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Darby Field, 1642

Searching in vain for Lake Champlain?

Tony Goodwin



IN JUNE OF 1642, DARBY FIELD, AN APPARENTLY ILLITERATE RESIDENT of Durham, New Hampshire, set out up the Saco River with several American Indians on what would be an eighteen-day expedition. At an Indian village at what is now Glen, several other American Indians joined Field's party as local guides into the daunting and unknown (at least to Field) wilderness beyond. Continuing up the Saco River, at some still-disputed point, Field turned and headed for the summit of Mount Washington. The local guides refused to follow, but at least one of his original companions continued with him to the summit. Starting with Lucy Crawford's *History of the White Mountains* (1846), White Mountain historians have agreed that Darby Field clearly deserves credit for making the first ascent of Mount Washington. There is also general agreement that he made his ascent (and another one later the same summer) at least 80 years before another ascent and 142 years before the well-documented Belknap–Cutler expedition in 1784.

Here the agreement ends. Historians have continued to speculate with numerous theories about both Field's route and his motives. Recently, however, Stephen Sulavik, an Adirondack historian researching Samuel de Champlain's journeys, may have serendipitously provided the best answer yet as to Field's motives.

In *Forest and Crag* (Appalachian Mountain Club Books, 1989), Laura and Guy Waterman analyzed the evidence contained in a letter written by Thomas Gorges shortly after Field's pioneering ascent. Gorges was serving as deputy governor of the province of Maine on behalf of his cousin, Ferdinando Gorges, who with John Mason held the charter to the province of Laconia, of which Maine was a part. Written on June 29, 1642, the information in the letter appears to have come directly from Field shortly after his return from his climb. The letter, discovered only a few short years before in 1984, provided much additional information about Field's ascent and allowed the Watermans to speculate credibly that Field's route took him over mounts Eisenhower, Franklin, and Monroe, and past Lakes of the Clouds before reaching the summit of Washington. The most salient bits of information contained in this letter are:

This is a portion of Samuel de Champlain's 1632 map that Darby Field probably studied before climbing what later was named Mount Washington in 1642. The author believes that Field climbed because he wanted to get to Lake Champlain, which really wasn't as far east as depicted on the map (see arrow). COURTESY OF STEPHEN SULAVIK AND THE BRITISH LIBRARY

This much I certify of according as it was sent to me by him that discovered them [the white hills] whose name was Darby Feild [sic] of pascatqua who about a month since with 3 or 4 Indians undertook the voyage . . . hence he travailed some 80 miles as he sayeth & came to a mountain, went over it, & a 2d & a 3d, at length . . . going to a rocke [sic] that was at the end of that which he judged 2 miles high, very steep, yet he adventured up, but one Indian accompyng him, the most being fearfull. At the top it was not above 20 foot square, wher he sate with much fear some 5 hours time the clouds passing under him making a terrible noise against the mountains. Thence he discovered some 80 miles farther a very (*glorious*) white mountain & between two other great mountains as he judged some 100 miles. . . . & at the foot of them were two litle ponds, 1 of curious red colour, the other black.¹

Having pieced together a plausible route taken by Field, the Watermans admitted, however, that they still knew “even less about *why* Field climbed.” The Watermans concluded that most likely Field’s motivation was to find “fabulous treasures” on the mountain as the Spaniards had done in the mountains of Central and South America. He did return with what he thought were diamonds but which turned out to be quartz and mica.

The Watermans wrote that Field probably was not out just for the adventure, although they left open the possibility that Field had set out to climb the mountain because he had seen it from the coast. They wrote that he could have “had other original motives but that as he got closer to the mountain his purpose centered on an ascent, which on its accomplishment became the most important event of the trip.” Their least likely stated motivation was to find “a route to the fur country that was then enriching Quebec traders.”²

Based on the new information provided by Sulavik, however, it appears Field did not climb Mount Washington for either adventure or treasure. Employed by the Laconia Company, which had a charter for the province of Laconia, Field was most likely looking for a route to Lake Champlain as it was described in the charter and shown on contemporary maps. There, Field hoped, on behalf of the Laconia Company, to establish a lucrative fur trade with the American Indians.

Sulavik’s book, *Adirondack: Of Indians and Mountains 1535–1838* (2005), provides considerable detail about the Laconia Company, founded in 1629

¹ Waterman, p. 12.

² Waterman, p. 13.

by John Mason and Ferdinando Gorges. Much of the information comes from a book, *America Painted to the Life*, written by Ferdinando Gorges and published by his grandson in 1658. The book describes how in November 1629, the Council of New England, chartered by the English Crown, granted Mason and Gorges a charter for the “Province of Laconia” (region of lakes). Sulavik describes this vast tract as “the land inhabited by the Iroquois from the eastern half of Lake Ontario eastward to Lake Champlain and northward to the St. Lawrence River.”³

Living in England at the time they were granted this charter, Mason and Gorges surely had only the sketchiest information about the land they had been granted. The only maps available at the time were two drawn by de Champlain in 1612 and 1613 and one by the Dutch explorer Adriaen Block that was probably influenced by Champlain’s maps. All three erroneously placed Lake Champlain in eastern New England, less than 100 miles from the coast, and possibly accessible by a water route.⁴ (These errors persisted for many years with a map published as late as 1672 placing Lake Champlain east of the Connecticut River and showing it as the source of the Merrimack River!)

Sulavik speculates that this erroneous geographical information, along with “Champlain’s mention of a lucrative fur trade in the ‘vicinity’ of Lake Champlain during his brief 1629 period of captivity in London, were likely major influences in the formation of the Laconia Company and the establishment of the Province of Laconia.”⁶

Based on the maps then available, Mason and Gorges had Captain Walter Neale set sail from England in the spring of 1630 to locate “the large Lake Champlain in the newly granted territory of Laconia.” Neale searched for three years, apparently including a foray up the Charles River from Boston, because Champlain’s early maps depicted this river as coming close to Lake Champlain. At the end of three years, however, Neale was recalled to England as the “Laconia enterprise had become bankrupt due to failure in both the inland fur trade and the coastal fishing industry”⁷

³ Sulavik, pp. 72–73.

⁴ Sulavik’s book (pp. 122–127) reproduces three maps, one from 1612, one from 1613, and a 1632 rendering reprinted with permission here on page 62.

⁵ Sulavik (pp. 146–147) reproduces the following map: *English, cartographer not identified. A Map of New England and New York, 1672* (Courtesy of the Sterling Memorial Library [map collection], Yale University).

⁶ Sulavik, p. 74.

⁷ Sulavik, p. 99.

Despite the bankruptcy, Mason and Gorges continued in their efforts to develop and settle this part of New England. Before he died in 1635, Mason founded the city of Portsmouth and the colony of New Hampshire, naming them after his native residence, Portsmouth, Hampshire County, England. Upon Mason's death, Gorges became the sole owner of the Laconia Company, receiving in 1639 a grant that extended his holdings farther inland and designated it the "Province of Maine."⁸

So, still very much involved with his holdings in New England (and presumably possessing Samuel de Champlain's 1632 map),⁹ Ferdinando Gorges wrote in 1642 what appears to be the "clincher" about Darby Field's motives: "Such an impression had the claims of Laconia made on the minds of our first settlers, that Neal [without the "e" but likely the same Captain Walter Neale] set out on foot in company with [Henry] Jocelyn and Darby Field, to discover these beautiful lakes, and settle a trade with the Indians by pinnance, imagining the distance to be short of 100 miles."¹⁰

Here is the confirmation that it was the desire to establish a trade with the American Indians that motivated this expedition into the mountains.

Even knowing that, we do not learn anything more about that expedition from Ferdinando. Indeed, Ferdinando may well be referring to Field's second ascent during the summer of 1642, since the Thomas Gorges account makes it appear that Field was the only English settler in that second party. So now we turn back to Thomas Gorges's "after action" report that the Watermans have so carefully analyzed as to the probable route up Mount Washington. Earlier historians had suggested Field went over both Boott Spur and Montalban Ridge, but the Watermans ruled that out. Field reported that he went over three summits. He mentioned the Lakes of the Clouds and the Great Gulf. This suggests he was on the western side of the range. He did not mention Tuckerman Ravine, a feature that would have been very prominent had he ascended via either Boott Spur or Montalban Ridge.¹¹ Likely making Tuckerman Ravine especially prominent in June 1642 would have been the extensive snowfield (maybe even glacier) because he climbed during the Little Ice Age.

⁸ Sulavik, pp. 98–99.

⁹ The map: *Samuel de Champlain. Carte de la nouvelle france, 1632*, appears in Sulavik's book. A section of it is reproduced here on page 62.

¹⁰ Sulavik, p. 99 (quoting Ferdinando Gorges from his book *America Painted to the Life*, published in 1658).

¹¹ Waterman, p. 12.

So we can be reasonably sure that Field and company continued up the Saco River past Glen and Bartlett. Now the question is, when did he decide to climb a mountain to look for Lake Champlain? According to Ferdinando Gorges, they were “imagining the distance to be short of 100 miles.” Following the twists and turns of the Saco River, they estimated that by the time they passed Bartlett they had (according to Thomas Gorges) traveled 80 miles. Thus, as the Watermans speculated, the decision certainly could have been made when they came to the view up the Dry River valley, a view that clearly indicates that the valley is a route to some high mountains.

Arguing against that route, however, is the apparent presence of lower-level clouds that day that would have obscured the view of the higher mountains. Equally likely in my view, Field’s group would have continued on to find the source of the Saco River, and then struggled up the final steep pitch to Crawford Notch. From a natural clearing somewhere in the broad Bretton Woods valley, it would have likely been obvious, even with clouds around, that significantly higher ground lay to the east. An additional reason to decide to climb to a high point for a view would have been no sign of any large lake in that flat expanse. Further encouraging Field to start an ascent would be the likely absence of snow on the western slopes compared with snow appearing on the eastern-facing slopes at the head of the Dry River valley.

From the vicinity of Crawford Notch, several possible routes would have taken Field over three summits before he finally summited Mount Washington. He could have started with Mount Pierce and then on to Mounts Eisenhower and Franklin without climbing or counting Mount Monroe. He could also have started with Eisenhower as the Watermans suggested he did coming up from the Dry River.

Field’s description of the summit view appears to describe the Green Mountains of Vermont “some 80 miles farther . . . & two other great mountains as he judged some 100 miles.” It seems unlikely that he would have noted the Adirondacks past the Green Mountains, so perhaps he misjudged the Franconia Range (which would certainly have looked quite white) to be 80 miles away and the mountains he judged to be 100 miles away were the Green Mountains. More significant, the apparent presence of lower-level clouds that day would have made it difficult to conclusively say that Lake Champlain wasn’t somewhere in between these mountains. This lack of a completely clear view may help explain the two later expeditions that same summer.

Of these later ascents, we have precious little information other than that Neal and Jocelyn apparently joined Field on his second ascent. He may have taken the same route as his first ascent. Or, with different snow conditions and greater knowledge, they may have taken a different route. The motivation for Thomas Gorges and another magistrate, Richard Vines, to make a third ascent that summer is even less clear. Perhaps they were the true adventurers who became intrigued by the accounts of this rugged and forbidding land with steep rocks, howling winds, colored ponds, and expansive views. Equally likely, given Gorges's integral role in the Laconia Company, they wanted one last independent confirming look that Lake Champlain was not where it was shown on the map. Thus, after 13 years, they would have to finally admit that a lucrative fur trade would not be part of the company's business.

Furthermore, after these three initial ascents, historians know of no reported climbing activity in the White Mountains until 1725, as the Watermans noted. Climbing for sport and adventure would not take hold until the Crawfords constructed the first trail up Washington nearly 175 years later.

Finally, almost four centuries later, this new evidence provides a better answer to one of the persistent questions in White Mountain history. And who would have thought that the answer would come from a history of the Adirondacks—a region with a much shorter climbing history? Mount Marcy, for instance, was not even known to be the highest mountain in New York State until 1836, nearly twenty years after the Crawfords had built the first trail up Mount Washington.

Sources

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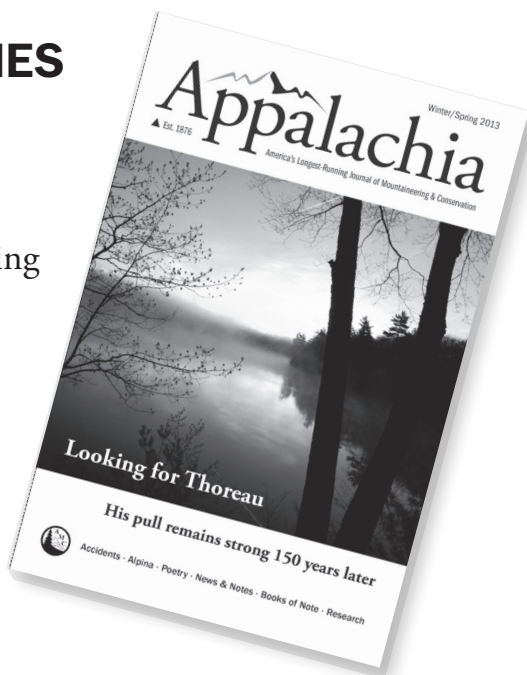
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