

In Search of the Big Boulder



▲ Closeup of the suspended boulder in the Flume at Franconia Notch. In the late 1800's the boulder was a more popular attraction for photographers than the Old Man of Mountain profile.

◀ A portion of the Flume as we know it today is visited annually by more than 250,000 people during their visit to the White Mountains Region.

BY DOUGLAS A. PHILBROOK

Mr. Philbrook is manager of the Mount Washington Auto Road and a noted collector of White Mountains artifacts and memorabilia.

Among the most enchanting natural wonders offered to the world by the White Mountains Region of New Hampshire was the massive boulder suspended in the Flume. The Flume is an 800-foot-long natural gorge, 20 feet wide with 60 to 70-foot granite walls rising perpendicularly from Flume Brook, located near the entrance to Franconia Notch State Park in Lincoln, New Hampshire. To countless thousands of nineteenth-century visitors, this phenomenon caused a degree of amazement nearly equal to the awe they felt on viewing the Old Man of the Mountains. Guidebooks of the period gave these two marvels "equal time," while collections of old souvenirs reveal both subjects shared similar popularity.

Unfortunately, this wonderful example of nature's oddities is no longer with us. In the catastrophic storm of June 20, 1883 the huge boulder was swept downstream. In more recent years, historical writers have repeatedly concluded that the boulder was never again found. Most recently, no less qualified and highly respected an historian than the late Mrs. Eva Speare reported in her *Manchester Union* column, "... a terrific tempest flooded the Flume causing this boulder, weighing many tons, to crash, probably into many fragments. No trace of it has been discovered." Such reports may very well be in error.

Countering the current belief that the boulder was forever lost are at least two reports by qualified authorities. Henry M. Burt, founder and editor of Mt. Washington's summit newspaper, *Among The Clouds*, enjoys a reputation for his dedicated interest in White Mountains affairs and his highly accurate recording of them. In the same year the

boulder fell, Mr. Burt gave an account of the incident in a now scarce booklet titled *The Franconia Avalanche*: "The boulder, which for centuries has been suspended in the Flume, was dislodged and taken nearly one thousand feet down the brook and left on the south bank." Again he wrote, "A little further up the stream toward the Flume on the south bank lies the famous boulder which was so curiously suspended for an unknown period. It is a thousand feet below its former resting place." Mr. Burt ended with, "A suitably inscribed tablet will hereafter serve to identify it."

In 1923, another little-known pamphlet was published by the Profile House. Its author was Col. C.H. Greenleaf, who for many years was actively associated with the Profile and Flume Hotels as part owner, manager and company president. To him goes the credit for being the first to organize a work project to help preserve the Old Man after recognizing the

Continued on next page



danger of destruction threatening it. Col. Greenleaf visited the Flume immediately following the great storm and may have been the first person to discover that the boulder was gone. He wrote, "I realized we must find the old boulder, which was quickly done, and within a week I found tourists were chipping it for souvenirs, which necessitated building a picket fence around it."

Today no record of the boulder's whereabouts exists. Finding it again would be an interesting challenge. ■

◀ *The famed boulder at the Flume in the 1880's as seen from above the falls. The walkway terminated at a point just beyond the boulder as shown. The boulder was dislodged by a catastrophic flood on June 20, 1883.*