NEW HAMPSHIRE
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY FOUNDED 1823

NEWSLETTER

Volume 63, No. 3 Fall 2026



Crawford Notch by Thomas Hill (1829–1908), 1872. Hill captured the peaceful beauty of the valley before the Willey tragedy. This colossal canvas has been in the New Hampshire Historical Society's collection since 1916 and hangs on the grand staircase in the Society's Park Street building in Concord. New Hampshire Historical Society.

Remembering the Willey Slide 200 Years Later

On the night of August 28, 1826, a severe rainstorm triggered a rock slide on the west side of Crawford Notch. The resulting tragedy captured national attention and drew the curious, especially artists and writers, to the White Mountains. These visitors jump-started the tourist industry in New Hampshire in what became an early example of "disaster tourism."

Samuel Willey and his wife, Polly, along with their five children, moved into a small house in Crawford Notch in the fall of 1825. They relocated from Lower Bartlett (now North Conway) to establish an inn for travelers passing through the Notch on the 10th New Hampshire Turnpike. This narrow, treacherous stretch of road was an important commercial link between ports in Maine and the St. Lawrence River. Willey hired two men, David Allen and David Nickerson, to help him enlarge the house, adding a second story, stables, and a barn, and renamed it the Willey House Inn and Tavern. In the spring, a heavy rain produced a mudslide so powerful that the Willeys considered moving away. Instead, they built a shelter to protect them in the event that it happened again.

A severe drought hit the White Mountains that summer, which ended with a fierce storm on the night of August 28. The entire region was devastated. The storm, compounded by the drought conditions that loosened tree roots, produced as many as 100 landslides, including an avalanche of trees, branches, gravel, boulders, and water that surged three miles

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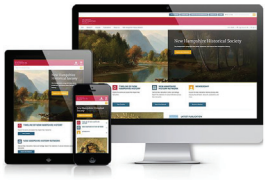
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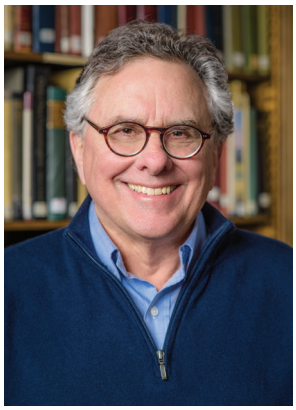
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Bill Dunlap

President's Message

There is an old joke that New Hampshire's climate consists of "eleven months of winter and one month of damn poor sledding." Actually, each of the seasons here has its own unique compensations (with the possible exception of mud season, which hijacks most of our spring in this part of the world). I have particularly fond memories of fall in my childhood years, in my home town of Hopkinton.

Labor Day signaled the end of summer, even if technically there were a few more weeks until the official start of fall. A new year of school was starting up, and we were leaving behind the carefree days of swimming, fishing, messing around in small boats, and going barefoot for two straight months. September meant a snap in the air and a sharper quality to the light.

In those days in our town there were organized youth sports for boys in the spring (Little League baseball) and in the winter (youth hockey, in Concord), but none in the fall. (Of course, back then there were no organized sports at all for girls, a shortcoming that fortunately has been cured today.) Our fall routine for every afternoon after school, except when it was raining: my friends and I would meet at the small green in Hopkinton Village to play touch football. The little park had features such as a statue honoring Civil War veterans, various other granite obstacles, trees, and an antique cast iron water trough, originally for horses. All of these features played a role in our games. A pass route might consist of, "Run down, even with the statue, break left, and go around the tree there—I'll throw the ball to you just after you get clear of the tree."

I lived in the village, which meant I would go home from school for lunch every day, like all of the other village kids. In the fall we mostly rode our bikes. Having a good bike was essential. One thing we liked to do was attach, with clothespins, baseball cards to the metal bike frame so that the cardboard cards would extend into the spinning spokes as we rode. Why do this? A very satisfyingly loud noise would emanate, mimicking the sound made by a motorcycle. We competed to see how many baseball cards we could cram onto our bikes, thereby creating the loudest roar.

One particularly noteworthy—and to us, extremely exciting—event occurred when I was around ten or eleven. Those were the days before Interstate 89 had been built, so the main route to points north came through Hopkinton Village, right down Main Street. One fall day a large truck loaded with live chickens (they were all in wooden cages in the open air, stacked on the back of the truck) came through town. The truck driver took a turn too fast, the truck rolled over (the driver was okay), and a very large number of chickens were liberated. The newly free-range

birds scattered everywhere around Hopkinton Village. At every house along Main Street chickens were hiding in hedges, in shrubbery along foundations, behind fences and stone walls…everywhere!

Imagine the adventure for young kids, running from yard to yard, diving through bushes, and sprinting after our surprisingly fleet feathered prey. We captured chickens one-by-one and brought them home to be sequestered in our families' garages. By that evening friends were bragging, "I have fifteen chickens," or, "I have twenty," etc. But by the next morning reality had set in…do we really want all these chickens at our houses? Of course the answer, provided by our parents, was NO. Fortunately the company that owned the chickens came to town the next day and collected them.

There were other rituals of autumn: raking leaves into giant piles to jump into, building little lean-to houses from branches and leaves in the woods behind our school, preparing elaborate costumes for Halloween. I sometimes wonder if our nostalgic recollections of our early lives have a way of being air-brushed, with negative memories minimized, leaving behind only the pleasant residue. I certainly feel nostalgia for those early years of my own life, and count myself very fortunate for having started my life at that time and place. Compared to today, life then was simpler; there was an appealing innocence to it. It seems to me that, although life then of course was not perfect, childhood in those days was an easier proposition than it is today.



"Autumn foliage along the Warner River," photograph by J. Karl Mason in *New Hampshire Vacation Pictorial*, a brochure produced by the New Hampshire State Planning and Development Commission, 1947. New Hampshire Historical Society.

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Remembering the Willey Slide

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down the mountains into the valley where the Willey family lived. The Saco River rose 20 feet that night and washed out most of the bridges in the area. Livestock and buildings were destroyed and parts of the turnpike were washed out.

The damage from the storm was so extensive that it took two days for searchers to reach the Willey house, which they found eerily untouched. Its location in front of a huge granite boulder divided the landslide, causing it to bypass the house. Although the house was intact, it was deserted. The door was ajar, the bedclothes were in disarray, and the family Bible lay open on the kitchen table. After several days of searching, the bodies of Samuel and Polly Willey, two of the children, and David Allen and David Nickerson were found. The remaining three children were never found but presumed dead. The family must have fled their home to escape the landslide but unwittingly ran directly into danger. They never reached the shelter. Ironically, if they had remained in the house, they would have survived.

News of the tragedy quickly spread all over the country. People were fascinated by the fact that all nine people were killed while the house remained. Visitors came to view the site and contemplate the Willeys' fate. The event was popularized by artists, writers, journalists, and even ministers, who saw in the Willeys' demise a metaphor for the power of nature and the sometimes inexplicable will of God. Artist Thomas Cole's first trip to the White Mountains in 1827 included a visit to Crawford Notch, where he sketched the site of the Willey slide. Nathaniel Hawthorne visited the Willey house in 1832 and was inspired to write a short story, "The Ambitious Guest," about the tragedy. Other artists and writers followed suit, contributing drawings, paintings, poems, and even a ballad to the body of work about the Willey slide.

The Willey house became one of America's first major tourist attractions. A local entrepreneur built a hotel attached to the house in 1845 so that visitors could stay overnight where the Willeys died. That same year, the mountain behind the Willey house was named Mount Willey in the family's honor. The house and hotel burned down in 1899, but today the spot where it stood is marked as a state historic site.



Photograph of tourists in front of the Willey house by James Wood Allen (1858–1940), 1889. The Willey House Hotel, built by Horace Fabyan in 1845, is visible to the left. It changed hands several times over the years and burned down in 1899, along with the Willey house. The site is now part of Crawford Notch State Park. New Hampshire Historical Society.

When tourists flocked to the site of the Willey slide, they were struck by the beauty of the White Mountains and quickly found other attractions to visit in the region, such as the Old Man of the Mountain, Flume Gorge, and Mount Washington. Area residents opened inns and hotels, earning a living by housing, feeding, and guiding thousands of visitors each year. By the 1850s railroads had come to the White Mountains, making it easier to travel there, and soon grand resort hotels sprang up to offer luxurious accommodations. Wealthy urban dwellers spent entire summers in the White Mountains to escape the heat and pollution of industrial cities. The more visitors that came, the more the tourist industry expanded. Even today, tourism is the second-largest industry in New Hampshire, generating millions of dollars in revenue and supporting tens of thousands of jobs.

To commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Willey disaster, the New Hampshire Historical Society is offering a new traveling lecture, with staff member Mary Adams delivering a talk about the history of the Willey slide and its impact on tourism, literature, and art. Mary is just wrapping up a successful year of "Redcoats and Rebels" talks about New Hampshire's role in the American Revolution, which brought her to nearly 100 historical societies, libraries, and community centers around the state. Like "Redcoats and Rebels," the Willey slide program will be offered in collaboration with New Hampshire Humanities as part of their Humanities to Go series, beginning in January 2027.

Fall Programs & Events

In-person programs will be held at the New Hampshire Historical Society, 30 Park Street, Concord, unless otherwise noted. For the most up-to-date information on programs and events, visit nhhistory.org and sign up to receive the Society's e-newsletter.

Curator's Tour: *Witness to War: Treasures from the American Revolution*
Saturday, October 10, 2026, 2 p.m.

Join Director of Museum Collections **Jonathan Olly** on a tour of the Society's newest exhibition, *Witness to War: Treasures from the American Revolution*. The exhibition features objects and documents that offer a glimpse of life during the turbulent years of the war and New Hampshire's transition from colony to state in the new nation. Admission is free for Society members, $10 for nonmembers. No registration required.

Lecture: Invisible Monuments: Tribute, Memory, and the Summoning of the Past
Saturday, October 17, 2026, 2 p.m.

We live in an era of monument building, yet we don't look at most of the monuments and memorials around us. Think of all the mute memorials you may pass in a week that are unseen, a blurred background to your daily commute. In this talk, author **Howard Mansfield** shares the call and response of monuments, the back and forth between past and present, which he explores in his latest book. Copies of Mansfield's book will be available for sale and signing at the event. Admission is free for Society members, $10 for nonmembers. No registration required.

Virtual Lecture: Camp Oáhe and the Legacies of Charles and Elaine Eastman
Wednesday, October 21, 2026, 7 p.m.

They were an impressive couple at the turn of the 20th century. Charles Eastman was a Santee Sioux, a Dartmouth-educated doctor, and an author and speaker; Elaine Eastman was a renowned children's author and a national leader in Native American education. Together, they witnessed the massacre at Wounded Knee, helped shape Americans' views of Indians, and started a summer camp in New Hampshire that encouraged the use of indigenous themes in the American camping movement. In this conversation with the Society's Director of Education Elizabeth Dubrulle, scholars **Julie Dobrow** and **Raymond Wilson** discuss the Eastmans' remarkable story. This program, conducted via Zoom, is free for everyone. Advance registration is required through the Programs & Events Calendar on the Society's website at nhhistory.org.

Lecture: Black Abolitionists: The Courage to Stand Up and Speak Out
Saturday, October 24, 2026, 2 p.m.

Black abolitionists displayed amazing courage in advocating for the end of slavery in 19th-century America, often putting their own lives and freedom at risk. Yet, their stories are seldom remembered. Award-winning journalist **Gail Braccidiferro MacDonald** explores this history in her new book, *Abolitionists of the Northeast*. In this talk, MacDonald will focus on four Black figures from New Hampshire: Julia Williams Garnet, Ona Marie Judge, Prince Whipple, and Harriet Wilson. Copies of MacDonald's book will be available for sale and signing at the event. Admission is free for Society members, $10 for nonmembers. No registration required.

Lecture: All Manner of Evil: An Introduction to the Real H. H. Holmes
Saturday, October 31, 2026, 2 p.m.

Born and bred in rural Gilmanton, New Hampshire, H. H. Holmes became one of the 19th century's most ruthless killers. He was a handsome charmer who skillfully made a place for himself among polite society while hiding an ugly secret of fraud, theft, and ultimately murder in a crime spree that ranged from Texas to Toronto. New Hampshire native and local author **Averee Kelly Clark** unmasks H. H. Holmes in this talk about his life, which she explored for her most recent book, a novel that follows the story of the investigations into Holmes and his sensational trial. Copies of Clark's book will be available for sale and signing at the event. Admission is free for Society members, $10 for nonmembers. No registration required.

Virtual Lecture: Genealogy in Early America; or, Why George Washington Was a Genealogist
Wednesday, November 4, 2026, 7 p.m.

Genealogy is everywhere these days, but scholars are just beginning to delve into when and how Americans came to be fascinated by the study of families and the connections that link us all. While we may think of 18th-century Americans as largely the subject of genealogy research, they were active participants in

what was a foundational interest and practice in their own time. Join **Karin Wulf** of Brown University as she discusses her ground-breaking research in the history of genealogy from her book, *Lineage: Genealogy and the Power of Connection in Early America*. This program, conducted via Zoom, is free for everyone. Registration is required through the Programs & Events Calendar on the Society's website at nhhistory.org.

Lecture: After General Stark: Family, Ambition, and a Changing New Hampshire
Saturday, November 7, 2026, 2 p.m.
The legend of Revolutionary General John Stark loomed large over the generations that followed him, even decades after his death. In this talk, author **Jane D. Cairns** introduces her new novel, *Exalted Objects*, and the generation of Starks who inspired it, the Gilded Age railroad magnate George Stark of Nashua and his eccentric younger brother Will. The novel traces the family's legacy and the world they inhabited: a New Hampshire transformed by railroads and industrial development and profoundly shaped by the experience of the Civil War. Copies of Cairns's book will be available for sale and signing at the event. Admission is free for Society members, $10 for nonmembers. No registration required.

Lecture: Tangled Lives: Native People and English Settlers in Colonial New England
Saturday, November 14, 2026, 2 p.m.
The stories we hear from our families tell us who we are and how we should view the world. What tales shaped New England identities in the 17th and 18th centuries? In this presentation, historian **Jo Radner** juxtaposes Native American oral traditions and stories told by her own New England ancestors to reveal a complex colonial "middle ground." This lecture is offered through the **Humanities to Go** program of New Hampshire Humanities, and admission is free.

Virtual Lecture: Bucky Lew and New Hampshire's Role in Integrating Sports
Wednesday, November 18, 2026, 7 p.m.
Harry "Bucky" Lew had integrated both college and professional basketball by 1903, and he didn't stop there. In a career that spanned 25 years and took him all over New England, Lew integrated every conceivable role in the game. He was welcomed in Concord many times, which wasn't the case everywhere. And that kind of welcome prompted the Dodgers to place their first integrated farm team in the United States in New Hampshire, which ultimately led to the full integration of all major league sports. Sports writer **Chris Boucher** shares the tale of the man who broke basketball's color barrier. This program, conducted via Zoom, is free for everyone. Registration is required through the Programs & Events Calendar on the Society's website at nhhistory.org.

Lecture: New Hampshire and Belleau Wood: World War I Soldiers and the Pilgrimages after the War
Saturday, November 21, 2026, 2 p.m.
Heather Warfield of Antioch University focuses on the intersection of history and psychology as she studies the therapeutic impact of pilgrimages in dealing with trauma. In this talk, she explores Belleau Wood, the site of one of the fiercest battles of World War I where U.S. Marines halted the German Spring Offensive of 1918 but at great cost. Warfield discusses New Hampshire connections to this battle, ranging from soldiers who fought there to the pilgrimages of veterans and families after the war. Admission is free for Society members, $10 for nonmembers. No registration required.



Photograph of the Yankee Division Memorial Church, Belleau, France, October 10, 1929. The 26th Infantry Division, known as the Yankee Division, had the largest concentration of New Hampshire men during World War I. During the German Spring Offensive of 1918, American artillery destroyed the village church in Belleau. After the war, Yankee Division veterans raised funds to build a new church on a new site. They returned to Belleau in 1929 to dedicate the church, which also commemorated the division's dead. New Hampshire Historical Society.

Trustee Spotlight



Colin Cabot became a trustee in 2024 and sits on the collections and interpretation committees. Colin was educated at Harvard College and the Harvard Business School and worked in the arts for over 20 years, performing, directing, and producing in the theater. In 1997 Colin and his wife, Paula, moved to Loudon to renew and expand Sanborn Mills Farm. The farm's mission is to teach traditional crafts and farming methods while sustainably using its field and forest resources for its workshops and events. It features two water-powered mills; a traditional blacksmith shop dating to the 1830s; numerous barns and agricultural buildings used as teaching studios and housing for livestock and vintage farming equipment; and a wide variety of gardens. Colin and Paula Cabot recently received a Preservation Achievement Award for Vision and Leadership in Preservation, Craftsmanship, Education, and Advocacy from the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance.



Ann Remus was first elected to the board in 2021 and is currently serving in her second term. She brings a depth of expertise in public education to bear as chair of the education committee. Ann served most recently as the superintendent of schools for the Bedford school district and was previously a K-12 teacher and assistant principal at schools in Peterborough and Bedford. She was also a founder and board chair of the Heronfield Academy in Hampton Falls. Ann was a trustee of the Elliott Health System and is currently a member of the Bald Peak Community Fund, which provides financial assistance to charitable organizations in the Lakes Region. She is a graduate of Mount Holyoke College and holds graduate degrees from Harvard University and Rivier College. Ann and her husband, Paul, live in Bedford.



Business Partners Help Society Complete Renovation

The New Hampshire Historical Society recently completed work on a new state-of-the-art climate control system at the Hamel Center, our collections management facility in Concord. The project was funded in part through the New Hampshire Community Development Finance Authority (CDFA) Tax Credit Program. This public-private partnership, run by the CDFA, provides grants to nonprofit organizations in the form of tax credit equity. We are grateful to the business partners listed below for funding the Society's grant.

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The 603 History Hunt wrapped up with an ice cream social on the Society's lawn on Saturday, August 1, 2026. Players picked up their prizes—603 History Hunt keychains and beach towels—and enjoyed a free scoop of ice cream from Moo's Place. The Temple Band of Temple, New Hampshire, entertained the crowd.