

# Crawford Notch History

**Discovery:** In 1771, a Lancaster hunter named Timothy Nash discovered what is now called Crawford Notch while tracking a moose over Cherry Mountain. He noticed a gap in the distant mountains to the south and realized it was probably the route through the mountains mentioned in Native American lore. Packed with provisions, he worked his way through the notch and on to Portsmouth to tell Governor John Wentworth of his discovery. Doubtful a road could be built through the mountains, the governor made him a deal. If Nash could get a horse through from Lancaster, he would grant him a large parcel of land at the head of the notch, with the condition that he build a road to it from the east. Nash and his friend Benjamin Sawyer managed to trek through the notch with a very mellow farm horse that, at times, had to be lowered over boulders with ropes. The deal with the governor was kept, and the road, at first not much more than a trail, was opened in 1775.

**Settlement:** The Crawford family, the first permanent settlers in the area, exerted such a great influence on the development of the notch that the Great Notch came to be called Crawford Notch. In 1790, Abel Crawford, his wife Hannah (Rosebrook), and their growing family settled on the land granted to Sawyer and Nash, at what is now Fabyans in Bretton Woods. Two years later, Hannah's father Eleazer Rosebrook moved with his family to Abel's homestead. In turn, Abel's family settled 12 miles away at the head of the notch in Hart's Location, for more "elbow room." Both families operated inns for the growing number of travelers through the notch. Abel's inn was the Mount Crawford House. Ethan Allen, Abel's son, inherited the inn operated by the Rosebrooks. In addition to being established innkeepers, the Crawfords were famous mountain guides that escorted visitors to the top of Mt. Washington. In 1819, Abel and Ethan Allen opened the Crawford Path, the footpath they had blazed to the summit. By 1840, horses could be on the trail. In 1821, Ethan Allen blazed a shorter route up Mt. Washington that is closely followed today by the cog railway.

**Railroad:** Increasing tourism to the White Mountains generated interest in the building of a railroad through Crawford Notch. The construction of the railroad was considered a difficult engineering feat that was thought to be impossible by many. The railroad, built by Anderson Brothers of Maine, was opened in 1875. It ran from Portland, through the notch, to Fabyans, the area where Ethan Allen had operated his inn.

Great difficulties and expenses were encountered due to the gain of 1,623 feet in elevation in the 30 miles between North Conway and Fabyans. There is an average rise of 116 feet per mile for the nine miles between Bemis Station at the south end of the notch and Crawford Depot. Impressive Frankenstein Trestle, originally built of iron and later replaced by steel, is 80 feet high and 500 feet long. The Willey Brook Bridge is 100 feet high and 400 feet long.

**Crawford Notch State Park:** Most of the land in Crawford Notch was acquired by the state of New Hampshire in 1913. It was the result of a bill passed by the legislature in 1912 aimed at rescuing the northern region of Hart's Location from excessive timber harvest. The bill failed to include the northern, most scenic part of the notch, which the state purchased in 1912 for \$62,000. Almost 6,000 acres are included in the state park. The land extends on both sides of the highway to the summits of the mountains that border the Saco River Valley. In 1922, the Willey House clearing was leased to Donahue and Hamlin of Bartlett, who built a cabin colony of peeled spruce logs for vacationers. More log buildings were added including restrooms, a restaurant, and gift shop, but eventually the state took back the clearing for its own operations.



# The Story of the Willey Family



During the fall of 1825, Samuel Willey, Jr. of Bartlett moved into a small house in the heart of Crawford Notch with his wife, five children, and two hired men. The first year, the three men enlarged and improved the house, which the family operated as an inn to accommodate travelers through the mountains on the desolate notch road. The little cluster of buildings was situated in the shadow of what is now called Mount Willey.

In June, following a heavy rain, the Willeys were terrified when they witnessed a great mass of soil and vegetation, torn loose from the mountainside across the river, slide in a path of destruction to the valley floor. As a result, Mr. Willey built a cave-like shelter a short distance above the house to which the family could flee if a slide threatened their side of the valley.

During the night of August 28, 1826, after a long drought which had dried the mountain soil to an unusual depth, came one of the most violent and destructive rain storms ever known in the White Mountains. The Saco River rose 20 feet overnight. Livestock was carried off, farms set afloat, and great gorges were cut in the mountains.

Two days after the storm, anxious friends and relatives penetrated the debris-strewn valley to learn the fate of the Willey family. They found the house unharmed, but the surrounding fields were covered with debris. Huge boulders, trees, and masses of soil had been swept from Mt. Willey's newly bared slopes. The house had escaped damage because it was apparently situated just below a ledge that divided the major slide into two streams. The split caused the slide to pass by the house on both sides leaving it untouched. Inside, beds appeared to have been left hurriedly, a Bible lay on the table, and the dog howled mournfully.

Mr. and Mrs. Willey, two children, and both hired men were found nearby, crushed in the wreckage of the slide. The bodies were buried near the house and later moved to Conway. Three children were never found.

The true story of the tragedy will never be known. Poets and writers have conjectured many possibilities. Perhaps the family, awakened by a threatening rumble, fled from the house to their cave, and was caught in one stream of the slide. It seems more likely the Willeys started to climb the slope of the mountain to escape the rising floods and were caught in the landslide.

Whatever the circumstances of the tragedy, it has endowed this part of the White Mountains with a legend enhanced by the awesome crags which rise guardian over the site of the former Willey home. Following the tragedy, an addition was built onto the house, which was operated as an inn until it burned in 1898.