



In the Name of the People

By Midge Eliassen

The Forest Society has a history of promoting an important democratic concept—that New Hampshire’s most iconic places should be protected and managed as state parks.

Several times a week, from early spring until the snow flies, a local man in his fifties hikes up Mount Sunapee. He calls himself a “native trout,” having lived near this mountain all his life. Each time when he gets to the summit, he pauses at a certain spot he calls his cathedral, where there is an incredible view of Lake Sunapee and the hills beyond. There he stops to watch and listen to the birds. Or he goes to the ledges above Lake Solitude and sits in reflection. He says, “Every time, I see glory everywhere I look, and I give thanks that this is my home.”

His reflective journey, and those of thousands of others who hike New Hampshire’s iconic peaks and find their own relationships with the trails and views, are possible in part because of the early work of the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests.

NH State Parks



Left: Mount Monadnock is one of the most-climbed mountains in the world. Although the Forest Society now owns most of the land on Monadnock, it leases the land to the State of New Hampshire. Each year the Forest Society invests the modest lease income toward the maintenance of this heavily-used reservation. Photo provided by the NH Division of Parks and Recreation.



Above: Today, 21st century visitors to Lake Sunapee can still enjoy the mountain's undeveloped slopes, seen here rising behind the lake. Photo provided by the NH Division of Parks and Recreation.

Left: A parcel on the north face of Mount Sunapee became the Forest Society's first reservation in 1911, thanks to support from the summer residents around nearby Lake Sunapee, shown here in this old photo. Photo by William Henry Jackson.



Today, the Forest Society continues to take an active interest in the maintenance and financial challenges facing New Hampshire's system of 73 state parks. The organization has played an active role in the conservation of many of our state's most renowned natural destinations, including Monadnock, Sunapee, Kearsarge, and Franconia Notch State Parks, and even the White Mountains National Forest.

In the Beginning

The State of New Hampshire owned only five acres of forestland when the Forest Society was founded in 1901. The founders were men and women responding to a bold new vision across the nation: that lands in special places should be held by the public for people to use and enjoy. Rather than allowing the forests across the Granite State's mountains to be devastated by the logging of timber barons and subsequent forest fires, men and women of vision campaigned to preserve them for the public. It was an initiative of the people, rather than of the government.

the land. In 1911 the Forest Society acquired this parcel on Mount Sunapee as its first reservation. It continued to add to this first holding until it owned most of the mountain.

Mount Sunapee became a prime recreational area in the 1930s when a group of Newport skiers developed the trail network for their ski club. By the post World War II era, the ski area was popular, and the state saw in Mount Sunapee an opportunity for development and tourism. The Forest Society was ready to pass on the management of the reservation, which had been hard hit by forest fires in 1941. In 1948 the Forest Society deeded over almost 1,200 acres on Mount Sunapee to the State of New Hampshire for a state park.

Franconia Notch

While summer residents partnered with the Forest Society to save Mount Sunapee, women and school children were key to the protection of the Franconia Notch. This campaign to save the steep-sided Notch, with its symbol of the Granite State, the Old Man of the Mountains, took every skill and strategy that Ayres

The Forest Society has helped conserve some of our state's most famous natural landmarks, including the White Mountains, Mount Monadnock, Mount Sunapee, and Mount Kearsarge.

During the Forest Society's first two decades, much of its attention was on the effort to preserve the White Mountains as a national forest resource. At the same time, the people of New Hampshire, including summer residents, were inspired to protect some of the state's other iconic mountains and geological features. They turned to the Forest Society for leadership. Its first Forester, Philip Ayres, came to the organization with a background that included understanding of and experience in the new field of public relations. He traveled the state, speaking eloquently and sharing photographs of the devastation left by logging and fire, and saw to it that his message received broad newspaper attention.

Mount Sunapee

Herbert Welsh, a Lake Sunapee summer resident from Philadelphia, responded to local outrage at the aggressive logging that was about to spoil the last of Mount Sunapee's tall timber. He rallied both summer residents and townspeople to save the north face of Sunapee. Welsh and his colleagues raised funds in a public campaign and turned to Ayres and the Forest Society for help in negotiating the purchase from the paper companies that owned

could muster. He persuaded the state to invest \$200,000; a member of the Forest Society's executive committee pledged \$100,000; and Ayres committed the Forest Society to raising another \$100,000 to buy the land offered up for logging.

Ayres launched a campaign that focused on the "Great Stone Face". He coordinated with the New Hampshire Federation of Women's Clubs, whose forestry committee chair was a founder of the Forest Society, to set goals for each town. The Women's Clubs and Ayres sold individual trees in the Notch for \$1 apiece. The public effort to save the Old Man and the Notch from destructive timber cutting had great appeal, and contributions came in from across the nation as the effort received widespread publicity. Even school children took part—a Franconia Notch Day in the schools yielded \$1,000, including some donations as small as a nickel. Over 15,000 individual contributions raised the \$100,000 that allowed the Forest Society in 1928 to buy 6,000 acres in Franconia Notch for a state park.

Today, both Franconia Notch and Mount Sunapee State Parks provide significant revenue for the State of New Hampshire from the Cannon Mountain ski area, the tourist attraction of The Flume in Franconia Notch, and the lease of the Mount Sunapee ski area.



Left: Now a destination enjoyed by families and other hikers, the summit of Mount Kearsarge was originally purchased by the Forest Society in 1918 as part of a 521-acre package. Over the years, whenever land on the mountain was threatened by development, the Forest Society acquired the endangered tract for later transfer to the state, eventually protecting more than 3,000 acres on the mountain. Photo by Chris Wells.



Right: In 1928, more than 15,000 individual contributions raised the \$100,000 that allowed the Forest Society to buy 6,000 acres in Franconia Notch for a state park. Contributions came in from across the nation, including some donations as small as a nickel. Today, the Flume in Franconia Notch, shown here, is a popular tourist attraction that provides significant revenue for the State of New Hampshire. Photo provided by the NH Division of Parks and Recreation.

Mounts Monadnock and Kearsarge

Mounts Monadnock and Kearsarge, both with bare summits often covered with hikers, are also state parks whose lands were preserved through the Forest Society's efforts. Mount Monadnock is known to be one of the most-climbed mountains in the world. Since its first ownership of land on Monadnock in 1915, the Forest Society has acquired many parcels through a complicated series of purchases and gifts over the years. Although today most of the land on Monadnock is owned by the Forest Society, it is managed by the State of New Hampshire as a state park on a lease from the Forest Society. Each year the Forest Society invests the modest lease income toward the maintenance of this heavily used reservation.

Kearsarge, like Sunapee, was given to the state by the Forest Society. The organization purchased individual parcels over the years, starting in 1918 with a parcel that included the summit of the mountain. The land was established as a memorial to Frank Rollins, former New Hampshire governor and founding president of the Forest Society. When the Forest Society gave this land to the state in 1950, it was renamed the Frank W. Rollins State Park. Over the years, the Forest Society has purchased additional lands on Mount Kearsarge that have been threatened by development, then transferred each in turn to the state.

Fostering a Living Legacy

The parks are part of the greater fabric of open spaces of special scenic beauty in the state and a key component of our tourism infrastructure. As a result of its long connection to the establishment of our state parks, the Forest Society continues to advocate for their responsible stewardship and ongoing protection and has come to the parks' defense when inappropriate development has threatened the slopes of Sunapee, Monadnock, and in the case of Kearsarge, a lost battle to prevent the erection of a cell tower on the peak.

The Forest Society, on behalf of not only its members but all who love New Hampshire, will continue to build on the vision of the conservationists who came before. As we enjoy the fruits of their vision today, we look ahead to the generations that will follow us as we contemplate the natural legacies that we, in our turn, will leave behind. The legacy of this generation must be to ensure the continued existence of our finest natural cathedrals for the generations who follow. ¶

Midge Eliassen was a newspaper writer/reporter and photographer for 30 years. She currently writes and produces the Lake Sunapee Protective Association newsletter, The Beacon and is a member of the Forest Society Board of Trustees.