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NEWS FROM THE NEW HAMPSHIRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Photographs Available

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Lost NH Landmark: The Old Man of the Mountain

CONCORD, NH—On Saturday, October 21, 2017, the New Hampshire Historical Society explores the history and myth behind an iconic New Hampshire object--the Old Man of the Mountain--in a lecture that celebrates this lost piece of the Granite State's heritage. Geologist Brian Fowler, former president of the Mount Washington Observatory, traces the Old Man's geologic and human history during the 198 years between the discovery of the phenomenon in 1805 and its disappearance in 2003.

On May 3, 2003, the Old Man of the Mountain disintegrated and fell into Franconia Notch, resulting in the loss of an important national landmark, long the basis for the State of New Hampshire's official emblem. This natural event brought to a close a nearly 200-year relationship between the people of New England and the "Old Man," as people pondered how the rock profile formed and remained in place, strove to secure and preserve it, and attempted to explain its natural and unmistakably "human" profile. Once thought to be a symbol of an ancient Abenaki prophesy, the Old Man was first brought to Americans' attention in 1805 by surveyors mapping out a path through Franconia Notch.

By the middle of the 19th century, the Old Man's fame had spread far and wide partly because of the efforts of two men: author Nathaniel Hawthorne and statesman Daniel Webster. Hawthorne published a short story in 1850 called "The Great Stone Face" in which he romanticized the rough beauty of the natural wonder. Webster was famously quoted as saying about the Old Man, "Men hang out their signs indicative of their respective trades; shoemakers hang out a gigantic shoe; jewelers a monster watch, and the dentist hangs out a gold tooth; but up in the Mountains of New Hampshire, God Almighty has hung out a sign to show that there He makes men."

Inspired by reports of its grandeur, thousands of visitors flocked to the White Mountains in the 19th century to see the Old Man where he stood 1,200 feet off the ground overlooking the aptly named Profile Lake. He became a leading tourist destination in the country and helped establish the White Mountains as one of America's most picturesque regions. Tourists could even stay at the luxurious Profile House, equipped with running water, as they marveled at the Old Man.

The Old Man became the state emblem in 1945 at the same time the state legislature declared that the state's motto was John Stark's inspiring phrase, "Live free or die." His image appears on countless tourist items and the state's license plate and quarter.

This lecture on the Old Man—held on Saturday, October 21, at 2 p.m.--is open to the public and included in the price of admission (\$7) to the New Hampshire Historical Society located at 30 Park Street in Concord. Military families with ID, children 18 and under, and Society members are admitted for free.

Founded in 1823 the New Hampshire Historical Society is an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to saving, preserving, and sharing New Hampshire history. Nowhere will you find a more extensive collection of objects and archives related to New Hampshire's history. The Society shares these vast collections through its research library, museum, website, publications, exhibitions, and youth and adult educational programs. The Society is not a state-funded agency. All of its programs and services are made possible by membership dues and contributions. For more information about the Society and the benefits of membership, visit nhhistory.org or call 603-228-6688.