

Inside the Summit House

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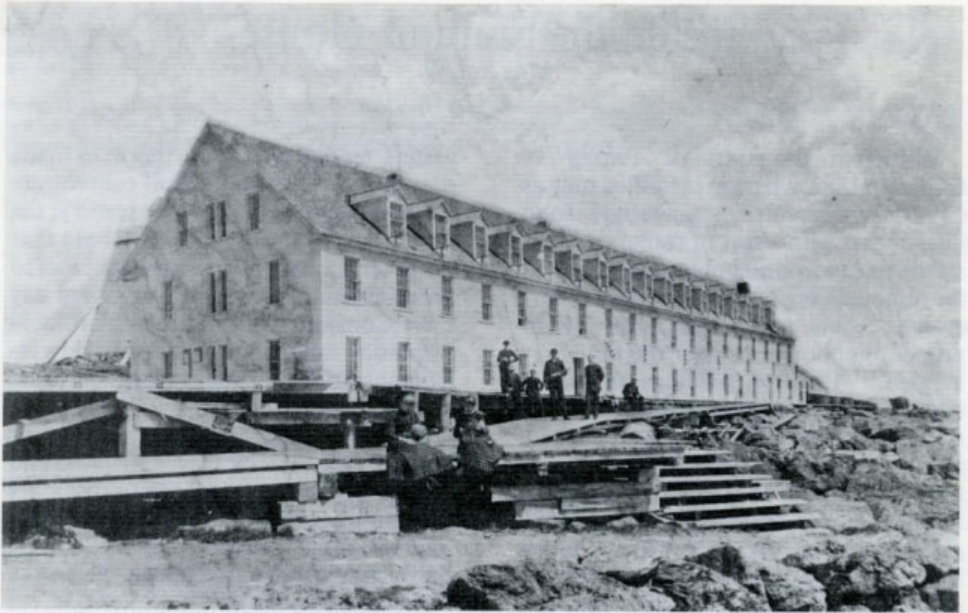
Writing to the editor of *Among the Clouds* in 1882, a person identified only as C.W.T. wrote, "It is strange how soon time invests with a sort of romantic interest the most inconsiderable occurrences in the mountain region, and how soon many events become semi-mythical for want of proper attention at or near the time they happen." Perhaps buildings as well as events follow that pattern, and now a century later, despite the presence there of a daily newspaper, remarkably little is known of Mount Washington's vanished Summit House and its residents. Many photographs of the plain exterior taken from the Stage Office or the Lizzie Bourne monument exist, but very few interior pictures have come down through the years. A few brief written sketches of the hotel were left by Kilbourne, Drake, and *Among the Clouds*, but for the most part

writers tended to ignore the man-made structures of the summit and concentrate on the sublime nobility of the scenery; the tacit assumption seems to have been that the hotel was an unremarkable adjunct to the mountain, accessible to anyone at any time. Consideration of this lack of documentation might cause contemporary inhabitants to ask if similar events or places are overlooked today.

Recently, a photograph of the office, or lobby, of the Summit House surfaced that gives another glimpse into this prosaic yet fascinating building. The image is a 7½" by 9¾" cabinet photograph marked on the back with a stamp reading "S. Towle, Photographer, Old Orchard, Maine". It shows, from right to left, a corner of a wood or coal parlor stove, a large souvenir counter with security screens hinged from the ceiling, a corridor, a telegraph office



Interior of Summit House office, September 1904. Photo by Simon Towle, author's collection.



The Summit House seen from the south. The door behind the man standing on the right opened into the office. The parlor was at the left end of the building, the kitchen at far right. [New Hampshire Historical Society]

in a separate room through an arched doorway, and an open door to the outside with a large dog lying in the doorway.

Close inspection of the photo with a magnifying glass reveals a calendar on the wall of the small office, but hopes of easily reading the date are frustrated by a bouquet of flowers in a vase that partially hides the calendar. The first day of the month fell on a Thursday, and just enough of the right side of the calendar is visible to determine that the square at the bottom right is blank. When a month starts on a Thursday, the 30th falls on Friday and the 31st on Saturday, the day at the bottom right; since in this case the box is blank, the month has thirty days. While the Summit House was often open for a few days in June, it was open throughout September, making it more likely that the month in question is September. In the period that the Summit House stood, Septembers that started on Thursdays occurred in 1881, 1887, 1892, 1898, 1901, and 1904.

Information on Towle is scarce. Directories for Lowell, Massachusetts list Simon Towle as a resident from 1858 through

1893, and his trade as photographer from 1861 through 1893. He appears in the 1886 and 1888 Biddeford, Saco, and Old Orchard, Maine directories, but directories from other years are missing. He was known on Mount Washington at the time, as *Among the Clouds* attested in 1898: "Mr. S. Towle, the well-known photographer of Lowell, whose presence is always a welcome event to hundreds of friends, arrived at the Summit House for a short stay last evening."² Similar notice was given his arrival in 1895, 1903, and 1905, and a photograph he made of the Gulf Tank covered in ice is published in Frank Burt's *Mount Washington: A Handbook for Travellers*.

The first issue of the 1904 volume of *Among the Clouds* seems to give conclusive evidence of the date of the photo by describing changes to the Summit House interior that spring that are clearly shown in Towle's picture:

"... *The public writing desks have been given a corner in the parlor and through broad arched doors leading into the former writing room may be seen the genial clerk, Mr. F.A. Cur-*

tis, in a separate registry office, as it were, and with him Mr. E. E. Paine, in charge of the Western Union Telegraph.

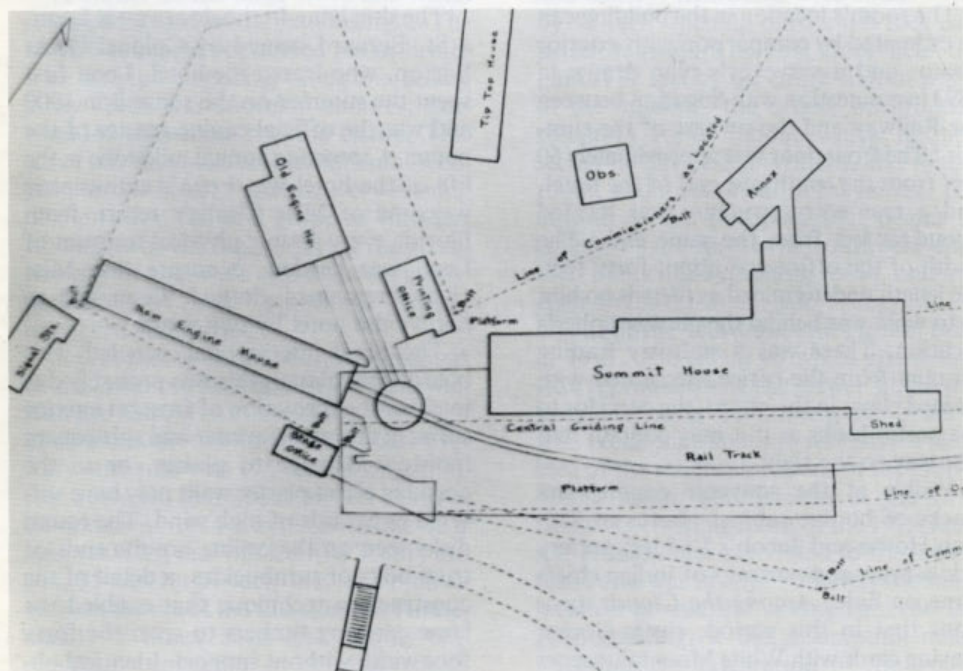
... Another change is observed in the souvenir stand, which this year occupies the whole side of the corridor from the foyer to the parlor.

In the rear of the counter may be seen the private office of Miss Mattie A. Clark, who for another year is manager of the house, and whose presence is an assurance to every former guest that in cloud or sunshine, good cheer will always prevail."³

Towle's photo indeed shows the Western Union Telegraph office in the same room as the hotel desk, behind which is a hand-lettered sign requesting guests to "Please leave your key"; a souvenir counter that stretches the length of the corridor; and an office behind the counter. Confirmation that Towle was in the White Mountains in September, 1904 is provided by the *White Mountain Echo* of September 24, 1904, in which he is listed as a

guest of the Mount Pleasant House that week (*Among the Clouds* had ceased publication for the season). This photograph of the office of the Summit House then, was taken in late September, 1904.

Determining the orientation of the room shown is complicated by the bright light entering the building from both sides. The shadows cast from the left are much darker, hinting that that is the sunny southeast side, facing the Cog Railway tracks, while the counter is on the northwest, or summit side. If this is the case, the radiance of the windows on the right could be the reflection of a photographic flash, or sunlight on snow on the summit rocks. The locations of the former writing room and the manager's office also argue that the left side is the front of the hotel; it seems more likely that the visitors were given a view out the front window over the train platform toward Maine and the Atlantic Ocean and the manager faced the blank ledge below the summit than vice versa. The door visible to the left appears to be one half of a double door unit, more



J.W. Sewall's plan of 1892. The plan, shown here reduced for reproduction, was drawn to a scale of 1 inch = 40 feet. [Mt. Washington Observatory Collection]



The Summit Colony from the northeast. Left to right: the kitchen sheds, the gable end of the main building, the ell built in 1874, the annex built in 1884, the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey tower, and Tip-Top House.
[New Hampshire Historical Society]

probable as a front than a back entrance.

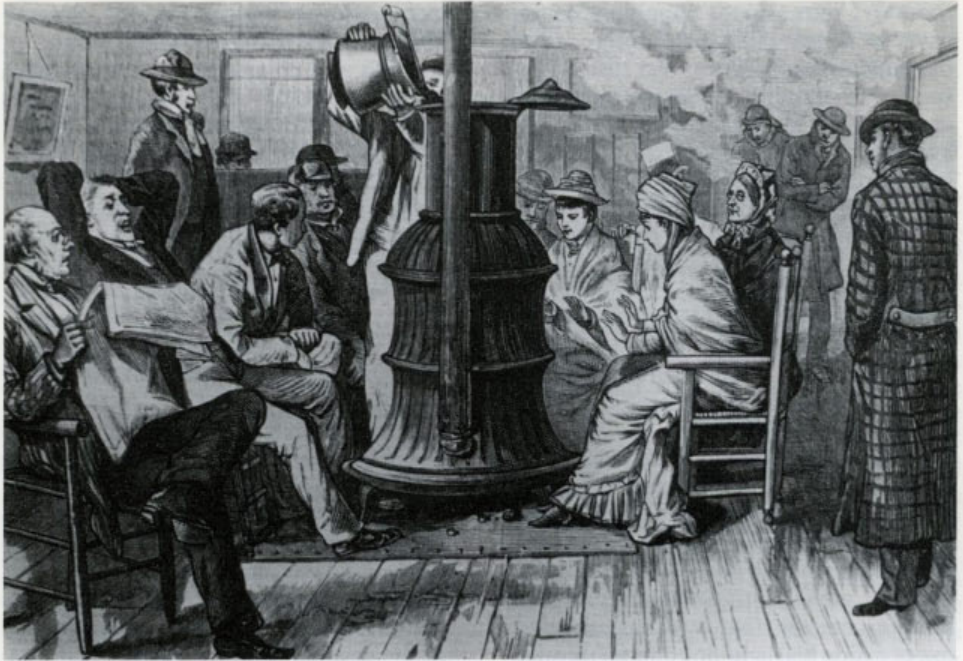
The room's location in the building can be estimated by comparison with exterior photos and a surveyor's plan drawn in 1892 in connection with litigation between the Railway and the owners of the summit.⁴ The front door was approximately 60 feet from the southwest end of the hotel, and a rear entry structure was located about 69 feet from the same end.⁵ The width of the office was about forty feet, the length undetermined as there is no hint as to what was behind the photographer's location. There was a stairway leading upstairs from the office, decorated with stained glass; in the photo, the corridor to the parlor looks as if it may contain that stairway to the right.

Visible at the souvenir counter are stacks of books; cabinet photos of Tip-Top House and Jacob's Ladder; pottery bric-a-brac; and portraits of Indian chiefs done on hide. *Among the Clouds* mentions that in this period, rustic clocks, playing cards with White Mountain scenes (the idea for which came from Miss Clark), embroidery, and leather goods

were all for sale here.

The dog lying in the doorway is Leon, a St. Bernard owned by Colonel Oscar Barron, who leased the hotel. Leon first spent the summer on the summit in 1900 and was the official canine greeter of the house. A recurring annual milestone in the life of the hotel was Leon's enthusiastic welcome of Miss Clarke's return from Florida every spring; physical restraint of Leon was needed to ensure that Miss Clarke remained clothed. Leon was to outlive the hotel by two years.

The hotel interior was paneled with boards, not plaster; this was probably due to either the formation of frost on interior surfaces during the winter and subsequent moisture damage to plaster, or to the cracking effect plaster walls may have suffered in periods of high wind. The round disks seen on the ceiling are the ends of truss bolts or turnbuckles, a detail of the construction technique that enabled the large carrying timbers to span the forty foot width without support. Identical objects are seen in existing stereo views of the dining room.



View of the office stove from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, 1879.

A corner of the large stove and metal stove pad is seen on the extreme right. The stove was a large pot-bellied parlor heater with its pipe extending along the ceiling away from the souvenir counter, surrounded by wicker rocking chairs. This stove was the social and sentimental focal point of the hotel: "Almost every evening of the season found a group of travelers whiling away the time enjoying the genial warmth of the stove and exchanging experiences of their mountain trips," remarked Kilbourne.⁶

An inventory taken of the furnishings of the hotel in 1882⁷ and the 1892 Sewall plan are helpful in establishing the rough dimensions of the hotel. The main 2½-story structure was 175 feet in length, 40 feet in width, and about 40 feet tall. An ell added in 1874 extended to the rear about 40 feet, and this led to a 2-story annex, 55 feet by 27 feet, that was built in 1884 on the site of the first Summit House, mainly to house hotel and railway employees. A collection of one story sheds and additions grew on the northwestern end over the years, housing the kitchen

and bakery. Bedrooms were about 9 feet by 15 feet, opening onto a ten foot carpeted hallway. The first floor held the parlor, 32 feet by the entire 40 foot width of the building, the office, washrooms, reception room (about which nothing seems to have been written), the dining room, and a small bar in the annex. The outline of the floorplan that begins to emerge — parlor at the southwest end, then public lobby, dining room, and kitchen on the northeast side — suggests the layout of the Third Summit House, built in 1915. The extent to which the design was reproduced in the newer hotel will probably never be known, but readers who recall that building will have a clear idea of the relative locations of the lobby, dining room, and kitchen in the 1872 house. The writing room of the 1915 Summit House, later converted to the ladies' restroom, was in approximately the same location as was the writing room in the 1872 building, if the assumption made regarding the orientation of the Towle photo is accepted. It is worth noting that after the conversion of the 1915 writing

room to a restroom the plumbing fixtures never worked well because at that end of the building bedrock was too close to the surface to allow the drainage pipes adequate pitch. This suggests that in the 1872 building the washrooms may have been located more to the center or northeastern end of the hotel where there was a basement through which pipes could be run.

Like its successor, the building was not completely invulnerable to the mountain's weather. Skylights in the ell leaked badly in the wind-driven rain, and keeping the water out was a frequent topic between Miss Clarke and John Horne, the Railway's Superintendent. One hundred mile an hour winds caused the chandeliers to swing in arcs from their attachments, and window panes were blown out often enough that the bellboys were practised at replacing them with boards during storms. Then, as now, lightning storms provided more excitement than was desirable; on one occasion ball lightning danced through the kitchen frightening the waitresses while a bolt turned the telegraph wires on the office ceiling into molten puddles on the floor.

In 1895, the newspaper noted that "sanitary conditions of the Summit House have been entirely changed and very much improved."⁸ One supposes that this means that modern plumbing was installed at the hotel end of the drainage pipe. The water source was a new 56,000 gallon tank at the northeastern end of the building filled from roof drainage and by trains from the Base. This tank survived the fire of 1908, and blew down in 1985.

In 1901, a new kitchen was added, with a bakery facing the Northern Peaks and the main kitchen facing the Railway tracks. Beneath this addition was the boiler room and a refrigerator room. The roof blew off the next winter, with parts reportedly found near Fabyan's.

Like other large summer resorts of the period, but probably to a greater degree due to its isolated situation, the Summit House must have been a world of its own. Home to a large group of employees and regular visitors who came to feel that they

were part of the family, the Summit House seems to have been an island of warmth and comradery in a strait-laced Victorian world. The atmosphere was described by Bradford Torrey in 1902:

*"... By the time you have been there two days, moreover, you will begin to enjoy the hotel, not only for its physical comforts, but as an interesting miniature world. The manager and the clerk, the waiters and the bellboys, the editors and the printers, the night watchman and the train conductor will all have become your friends, almost your blood relations..."*⁹

A fiery prophecy of the end of the summit colony sent "a thrill of horror at the extent and awfulness of the calamity"¹⁰ through observers on the summit on August 15, 1907. On that clear night the flames of a conflagration in Old Orchard lit up the sky to the southwest as it destroyed 17 hotels and 20 houses. Unknown to the spectators watching from the spacious platform outside the hotel, Old Orchard's fate foreshadowed that of the Summit House; on June 13, 1908, fire broke out in the parlor end of the building after a work crew had left the mountain for the evening, and an era came to its end.

NOTES

1. *Among the Clouds*, July 14, 1882, "The First House on the Summit".
2. *Among the Clouds*, September 6, 1895.
3. *Among the Clouds*, July 8, 1904.
4. J. W. Sewall, *Plan of Summit*, Coos Deeds, Vol 71, 1892.
5. Using Sewall's plan drawn at a scale of 1" = 40', the 2½ story gabled structure, which ended at the northeast side of the ell, can be measured at 175 feet. That section had 19 evenly spaced 2nd story windows; allowing for 18 spaces between windows, and 2 half spaces at each end, the distance between the centerline of each window should be 9.2 feet. The front door, under the seventh 2nd story window, would have been about 60 feet from the end. The back door, under the eighth 2nd story window, would be 69 feet from the end.
6. Frederick W. Kilbourne, *Chronicles of the White Mountains*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916, page 247.
7. Circuit Court of the United States, District of N.H., *Ebenezer S. Coe and David Pingree, Trustees, v. Walter Aiken, et. al., Pleadings and Evidence*, Manchester, 1893, pgs. 171-173.
8. *Among the Clouds*, July 28, 1895.
9. *Among the Clouds*, July 26, 1902.
10. *Among the Clouds*, August 16, 1907. □