



Q&A: What Was the Old Man of the Mountain?

Fast facts about a New Hampshire Landmark

Q: Was the Old Man of the Mountain a real person?

A: The “Old Man of the Mountain” was the nickname used to describe a natural wonder that people could see on Cannon Mountain in Franconia Notch. Five gigantic layers of granite jutted out from the mountain in such a way that when you looked at them from one angle, they resembled the side view, or profile, of an old man’s face.

Q: Who first saw the Old Man of the Mountain?

A: We do not know for sure who saw it first but its most likely that Abenaki living around what we call Cannon Mountain would have seen the rock formation long before any European settlers. Some people claim it was first seen by a non-Abenaki person around 1805 when a group of men were building a road that cut through Franconia Notch. People who lived outside the region began to learn about the Old Man of the Mountain when a sketch of it was published in a magazine in 1828.

Q: A picture of the Old Man of the Mountain is featured on New Hampshire license plates, road signs, the state quarter, food packaging, and lots of other things. Why is that?

A: When people heard about this unusual natural wonder in the White Mountains, they wanted to see it for themselves. In the mid-1800s, lots of people started coming to New Hampshire for vacation. A view of the Old Man of the Mountain became one of the most popular tourist attractions. As more and more people saw the Old Man, more and more people began to paint it, write about it, and take its photograph. Soon people began to think of it as a symbol of New Hampshire. In fact, in 1945 the state government voted to make the Old Man of the Mountain the official state emblem.

Q: The Old Man of the Mountain isn't on the mountain anymore. What happened?

A: In 1872, hikers reported that the ledges of granite that created the Old Man's face seemed to be moving away from the side of the mountain. Over the next 130 years many people would try different techniques to prevent the ledges from collapsing. In 1916, a stone mason installed strong steel bars, called turnbuckles. Years later, teams of volunteers led by Niels Nielsen and his family would dig trenches to redirect rainwater and plug up cracks in the ledges with a special kind of glue called epoxy. But the process of erosion and rock movement that created the Old Man in the first place never stopped and early in the morning of May 3, 2003, the ledges broke away from Cannon Mountain and the Old Man of the Mountain crumbled.

Q: If the Old Man of the Mountain no longer exists, why is it still the state emblem?

A: The Old Man of the Mountain became a symbol, and symbols often have meaning greater than the physical thing that inspired them in the first place. Symbols communicate information and ideas without using words. The Old Man of the Mountain symbolized something about the personality and values of the people of New Hampshire. Seeing the image of the Old Man of the Mountain reminds people about those qualities and stirs up feelings about those values. What does the Old Man of the Mountain mean to you?

