.

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Bethlehem, but he occasionally guided parties that went to the northernmost parts of New Hampshire and even into the wilds of Canada. Thompson had no qualms about traveling through unfamiliar areas. He claimed that he never needed a compass because he had “three sure ways” for getting a bearing in the woods: He found north by looking at the moss on a tree, which usually grows on the north side; he ascertained south by looking at a spruce tree, whose heaviest boughs grow on the south side; and he discovered east by looking at a hemlock whose topmost twig points in that direction.

Thompson started guiding in the 1840s and led tourists into the woods for almost 50 years. By the 1870s, people commonly referred to him as “Old Man” Thompson. He must have been unusually vigorous for his age, for an 1879 article published in *The White Mountain Echo and Tourists’ Register*, a Bethlehem summer newspaper, describes Thompson at age 65 as follows: “Straight as an arrow, his skin bronzed and browned with the heats of over 60 summers in the woods, his form strongly knit, and showing, even at his present age, a strength that few young men would care to cope with, and an eye clear and undimmed as a bird’s, he is the veritable beau ideal of a hunter and a guide.”

The author of these words did not identify himself, but it probably was Benjamin MacDonald, a client of Thompson’s and a reporter for *The White Mountain Echo*. In 1879 and 1880, MacDonald embarked on some “Echo Explorations” with Thompson, which he wrote up for the newspaper. At the time, the White Mountain region was a fashionable tourist destination, yet much of it was a pathless wilderness with numerous unnamed and unclimbed peaks. On MacDonald and Thompson’s forays into the Zealand River valley, the Pemigewasset forest, and uncharted areas near Franconia Notch, they frequently had to battle their way through a jungle of fallen trees and tangled brush. On these outings, MacDonald named some of the geographic features, including Bridal Veil Falls, the beautiful waterfall on the western side of the Cannon–Kinsman Range.

MacDonald’s articles in *The White Mountain Echo* paint an intriguing and often amusing picture of Thompson. “Thompson had provided himself with a good-sized meal bag,” he wrote, “and had cut a hole in the center. Into each end he packed away his share of our traps, and when he had loaded up, he thrust his head through the hole, and, as he expressed it, was ‘well balanced both before and behind.’” Thompson poked his head through the center of the sack, MacDonald noted. One end dangled down his front; the other down his back.

MacDonald listed the food and gear they took:

An iron fry-pan, firmly tied to a two-quart kettle lay in one place on the ground, two large loaves neatly and securely wrapped up were in another, while in various other spots in the vicinity were pork, doughnuts, packages of tea, salt, pepper and other sundries, and, to crown all, two curiously-shaped bundles looking suspiciously like bottles carefully reposed in the safest spot on the bank, and Thompson seemed to take great care of these. In explanation of their contents he said, "You see woods are pretty tough places, and sometimes you strike a good deal of decaying stuff that needs considerable disinfecting. These two bottles have got disinfectants in 'em."

MacDonald said Thompson could tell "wonderful stories" about the early settlers, wild animals, dangerous journeys in the hills and the "hidden beauties in their utmost recesses that are unknown to ordinary mankind." He also paid tribute to Thompson's talent for fishing and woodcraft:

It may be skill; it may be science, it may be anything but what I suppose it is, but the old man certainly has no superior that I know of in the trout securing line. If there is a fish to be hooked he will hook it, and I have seen him cast his worm into pools where others have fished but a few hours before and bring forth a speckled beauty weighing over half a pound with the most supreme indifference, as if it was a matter of common occurrence and unworthy of any comment. And then his ingenuity in the woods under circumstances that would completely nonplus any other man! Often in the most exasperating emergencies, when the rain poured in torrents and there was no possibility of devising shelter, he would improvise some wonderful structure, out of what seemed to me to be nothing, that would effectually shield us from the tempest's fury and keep us as dry and comfortable as if in our own house in Bethlehem.

As a guide, Thompson clearly had many excellent qualities. But he had one serious failing: He was more focused on his own needs than those of his clients. On one "Echo Exploration" in August 1879, Thompson was so determined to reach the day's destination—Zealand Pond—that he ignored the complaints of MacDonald, who had been sick before the outing. MacDonald pleaded with him to stop early, but Thompson insisted, "You've got to go it; two miles

further on before we get into camp. We've got to reach New Zealand Pond tonight." For MacDonald the trip was agonizing. He wrote:

The perspiration poured off me in streams, and my clothing was saturated. But the old man kept on ahead as if nothing unusual was occurring At last I could stand it no longer; the pain was unendurable, and the pack upon my shoulders seemed to weigh a ton. I called out that I would not budge another inch, that I could not move a foot farther. I might as well have expostulated with the Sphinx. Plod, plod, plod; crash, crash, crash. The old man pursued the even tenor of his way perfectly unconcerned. I got mad. I could see that if I was to reach camp at all, I must follow him, and I followed accordingly, for what seemed many miles, but which the old man afterwards assured me was only a couple of hundred rods . . . Never shall I forget the feeling of relief I experienced when Thompson called out: "Here we are! How's this for a camp?"

MacDonald obviously didn't begrudge the old man for his insensitivity. On that very trip, MacDonald chose the name Mount Thompson for the wooded peak that marks the high point between Mount Guyot and Zealand Notch.

In 1882, A.E. Scott, the AMC councillor of improvements, wanted to explore the Twin Mountain Range to determine the feasibility of constructing a path to its summits. Scott hired Thompson as the guide for a seven-day journey that went across the Twin Range, then down the valley to the East Branch of the Pemigewasset River and on to Crawford Notch. In addition to Scott and Thompson, the party included Martha Whitman and Dr. Laura Porter, two active women members of the AMC; Charlotte Ricker, a journalist who was writing about the outing for *The White Mountain Echo*; and a porter named Odin.

Scott wrote an account of the outing that was read at an AMC meeting and then published in *Appalachia*.¹ The report indicates that "Old Man" Thompson did not distinguish himself on the trip. Water problems plagued the party repeatedly in its first days. Springs and streams in the valleys provided the explorers with a good supply of clear, pure water, but when they followed routes along ridgelines, water was hard to find and everyone suffered from intense thirst. It didn't help matters that several times, Thompson and Odin, who were carrying water meant for the group, selfishly drank all of it themselves.

¹ "The Twin Mountain Range," *Appalachia*, April 1883, III no. 2, pages 107–121.

On another occasion, Thompson fell asleep when he should have been gathering wood for the evening campfire. Unable to rouse him, the group managed to get the fire going. Thompson didn't wake up until morning, and the indefatigable Laura Porter performed the usual task of a guide: tending the campfire throughout the night.

The trip was so arduous that, at one point, Thompson became discouraged and complained that he wanted to return to Bethlehem. But when the party reached the East Branch of the Pemigewasset River, he waded in and, with great delight, began catching fish. That evening, the frying pan was "filled and refilled many times with trout."

"A change has come over the old man; he has forgotten the discomforts of the mountains, and—so long as fish abound—he cares not for home," Scott wrote. "He regales us with stories of the woods, in which he is the principal actor, and our camp is not silent until a late hour."

Thompson fell from grace again the following June, when Scott hired him to cut a path over the summits of North and South Twin Mountains and on to Mount Guyot. Thompson and Odin cleared the way to South Twin, then ran into some thick scrub and refused to go any further. Scott had to employ other woodsmen to complete the job.

In 1881—a year before the Twin Mountain trip—the name Mount Thompson appeared on a revised edition of Henry Francis Walling's *Map of the White Mountains* (J. Bien, 1877). But this was the last time that Thompson would enjoy cartographical recognition.

Could Thompson's self-centered behavior on the Twin Mountain trip have had something to do with the Mount Thompson name change? Perhaps. It certainly didn't help his reputation with AMC members. When AMC member Eugene B. Cook looked at Walling's map, he resolved to explore the Zealand area and climb the newly named mountain. He made this trip in August of 1888. In Cook's exploration report, he referred to the peak as the "so-called 'Mount Thompson,'" an indication that he disapproved of the name. Cook's report was read at an AMC meeting that December and apparently the members shared Cook's opinion. According to notes in *Appalachia*,² a discussion followed in which the desirability of retaining the name Mount Thompson was "questioned by several and defended by no one."

The club members' lack of approval was significant, but the extensive logging in the Zealand area may have had even more to do with the name change. In the 1880s and early 1890s, the infamous James E. Henry, known to

² "Proceedings of the Club," *Appalachia*, May 1889, V no. 4, page 354.

some as the “wood butcher,” cut down everything in the Zealand forest, took out the marketable timber and left the rest as slash. All it took was a spark from one of the locomotives on Henry’s logging railroad or an improperly tended campfire or a careless smoker to cause the slash to erupt in flames. By the time Thompson passed away at age 95 in 1909, two great fires had ravaged the region that encompassed the former Mount Thompson. The land was a scorched and blackened wasteland. For the first two decades of the twentieth century, few people went there. The forest eventually came back to life, but by that time, the name Mount Thompson had faded from memory.

In 1923, the AMC constructed the Zealand Ridge Trail—today part of the Twinway—between Mount Guyot and Zealand Notch. That same year, the AMC Committee on Nomenclature, which had the power to choose names, recommended that “the mountain mass immediately west of Zealand Notch be known as Zealand Mountain.” With no views from its summit, few climbed it. Only after 1957, when the AMC founded its White Mountain Four Thousand Footer Club, did peakbaggers begin seeking out the former Mount Thompson, and most of them had no idea it had been called that, nor who “Old Man” Thompson was.

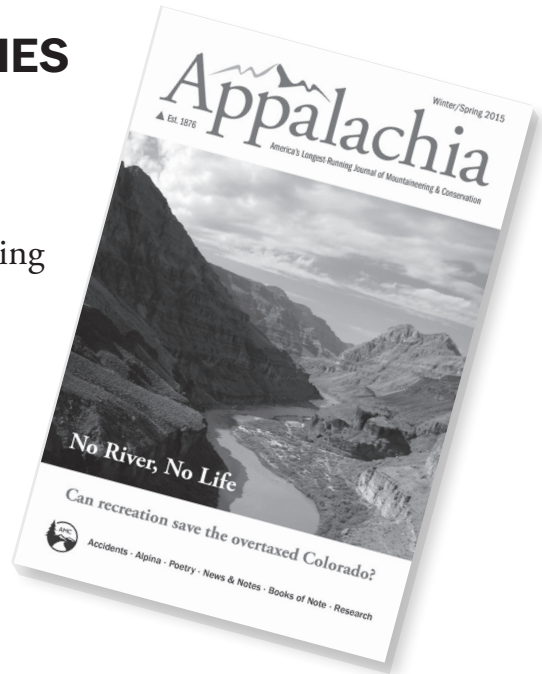
JULIE BOARDMAN is the author of *Born for Mountains* (Amazon Digital Services, 2010), and *When Women and Mountains Meet: Adventures in the White Mountains* (Durand Press, 2001). She’s written many articles about nature and other topics and hiked extensively in the Whites.

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