

2015

## The Great Gulf: Evolution of a Wilderness

David Govatski

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



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Govatski, David (2015) "The Great Gulf: Evolution of a Wilderness," *Appalachia*: Vol. 66: No. 1, Article 11.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol66/iss1/11>

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).

# The Great Gulf

*Evolution of a wilderness*

**David Govatski**



THE STORY STARTS LONG AGO IN THE SUMMER OF 1823. THE name *Great Gulf* is thought to have originated from Ethan Allen Crawford from a statement he made and recorded in Lucy Crawford's book *The History of the White Mountains* (Hoyt, Fogg & Donham, 1845). Ethan and his companions lost their way in the fog on the summit of Mount Washington, Crawford wrote. They wandered around, coming to "the edge of a great gulf." Crawford also called it the Gulf of Mexico in that classic book. John Spaulding continued to call it the Gulf of Mexico in his *Guide to the Historical Relics of the White Mountains* (Nathaniel Noyes, 1855). Eventually, the name Great Gulf won out.

The Great Gulf is a large glacial cirque complex<sup>1</sup> located between Mount Washington and Mount Adams. The depth of the Great Gulf ranges from 1,100 to 1,600 feet. Recent research and interpretation points to active mountain glaciers in it after the melting of the late Wisconsin glaciation roughly 14,000 years ago. The West Branch of the Peabody River with its countless cascades and waterfalls drains the area. Two half-acre tarns are found within the borders, the first being Spaulding Lake at the foot of the Great Gulf headwall. The second is Star Lake in the col between Mounts Adams and Madison.

### Warren Hart's Trail-Building Spree

The Great Gulf's steep headwall, boulder fields, and stream crossings discouraged most early trail builders. Benjamin F. Osgood, a guide at the Glen House in Pinkham Notch, built the first trail into the Great Gulf in 1881, marking the nearly six-mile route with ax blazes from the Glen House to Spaulding Lake. This route fell into disrepair quickly and soon was hard to follow. Thus, the Great Gulf remained one of the last trailless locations in the White Mountains during the big hiking boom of the late 1800s—

---

<sup>1</sup> A *cirque* is a bowl-shaped depression with steep walls carved by an alpine glacier on the side of a mountain.

*Trail builder Warren Hart helps Frank Allen Burt up the rugged Six Husbands Trail on Mount Jefferson in October 1910. This straight-up climbing is the norm on most trails Hart blazed through what became the Great Gulf Wilderness of the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Burt later wrote The Story of Mount Washington (Dartmouth Publications, 1960). The Six Husbands Trail originally started at Tuckerman Junction and included what is today the Alpine Garden and Wamsutta Trails.*

GUY SHOREY/COURTESY OF THE AMC LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

until the incredible trail-building spree of 1908 to 1910. The tireless and enthusiastic Appalachian Mountain Club Councillor of Trails Warren Hart explored the Great Gulf and became determined to build a new system of trails through it, providing alternative routes to the highest peaks in the White Mountains.

Hart inspired many volunteers to work with him in the Great Gulf's rugged terrain, marking a system of trails. Their first task in 1908 was restoring the Great Gulf Trail all the way to the rim. They then built the Star Lake Trail from the Madison–Adams col to the summit of Mount Adams.

In 1909, trail workers built the spectacular Six Husbands Trail, named for Queen Weetamoo of the Pocasset Tribe, who legend has it married six times.<sup>2</sup> The Six Husbands Trail climbed 2,050 feet in 2.3 miles up the incredibly steep buttress of Jefferson's Knee. The Adams Slide Trail rose more than 2,300 feet from the floor of the Great Gulf in only 1.25 miles. The tireless workers also cut the Chandler Brook Trail to what was then called the Mount Washington Carriage Road (now the Auto Road) near the 4.5-mile mark. Hart and his crew built the first Great Gulf Camp, a three-sided shelter, in 1909. It served as the base camp for the volunteers.

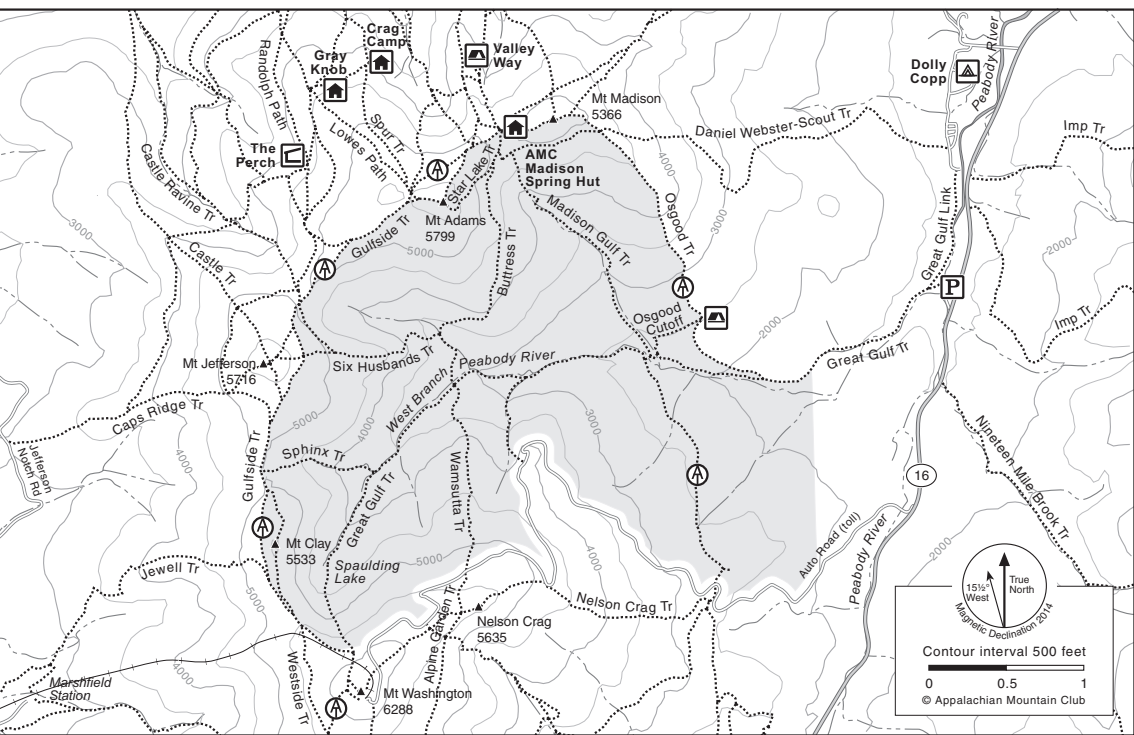
In 1910, the trail-building spree continued with the construction of the Wamsutta and Madison Gulf trails and Edmands Col to the Six Husbands Trail cutoff. This marked the final year of Hart's efforts in the Great Gulf. Randolph Mountain Club volunteers built the Sphinx Trail in 1913. The only trail from this marathon of early path-marking that hasn't survived is the Adams Slide Trail. Its falling rocks posed such a hazard that it was closed in 1971.

Hart himself might have written the *Boston Evening Transcript* article published August 25, 1909, "The Great Gulf Opened." Its sub-headline was, "White Mountain Ravine now rediscovered, and the discovery there of the finest water scenery in the White Mountains."

The newspaper writer, whoever it was, took a jibe at Hart's rival, the famous trail builder J. Rayner Edmands, who carefully graded rocks in his trails, such as the Gulfside Trail and the trail up Mount Pleasant (now Mount Eisenhower). The new Great Gulf trails crashed over giant boulders; no grading there, the newspaper writer bragged. "Unlike most of the paths

---

<sup>2</sup> John Greenleaf Whittier used the female Indian Chief Weetamoo as the heroine for his 1892 poem "The Bridal of Pennacook." Her first husband's name was Wamsutta and a trail in the Great Gulf is named for him. See <http://www.poemhunter.com/best-poems/john-greenleaf-whittier/the-bridal-of-pennacook/>.



*Between 1908 and 1910, AMC Councillor of Trails Warren Hart and his volunteers quickly built steep trails through the previously inaccessible Great Gulf area. Most of these trails exist today. The routes included the Great Gulf Trail, Six Husbands Trail, Madison Gulf Trail, Wamsutta Trail, Star Lake Trail, and Alpine Garden Trail.*

LARRY GARLAND/AMC

in the White Mountains, these trails have not been cut to avoid obstacles, or to smooth them away as much as possible, they were not designed for the pastime of curious women; and they have not been made like to the superfluous boulevards of piled stone work that a perverted energy has built here and there upon the mountains. . . .”

The success of the Hart’s trail-building spree convinced the AMC to convene its August Camp of 1910 deep within the Great Gulf. From July 29 to August 13 that year, 42 AMC members tented and set out on adventures in what the club called the most inaccessible location ever picked for August Camp. Leaders built a special tote road from the Half Way House on the Carriage Road (today’s Auto Road) down to the camp so that the August Camp crew could carry suitcases and other gear down. The camp even had a





*Warren Hart, standing center with a cup on his belt, enthusiastically led groups like this one in a spree between 1908 and 1910 that transformed the impenetrable rock tumble of the Great Gulf into a major hiking area. This photo shows the new Great Gulf Shelter, which no longer exists.* AMC LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

phone line. The weather was described as “unfortunate, with clouds and rain almost every day, with heavy showers and much thunder at night. The storm of August 4 continued for more than 24 hours.”

### **1916: U.S. Forest Service Buys Great Gulf**

Much of the White Mountain region was public domain land owned by the state of New Hampshire since 1788 when it became a state, but the state sold the last 172,000 acres of it, including the Great Gulf, in 1867, when it needed money for schools. Governor Walter Harriman and the New Hampshire Legislature agreed to sell the land to Colonel Hazen Bedell of Colebrook, New Hampshire, for \$26,000 or 15 cents an acre. Bedell sold it to logging companies.

## The Logging Era

The widespread harvesting of the forests in the White Mountains starting in the 1870s with subsequent forest fires led to a public outcry and clamoring for the protection of the White Mountains only a few decades after the land had left public ownership. The AMC, Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, and numerous other groups led the campaign to protect the White Mountains. Finally in 1911, the Weeks Act (named for its sponsor, John Wingate Weeks) passed. This allowed the federal government to purchase land from private owners for the creation of a national forest and for cooperative forest fire control with the states.

In early 1914, the government acquired the first parcels for the future White Mountain National Forest. The Conway Lumber Company owned the land in the Great Gulf. That year, specialists from the U.S. Forest Service appraised the Great Gulf at \$11.62 an acre, according to a fifteen-page report by Forest Examiner Dean Martin. Some of the most valuable remaining spruce timber stood next to Great Gulf Camp, the AMC shelter in the bottom of the Great Gulf. Martin recommended that the USFS offer \$8.50 an acre as part of a larger purchase of 53,416 acres. The lower part of the Great Gulf had already been logged for the large spruce, but most of the area remained as old-growth forest because of limited accessibility for horse logging. And so on March 6, 1916, the federal government bought the 5,552-acre Great Gulf area for \$8.50 an acre—a total of \$47,192. (That would be the same as \$192.32 per acre or a total of \$1.06 million today.)

## The End of Logging

In 1919, a federal forester, William Logan Hall, wrote to his supervisor in Washington, “Acting under your instructions, I have endeavored to work out a practical plan for retaining the original forest growth on the crucial areas of privately owned land in the White Mountain Purchase Unit. In view of their essential nature as watershed cover and in view of their recreational importance, a determined effort should be made to retain their forest growth on areas of considerable size.”

Early foresters with the fledgling White Mountain National Forest developed informal or “gentlemen’s agreements” to restrict or prohibit logging along certain trails or especially scenic areas. The term for these special places was *restricted area* and came before such terms as *primitive*, *wild*, or *wilderness*.

The first area was set aside in 1928, when the residents of Waterville Valley petitioned the federal government to protect the Greeley Ponds region from a proposed logging railroad route. This area was protected under an informal agreement until it was designated a scenic area with special regulations in 1961.

In 1930, Edward Behre from the research arm of the USFS convinced Forest Supervisor James Scott to establish a natural area in the White Mountains to protect an uncut tract of original forest cover. A 510-acre area that best met the requirements was chosen on the slopes of Whiteface Mountain near the town of Wonalancet. This area became known as the “Bowl Natural Area” and later renamed the “Bowl Research Natural Area.” This was the first area to move beyond an informal agreement to a written designation.

### **Randolph Mountain Club Proposes Great Gulf Wild Area**

A committee of three unnamed members of the RMC asked the Forest Service in the summer of 1951 to consider establishing a Great Gulf Wild Area in the Androscoggin Ranger District. These were their reasons:

1. The Great Gulf is at present a spot of natural beauty. In its upper reaches considerable old-growth spruce still stands.
2. It could easily be defined as the watershed of the West Branch of the Peabody River.
3. It is easily accessible by trail for those who wish access, yet far enough from roads and communities to preserve the impression of remoteness.
4. It is an area not easily logged, the present remaining spruce giving evidence of this fact.
5. The acreage involved (approximately 5,000 acres) is not so great as to seriously curtail their policy of selective cutting.

The committee wrote, “It is our hope that this Great Gulf Area may be preserved forever in its natural wild state so that generations hence may see for themselves a sample of what was once commonplace in the White Mountains.”

The Forest Service in the 1950s already used more than two dozen designations for special management areas. These included what the federal government officially labeled *Wilderness* and *Wild* and *Primitive* areas. The term *Wilderness Area* originally meant a tract of at least 100,000 acres characterized by primitive conditions of transportation and habitation. The term *Wild Area* indicated that the area had the same character as a Wilderness



except that it was smaller and between 5,000 and 100,000 acres in area. Other designated areas included *Natural*, *Scenic*, and *Virgin*.

The USFS studied for years whether to name the Great Gulf a Wild Area. Officials considered these complexities: Hikers went through the area, it had a shelter, and the land was adjacent to the popular Mount Washington Auto Road and a military jet engine test facility near the summit. The USFS preferred a designation of Scenic Area because it most closely matched the reality of the Great Gulf.

### **Politics and What to Call It**

The problem of designating special restricted areas was deep and conflicted with the guiding principles since the early days of the USFS and its first chief, Gifford Pinchot. The conflict in the environmental community was and still is between the “conservationists” that promoted the wise or proper use of natural resources versus the “preservationists” that wanted to protect nature from use. For the utilitarian conservation side, the slogan Pinchot liked was “the greatest good, for the greatest number, for the long run.”

This “greatest good” dilemma continues. The real problem for managers is expressed by this question: “Can the White Mountain National Forest be administered to provide the greatest benefit to the greatest number of people in the long run by the establishment of restricted areas such as the proposed Great Gulf Wild Area?”<sup>3</sup>

The RMC’s proposal in 1951 was believed to be the first application for a special area received from an outside organization in the nearly 40-year history of the White Mountain National Forest. Before that, the ideas came from within the USFS. This application opened the door for more requests from other organizations, including the AMC.

The decision on Wild Area status took eight years. Richard E. McArdle, chief of the USFS, designated it on October 30, 1959. Americans were starting to advocate for stronger protection of such areas, but some conservation leaders worried that the government might undo the special protections offered for Wild Areas as easily as they designated them. This growing sentiment turned into a widespread consensus for permanent protection by Congress.

---

<sup>3</sup> An official expressed this question in a November 1951 internal USFS document, “The Establishment of Restricted Areas such as Wilderness, Natural or Primitive Areas on the White Mountain National Forest.”



*Children posed with a roadside sign describing the designation of the Great Gulf as a Wild Area in 1962, three years after the designation. The Wild Area status lasted only five years, until the Great Gulf became a Wilderness Area in 1964.*

JACK GODDEN/U.S. FOREST SERVICE

And so, in 1964, Congress passed the Wilderness Act, and President Johnson signed it on September 3. The Great Gulf Wild Area was automatically reclassified as the Great Gulf Wilderness as a result of Section 3 of the Wilderness Act. Any area previously classified as “canoe, wild or wilderness” with a small “w” became Wilderness. The Boundary Waters Canoe Area in Minnesota added Wilderness to its name.

Wilderness enthusiasts celebrated the immediate creation of 9.1 million acres of Wilderness with the stroke of a pen in 1964. The cover of the 1964 issue of *Living Wilderness* magazine (the publication of The Wilderness Society) featured the Great Gulf Wilderness. Sadly, Howard Zahniser, the relatively unknown leader of The Wilderness Society and primary author of the act, died four months before it passed. Today, the National Wilderness Preservation System is an enduring resource with more than 110 million acres of land that an increasing population can use and cherish.

### **Even Now, the Untrammelled Gulf**

The Wilderness Act of 1964 created a legal definition of Wilderness.<sup>4</sup> Many people mistakenly believe that having a Wilderness means one just leaves the land alone—doing nothing to it. In fact, managing a Wilderness like the Great Gulf requires much work behind the scenes to maintain the five qualities of Wilderness character. The land must be *untrammelled*, a term Zahniser coined that means people don’t use the land in a way that changes it.<sup>5</sup> It must be “undeveloped.” The USFS removed two trail shelters from the Great Gulf in 1976. Recently, when aggressive black bears began taking food from backpackers, land managers reluctantly installed metal “bear boxes” for

---

<sup>4</sup> “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor that does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected to preserve its natural conditions and (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.” (Public Law 88-577, September 3, 1964).

<sup>5</sup> Exactly what trammeling on Wilderness land means provides land managers with plenty of subjects for debate.

storing food. The land must have a “natural character.” The USFS no longer stocks fish in Spaulding Lake. It’s unlikely it would ever spray chemicals to kill insects. Campfires aren’t allowed because this practice involves gathering wood from the forest.

A Wilderness must offer “outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.” Protecting this quality has proven difficult because the Great Gulf was a popular area for summer camp groups. Limiting group sizes to ten to protect solitude meant that even elite summer camps had to find other areas where their larger group sizes were permitted. A proposal for a trail in Jefferson Ravine was withdrawn because this was one of the last trailless ravines, and a trail here would eliminate an opportunity for an unconfined recreational experience more commonly known as *bushwhacking*.

Finally, any “unique attributes” in the Great Gulf and other Wildernesses must be preserved. The Great Gulf is full of such attributes. They include Arctic plants and wildlife such as the American pipit. Much of the Great Gulf is old-growth forest and contains examples of what the pre-settlement red spruce forest looked like. The Great Gulf is unique in another way: It is below Mount Washington, the mountain known for the world’s worst weather.

Yes, the Great Gulf Wilderness is worth far more than the original price of \$8.50 an acre. Even those who have not hiked in the Great Gulf derive satisfaction and a sense of happiness knowing that such a wild place exists and is fully protected. Those hikers who clamber up the Six Husbands Trail or other trails know the full value of an experience in the Great Gulf Wilderness.

---

DAVID GOVATSKI, a retired forester for the USFS, writes about forest conservation issues. He lives with his wife, Kathi, in Jefferson, New Hampshire, where they hike and ski. He enjoys visiting wilderness areas including the Arctic, alpine summits from California to Nevada, and the subtropical wilderness in Florida’s Everglades.

---

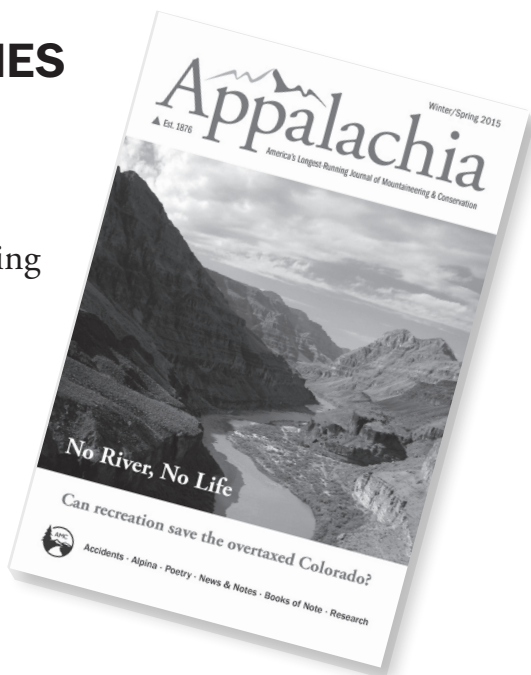
*"I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features."—Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber*

---

## 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).