

Go Learn it on the Mountain

An Interpretive Agenda for New Hampshire's Tallest Peak

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Introduction

Over the years, the state of New Hampshire has developed a mild fixation on superlatives. We pride ourselves on having the lowest state taxes in the country and a 400-member House of Representatives that is larger than any other state-level legislative body in the country.¹ New Hampshire law requires our presidential primary election to be the first in the nation.² Hugh Gregg, a former governor of New Hampshire, is leading an effort to have Exeter, New Hampshire, declared the birthplace of the Republican Party. New Hampshire claims preeminence among the original thirteen colonies for being the ninth and therefore deciding state to ratify the U.S. Constitution (Rosal 1988:226-234). Given the Granite State's preoccupation with superlatives, which may come from living in the shadow of Massachusetts (Potter 1991; 1993:126-131), it is fortunate that New Hampshire can claim a geographic feature that casts an impressive shadow of its own: Mount Washington, "the highest peak east of the Rockies and north of the Carolinas" (State Planning and Development Commission 1955). In the following article, we propose an interpretive program for the cultural resources that share the top of Mount Washington. Our proposal goes against the grain of most interpretations of Mount Washington: instead of focusing on the considerable singularity of the place, we have chosen to explore several aspects of Mount Washington that make the summit of this great peak similar to, rather than different from, every other piece of real estate in New Hampshire. The interpretation we propose has the virtue of giving visitors something to think about (other than a brake job or a foot massage) once they've made their way back down the mountain.

¹ In point of fact, we refer to our House of Representatives as the "fourth-largest democratically elected legislative body in the English-speaking world, trailing only the U.S. House of Representatives, England's House of Commons, and India's House of People.

² This requirement is codified in the laws of New Hampshire as RSA 653:9 which states, in part: "The presidential primary election shall be held on the second Tuesday in March or on the Tuesday immediately preceding the date on which any other state shall hold a similar election, whichever is earlier...."



There is no question that Mount Washington is an impressive chunk of topography. It draws hikers from all over the country, among them a high-school friend from Cleveland whose summer-long preparations for a Mount Washington ascent introduced us to this mighty peak ten years before we ever moved to New Hampshire. Once we did move here, we learned that one key feature of any local television weather map is a temperature figure, usually twenty to thirty degrees cooler than all the rest—and often in a different color—attributed to the rarefied air “high atop Mount Washington.” Much of what interpreters from a variety of agencies have to say about Mount Washington centers on the peak’s superlatives. At 6,288 feet, it is the highest peak in the Northeast. It is the location of the greatest wind velocity ever recorded on Earth—231 miles per hour on April 12, 1934 (Johnson 1961:48). It has the Tip-Top House, which was built in 1853 and is the “oldest existing building at the top of a major North American peak” (Belcher 1981). In addition, Tip-Top House was home to *Among the Clouds*, “America’s first [and probably only] mountain-top newspaper” (Belcher 1981), published at the summit between 1877 and 1908 (Anderson 1980). Finally, Mount Washington has been served continuously since 1869 by the “first mountain-climbing railroad in the world” (Price 1965), the Mount Washing-

The problem with information such as this is that once you’ve learned it, there’s not much you can do with it. You’ll be set for cocktail-party chit-chat, and you might win a few extra appliances the next time you find yourself on a television game show. But outside of helping you settle a few bar bets and giving you a conversational trump card if someone should happen to bore you with stories about the high place or the cold place or the windy place from which they have just returned, information from the “Mount Washington Superlatives Tour”³ has very few explicit practical applications.

Critical Interpretation

For some, presenting the public with a short list of “whiz-bang” facts about a natural, cultural, or historic site may be considered an acceptable or even an exemplary interpretation, but we come from a different school of thought. Following the tenets of critical theory (Leone, Potter, and Shackel 1987; Potter 1994) we would argue that no interpretation—even one that appears completely flat, objective, or harmless—lacks a point of view

3 While we use this term at several points in this article, there is no specific, official “Mount Washington Superlatives Tour.” Rather, we use this term for rhetorical purposes, as a handy way of referring to several dozen bits of formal and informal interpretation based on Mount Washington’s list of “biggests” and “oldests.”

or a social/political agenda. There is no such thing as value-free knowledge; all knowledge is knowledge for a purpose.

Any public interpretation is a conversation in which one person tries to persuade another person or a group of people to think something or do something. That "something" can be large or small, general or specific, but it is always there, if not *on* then *under* the surface of *any* public interpretation. In the case of trivial or seemingly meaningless interpretations, ones that are too "Mickey Mouse" or mostly glitz without much message, all that the interpreter may be attempting to do is hold the attention of the visitor, but even this modest goal may be considered a point of view in that it guides decisions about the inclusion, exclusion, and ordering of information presented to the public.

This shaping of interpretive content is sometimes deliberate and sometimes unconscious. Furthermore, it is not inherently evil; it is inevitable (Wallace 1986:137). Thus, according to critical theory, the job of any scholar/interpreter is not to eliminate bias, interests, or points of view—which is impossible—but rather, to recognize these things, acknowledge them, and put them on display alongside interpretive content, as a way of empowering the people who consume our interpretations. We need to explore existing interpretations to determine the interests they serve, and we need to investigate our own authority and agency

in the interpretations we produce (Chappell 1989).

Up with ITI

Armed with the theoretical perspective outlined above, we first visited Mount Washington in June 1991. We made our climb along with a group of experienced interpreters who were attending the Interpretive Training Institute, an annual gathering sponsored by the Appalachian Mountain Club, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management, the Metropolitan District Commission, New Hampshire State Parks, the U.S. Forest Service, and the National Park Service. Our trip up Mount Washington followed a day of classroom workshops and was intended to give participants the chance to use the cultural resources on Mount Washington as a case study in developing an interpretive plan. In particular, the group was to focus on the Tip-Top House, a 140-year-old, National Register-listed former hotel which is now a historic site in the New Hampshire State Parks system.

Along with the ITI participants, we took in the full range of interpretation available at the summit of Mount Washington. This included a tour of the Tip-Top House plus information on display in the visitor center at the state-run Sherman Adams building and at the Mount Washington Observatory. After ingesting these various interpretations, we noticed two trends.

On the surface, each of these interpretations stressed, in a predictable manner, one or more of the superlatives noted above. The Tip-Top House interpreter talked about his site's status as the oldest standing building on top of a major North American mountain. At the observatory we learned about the highest wind velocity ever recorded. And so on.

Far more interesting than these run-of-the-mill Mount Washington factoids was an almost unacknowledged interpretive undercurrent. Shortly after we began our walk around the summit, in what amounted to a series of asides, we learned that the top of Mount Washington may be thought of both spatially and temporally as a crazy quilt of ownership and other rights. The top of New England's tallest mountain is currently shared in one way or another by the state of New Hampshire, Dartmouth College, the privately run Mount Washington Observatory (which leases space from the state), two private transportation services (the Mount Washington Auto Road and the Mount Washington Cog Railway), a radio transmitter, a television transmitter, and one or more federal intelligence agencies. Most of Mount Washington, specifically the parts below the immediate summit and outside the rail and road rights-of-way, is part of the White Mountain National Forest. Without going into undue detail, it is fair to say that the history of the summit's ownership is every bit as complicated as

today's tangle of ownership, rights, and rights-of-way (Anderson 1980).

But What Does This Mean?

As we have said, a critical approach to historical interpretation is a two-step process which entails an examination of existing interpretations to identify the interests they serve and the creation of new interpretations that openly acknowledge contemporary needs and interests. Thus we must begin by asking just what is the meaning and the use of the seemingly meaningless and seemingly useless interpretations that fill the thin air high atop Mount Washington. Here's our best guess.

It is not easy to get up Mount Washington. One may hike up, but a climb up Mount Washington is a legitimately dangerous undertaking, especially when the weather is questionable and even when it looks safe.⁴ There are three other options: a \$32 ride on the Mount Washington Cog Railway, a less-expensive ride in a van operated by the Mount Washington Auto Road (first opened in 1861 as the Mount Washington Carriage Road), or a drive in your own car along the Auto Road which will cost you some money and perhaps a white knuckle or

⁴ As of the writing of a 1960 press release from the New Hampshire State Planning and Development Commission, 43 people had died as a result of climbing Mount Washington, most of them victims of exhaustion and exposure.

two. One way or another, you have to pay a price to get up Mount Washington, but when the reward is being able to see 150 miles in any direction, the trip up seems well worth the cost.

The rub is that the top of Mount Washington is socked in by fog 300 days each year. That means that on any given day, a visitor to Mount Washington rolls the dice, trading hard-earned vacation dollars (and time) for a one-in-six chance of viewing a view that is second to none, at least in the East. The list of Mount Washington climbers who have crapped out, peaking without peeking, is long and distinguished. Daniel Webster, disappointed after his 1831 conquest of the summit, reportedly said, "Mount Washington, I have come a long distance, and now you seem to give me a cold reception, for which I am extremely sorry, as I shall not have time enough to view this grand prospect which now lies before me, and nothing prevents but the uncomfortable atmosphere in which you reside!" (Monahan 1951).

Today, even if clouds do their worst, nobody has to leave Mount Washington unfulfilled or empty-handed. On the chance that you don't get to see the Berkshires of Massachusetts, the Green Mountains of Vermont, the Adirondacks of New York, Maine's Atlantic Coast, or Canada (Johnson 1961:7) from the top, an enterprising postcard maker did, and you can buy what he or she saw. And if you choose to drive the Auto

Road, your bumper can proudly proclaim that "This Car Climbed Mount Washington." Better yet, without spending a dime on souvenirs, you can take a "Mount Washington Superlatives Tour" and be firmly reminded that your trip was successful even if (or perhaps because) all you could see was the mother of all fog banks. View or no view, you've stood on the bull's-eye once targeted by the fiercest gust of wind ever recorded, and you've ridden on the world's first mountain-climbing railroad or driven on the world's first mountain toll road (Johnson 1961:1), also thought to be "the oldest man-made recreational facility still in operation in the entire country" (Seaver 1979). In short, we suspect that the pitter-patter of superlatives raining down on visitors to the "roof of New England" (Atkinson 1961) serves to reinforce the message that is delivered only sporadically by the unreliable view: Mount Washington is an amazing place, and we see no reason to argue with John Meck's (1963) claim that "the summit of Mt. Washington is undoubtedly the most unique piece of real estate in the entire State of New Hampshire." The various commercial concerns that make money from getting people to the top of Mount Washington depend on a steady stream of visitors sharing Meck's opinion; satisfied customers, convinced that their experience was extraordinary, will convince others to follow in their footsteps, or tire tracks.

Thus there are two sets on in

terests served by a Mount Washington summit tour based on the mountain's impressive list of superlatives. When visitors are satisfied with what they have seen, heard, or read on top of Mount Washington, they win, and so do the entrepreneurs who sell access to the summit. Given the high ranking of tourism among New Hampshire's "industries," attracting and satisfying tourists is an important mission. We do not fault the authors of interpretive materials that either explicitly or implicitly encourage visitors to value their visits to the Granite State (and we certainly do not mean to discourage potential Mount Washington visitors by citing the statistics on cloudy days). Even so, we think there is something more important than attracting visitors that may be done with the interpretive raw materials at the top of Mount Washington.

Down to the Sub-text

We have previously noted a sub-text to the "Mount Washington Superlatives Tour" that deals with the issues of multiple ownership and multiple use at the summit. Interestingly, this mountain-top sub-text is somewhat more prominent at lower elevations. In the thick, but not exhaustive, Pinkham's Grant correspondence and clipping file at the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources, articles quoting P. T. Barnum (who called the view from Mount Washington "the second greatest show on earth") share folder space with articles such as:

- "Mt. Washington / Col. Teague Will Admitted to Probate in Coos Court / Cog Railway and Other Holdings Go to College in Residuary Legacy; Use of Income Left Unrestricted" (*Manchester Union Leader*, 26 October 1951);
- "'Mount Washington Committee' Represents Several Interests" (*Manchester Union Leader*, 24 November 1953);
- "Notable Pioneer Work / Mount Washington Observatory Great Aid to U.S. Armed Forces" (*Manchester Union Leader*, 25 November 1953);
- "New Hampshire Once Owned Summit of Mt. Washington" (*Littleton Courier*, 5 December 1963);
- "Summit Improvements Required / Senate Views Funds for Mt. Washington" (*Manchester Union Leader*, 22 March 1974);
- "Mindful of Public Interest / Dartmouth Will Retain Mountain Summit Title" (*Berlin Reporter*, undated); and
- "Discuss Greater Cooperation on Mt. Washington" (unattributed, undated).

Shortly after the death of Colonel Henry N. Teague, the last individual to own the summit of Mount Washington, Reg Abbott (1953) wrote about a meeting of "all—or most all—the special interests on Mount Washington," later referred to as "the people who own various parts of the peak." The purpose of Abbott's article was to introduce Governor Hugh Gregg's newly formed "Mount

Washington committee" whose members represented Dartmouth College (which was willed the peak by Colonel Teague in 1951 and which sold it to the state of New Hampshire in 1964), the Mount Washington Observatory, the White Mountain Region Association, the Appalachian Mountain Club, the Glen House, the Summit Road Company, and state's Forestry and Recreation Commission, and the White Mountain National Forest. Also invited were the U.S. Army, Navy, and Air Force. One of the committee's first tasks was the drafting of "a comprehensive map of the summit area, showing who owns what and who leases what areas" (Abbott 1953). Abbott concluded his article by saying, "With the Army, Navy, the Air Force, the Signal Corps, the Quartermaster Corps, the cog railway, the carriage road, the observatory, Mt. Washington TV, Yankee Network, the Appalachian Mountain Club and the general public all having use for, and access to, the summit, is it any wonder there are problems."

In 1963, Meck observed that "over the years there have been a number of leases of the real estate at the summit to various persons and corporations and also conveyances from time to time of certain easements and rights of way in this real estate.... After World War II the federal government became vitally interested in Mt. Washington as an outdoor laboratory ... subsequently this area was condemned for short periods of time by agencies of the federal

government." This pattern of multiple interests, rights, and uses was largely unchanged a decade later when it was noted that, "except for the privately owned buildings of WMTW-TV (Channel 8), the summit plateau of Mount Washington is a New Hampshire State Park, and it is completely surrounded by the White Mountain National Forest. The structures on the top, all designed to serve the public one way or another, make up what has been called 'a city in the clouds.'" (*Concord Monitor* 1976). A year or so after we made our visit to Mount Washington, this theme was identified yet again by Gary Ghioto in an article subtitled "Interests vie atop Washington." Reports Ghioto (1992), "The politics of Mount Washington are complicated. While the U.S. Forest Service controls much of the mountain, the owners of the Cog Railway and the auto road have deeded rights of way to the summit. The state owns 60 acres on the summit as part of Mount Washington State Park. Dartmouth College owns nine acres and has a lease with the owner of a Maine television station until 2010.... Other interested parties include the Mount Washington Observatory ... and the Appalachian Mountain Club."

There are at least two ways to respond, interpretively, to the kaleidoscope of interests shifting in and out of view at the top of Mount Washington. The initial impulse of most participants in the Interpretive Training Institute

was to head for coherence; they wanted to see and hear fewer messages, delivered in fewer voices, with fewer seams showing. From the standpoint of interpretive theory, such an interpretation of the summit would be a decided improvement over what is available now. Most experts agree that when you confuse your visitors, their responses to your interpretation will range from apathy to antagonism, which are probably *not* the reactions you had in mind when you wrote your tour, printed your guidebook, or hung your exhibit panels. Despite the good work of the ITI crew, we found ourselves heading in another direction.

Rather than trying to produce interpretive coherence by hiding all the stitching that holds the top of Mount Washington together, our idea is to put the fragmentation of the summit to use by putting it on display, inside an interpretation that served to frame it. On our way home from Mount Washington, we came up with the following text which could be used in a variety of different interpretive media.

A Tip-Top Tour

"As you walk around the summit of Mount Washington, you will notice buildings and structures that are occupied and used by many different agencies and organizations. Dartmouth College owns and leases a part of the summit. The state of New Hampshire owns and operates Tip-Top House and the Sherman Adams

building. The observatory is run by a private, non-profit organization. Television and radio stations based in Maine and New Hampshire broadcast their signals from this mountaintop, and several different public and private agencies—including the Federal Bureau of Investigation—have communications equipment here. Finally, as you probably know, public access to the summit is managed by two different private companies. In short, many different organizations have planted their flags in this small piece of New Hampshire. Given the value and the uniqueness of this particular spot, it is tempting to wonder how and why so many different interests can co-exist in such a small place. Why hasn't someone decided to play 'King of the Hill' on Mount Washington?

"We think the answer has to do with what you already knew about this mountain *before* you hiked, rode, or drove up here to the top. Mount Washington has been described by a mountain of superlatives. It is the *highest* peak in the Northeast. It has the world's *worst* weather, and has felt the world's *fastest* recorded winds. We think Tip-Top House is the *oldest* mountaintop hotel in the United States. You may know other superlatives for this place. The point is that, for many different reasons, we have come to think of the summit of Mount Washington as special, unique, distinctive, in a class by itself. There is no other. We think that almost everyone who has an interest in Mount Washington

recognizes its specialness. Not only do people see this place as special, we think that most people would find it inappropriate for a single individual or organization to own or control a place as special as this.

"So many different interests co-exist on this mountaintop *not* because of something intrinsic to the mountain itself, but because people have *decided* that this place should be shared and they have worked hard to make that sharing a reality.

"However, the top of Mount Washington is not the only place in New Hampshire where there are multiple interests that need to be considered, and we hope that after you go back down the mountain you will spend some time thinking about the idea of ownership. Somewhere along the line—either consciously or by default—people decided that the summit of Mount Washington should be held in common. Back in the flatlands there are all kinds of rights and interests that make up the concept of property ownership. There are water rights, mineral rights, air rights, hunting rights, and development rights, to name just a few. Various 'packages' of these rights can be conveyed through easements and other legal tools. When you come down to it, *no* individual owns and absolutely controls all of the various rights that adhere to any particular piece of property. In *every* case, a greater or lesser number of these rights are managed publicly for the common good.

"Here on Mount Washington we can see a rather extreme example of cooperation based on a clear idea of rights that cannot or should not be subject to narrow ownership. When you get back down from the mountain, we hope you will remember the Tip-Top House and the breathtaking view, but we also hope you will spend some time thinking about just where, and how, to draw the line between resources and rights that should be owned privately and those that are so valuable to us that they should be used and managed with the long-term common good in mind, rather than short-term private gain.

"By suggesting this line of thought, we do not mean to advocate any particular position, or any specific changes in local or regional land-use regulations. All we are suggesting is that the history of cooperative management at Mount Washington can help all of us think more productively about the rights and responsibilities of property ownership wherever we come from. Mount Washington may well be a singular resource, but there is no place in New Hampshire that doesn't deserve the same kind of thoughtful attention given to this place for so many years."

Property Rights

New Hampshire's automobile license plates carry the motto "Live Free or Die," and we live free in a variety of ways. In what is almost an annual ritual, our state legislature routinely defeats three

bills: a "bottle bill" requiring the use of returnable beverage containers, a bill requiring adults to wear seat belts, and a bill requiring hunters to wear orange. Here in New Hampshire, nobody tells us what to do, and this is especially true with regard to private property rights.

New Hampshire is fertile ground for the "Wise Use" Movement, which argues that almost any private land-use decision is better than almost any government-based land-management proposal. As of 1988, the last year for which we have statistics, 11% of New Hampshire's 234 cities and towns lacked a building permit system, 15% had no zoning ordinance, and 36% had no building

Mount Washington.

Unfortunately, this particular New Hampshire is more fantasy than reality. No matter how loudly one might talk the talk, there is no place—even in New Hampshire—where one can walk the walk. Every single square inch of the Granite State is subject to at least some infringement on the sovereignty of private property rights—and we have a longer and richer history of public land-use planning than many people might suspect. By focusing on the complexity of interlocking and overlapping property rights on the summit of Mount Washington, which mirrors the complexity of property rights throughout the rest of the state, we hope to en-

tering into sophisticated discussions of property rights seems somewhat more important to us than teaching them the date on which the wind blew 231 miles per hour high atop Mount Washington.

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With Ridiculous Caution

On southeast Georgia farmland, on a road that runs
to mire in March rains, near no thing
human, abruptly a stranded graveyard. There is no church
for miles. This is a cemetery for travellers,
where manifest destiny brought some of them to lie down
and sleep out the rest of their crossing.

Once I found this hushed community I returned often, walking
the ground so many times I memorized their names. Diphtheria moved
through their young like gossip among tattlers,
like fatal slander. Wives outlived their men by ten years,
at least; husbands followed wives within only two.

The crude stones, some blank, featured names and dates
imprecisely scrawled by makeshift tool: Bennett, Thornburgh,
Strom, Taylor, Booker, Sims, Johnson, Albright. But some stones
only seemed blank; their indented surfaces could be revealed
by a process known to the art's cognoscenti as "rubblings."
People have travelled cemeteries all over a country, gathering
anthropological scraps from the process.

My presence in this burial place is the old maid's foolish
anticipation: Those lying about are at a loss for words, and getting
to know them is like listening for the cat with no bell.
Al, the savvy southern boy, has dared me to find
the Parkerville Cemetery; I have spent the day to win
this dare. Since then, the dead ones and I have exchanged
theories on meaning. This small wood has escaped
the insidious secret of Spanish moss: the decadent drape
on trees holding "chiggers" in swarms, loathsome charm for the unwary.

Absurdly careful, I begin to gentle the letters on stones onto rice paper with a charcoal stick, remembering those back at the office worrying, "It's funny that she's so keen on finding that cemetery." It *is* funny, that finding some of the dates on stones, I had to find them all, since *not knowing* means I would have to lie down here forever to unriddle these truncated lives.

How do we call death? – "passing," as these souls were when their bodies became as useless as destinations: *motus animi continuus*.

Sun slants through trees, layering my face;
the wind rubs across it, yielding nothing,
nothing but texture. I struggle to lift a toppled
half-stone of graveness: infant mortality.
Some children's graves are diagonal bricks in circles
of leaves, nothing more.

I must write a book on those buried here,
because they will be dead for a long time;
because there is a texture here beyond mere indentations
in stone. Because all of what inheres in this place
steals loveliness from every living thing
and flies like a mynah in the face of caution.

– Susan Stevens