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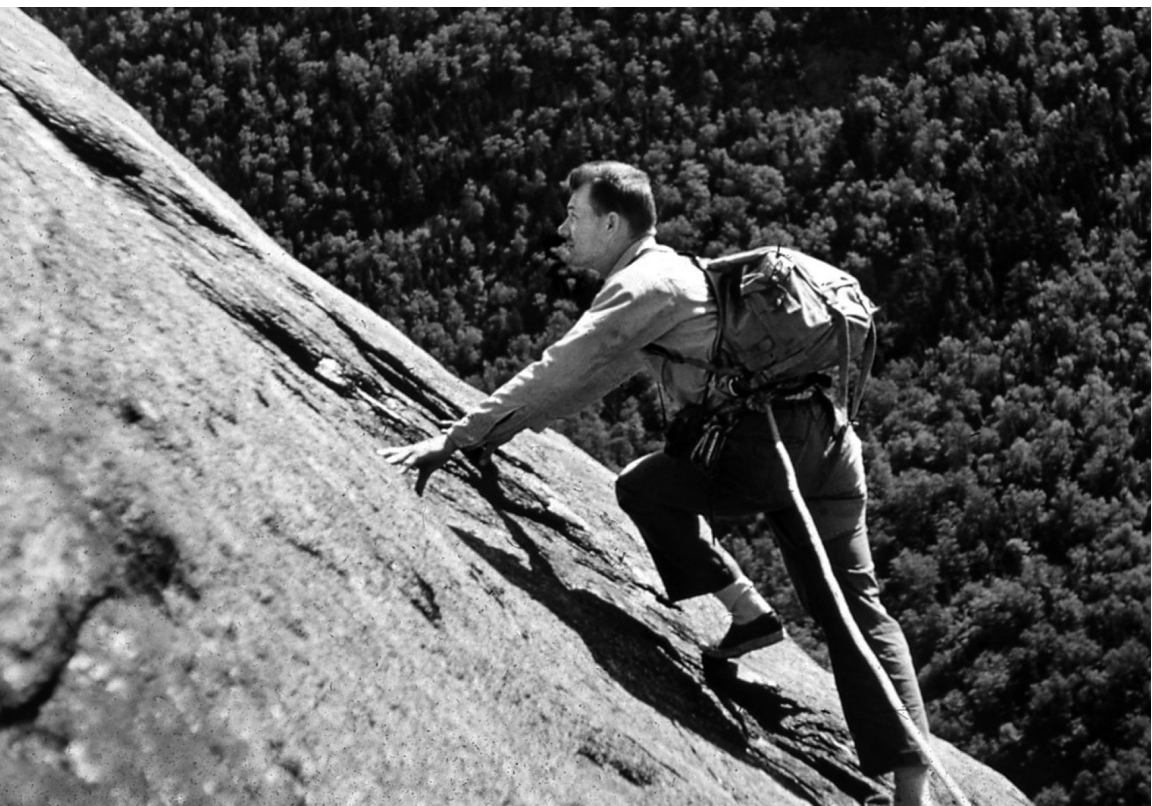
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Climbing Detectives on Mount Willard

Unearthing a long-neglected route

Geoff Wilson



I LOVE THE OLD CLIMBING ROUTES OF THE 1920S AND 1930S. In part, this is because I like climbing the big features in a landscape—prominent cliffs, ridges, and mountains—and because I don't tend to climb very difficult grades, at least from the modern perspective. But it's also because I enjoy being a part of the rich history of people climbing mountains. In North America, the 1920s and early 1930s were a very dynamic time for climbing. Many from that first generation of skilled technical climbers in North America lived in New England and they explored and established routes up nearly all of the big cliffs in the White Mountains. For me, as a hiker and nascent climber living in this region, the early routes of the '20s and '30s were perfect for me. They were of modest technical difficulty, yet provided immense satisfaction by ascending big, imposing features of the landscape. Routes like the Whitney Gilman Ridge on Cannon Cliff, the Northeast Ridge of the Pinnacle in Mount Washington's Huntington Ravine, the standard routes on both Cathedral and Whitehorse ledges, and, farther afield, various routes on Katahdin in Maine and Wallface in the Adirondacks were all early milestones as I developed as a climber. Until this past summer, however, one of their peers, the Standard Route on Mount Willard, had always scared me off. It requires eight to ten pitches, is rated a moderate 5.6, and it is one of the major, commonly climbed routes of the pre-World War II era. By that measure, it would be perfect. But it is also a paradox: Although it was one of the most commonly climbed routes of the late 1920s through at least the 1940s—when climbing equipment was rudimentary by today's standards—it now has a bad reputation for its loose rock and difficult route finding. In contrast to most of the other significant pre-World War II climbing routes, very few climbers active today even consider the route.

My first introduction to Mount Willard was through Ed Webster's second edition of *Rock Climbs in the White Mountains of New Hampshire* (Mountain Imagery, 1987), which covered most of the big cliffs in the region. This guidebook instilled in me a strong sense of climbing history and shaped my early years as a climber by aiding my inclinations to visit less-frequented places. Mount Willard was one of those places, yet I climbed a number of routes on the cliff for years before I was willing to try the original line. The Webster guide describes Willard's Standard Route thus: "Today usually only the lower slabs are climbed due to loose rock and poor protection on the upper face.

A climber works his way up the slabs of Mount Willard sometime in the 1950s.

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A recent attempt by an experienced party to repeat the climb was thwarted by just such conditions, so the climb cannot be safely recommended.” That was enough for me. Despite modest successes climbing technically harder climbs on Mount Willard and elsewhere, I steered clear away from that part of the cliff face for more than fifteen years.

The stars seem to have aligned in the summer of 2010, when my long-time climbing partner, Mason, and I decided it would be a fun summer project to figure out the old route and give it a try. We were both returning to rock climbing after a few years away from it, and we were inspired by a drive to taste something we hadn’t done and for a shared affection for this big cliff conveniently located halfway between our homes. I doubt this would have become a project, though, if it weren’t for a chance meeting with Laura Waterman while out for a hike with my son early in the summer.

Laura and Guy’s classic history, *Yankee Rock & Ice* (Stackpole, 1993), came out when I first moved to the White Mountains and was in the thick of exploring its mountains and crags. Their extensive research, old photographs, and storytelling brought to life the old routes I was cutting my teeth on and led me further afield in the Northeast, always with a deep appreciation of the old climbs and climbers. It had a huge impact on me and I was thrilled for the chance to tell this to Laura. We spoke about many of the old routes, including the Standard Route on Mount Willard. I learned that she and Guy had climbed it while researching the book, and this got me thinking that maybe now was finally the time. I’d never spoken with anyone who had climbed it, and doing so with Laura made it seem a bit less intimidating. Piecing together an old route that very rarely gets climbed anymore sounded inspiring, achievable, and fun.

The first step was to gather information. In addition to the description in the Webster guide, we went back to the original source, the 1929 *Appalachia* volume xvii. This contained both a classic article by Ken Henderson, “Some Rock Climbs in the White Mountains,” as well as a shorter route description penned by Robert Underhill. These convinced us of two things: finding the start to the upper pitches was crucial, and if we did, we had a good chance of climbing the route. Henderson’s article, by covering ascents of Pinnacle Buttress and Cannon as well, made the climb seem feasible as no great distinction was made between Mount Willard and the other routes, both of which were on cliffs we were familiar with. Of course, the fact that he describes climbing Cannon right after driving to it in a soaking rain and hail

storm might have been a clue that he was a climber of a different caliber than we'll ever be, but we ignored that.

The lower pitches more or less follow the central watercourse, which is the winter route, Cinema Gully. Apparently the original route, from 1928, stayed mainly to the right of the watercourse, whereas subsequent variations stayed mainly left. We found the watercourse running with water and chose to start right, where we could take advantage of a few new bolts on a different line before we diverged and continued up to a tree ledge just right of the watercourse. I think this would roughly coincide with the first two pitches of the original line, but after that we found ourselves cutting back and forth across the watercourse in a quest for possible belay stances and intermediate protection. That section of the slabs is not steep and there is no obvious line, except the central one, which runs with water. After three pitches we ended up at a belay in bushes to the right of the last pitch of Cinema Gully, faced with an exit pitch up the mostly wet, left-trending exit of the watercourse. It was not a fun lead, but I think it was the original line. Henderson's article mentions "a difficult traverse . . . necessary to climb onto a narrow and precarious ledge, and then out around and over a bulge in the rock. One more quite hard pitch brought us to the band of vegetation and the luncheon place, just as the ginger ale was being broached." This matched our experience, minus the casual confidence and ginger ale. Henderson did this in 1929 carrying a movie camera on his shoulder, with which he was filming the ascent of the party broaching the ginger ale! Again, he and his compatriots were just fantastic climbers, bold and confident. This was a feeling that crossed our minds frequently on the upper cliff as well.

The climb Henderson wrote up was the third ascent of the lower slabs and second of the complete upper pitches, the first being that same month. The previous year, Robert Underhill and Lincoln O'Brien had quite an epic dealing with rotten rock on a direct attempt straight up from the lower pitches.¹ We knew about the rotten rock on the upper cliff from the route descriptions and stories, but the scramble up from the top of the lower Standard Route to the upper tier reiterated them with nothing but steep, unstable, angular blocks that could have only come from the general area we were headed toward. I would never want to be below a party traveling up that mess.

¹ Waterman, Laura, and Guy Waterman. *Yankee Rock & Ice: A History of Climbing in the Northeastern United States*. Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole, 1993, pp. 28–32.

We expected that the start of the upper pitches of the climb would be difficult to find, based on our own previous experiences on the cliff as well as conversations with others. Webster's guide says to find the upper pitches by walking 100 yards left to reach the bottom of a large, rotten (that is, loose with rock) amphitheater, the route's upper landmark. Similarly, the original description by Underhill in *Appalachia* states that the upper pitches start after a traverse 100 yards left to a large, rotten gully that splits the upper face. I emphasize both because it sounds easy enough, but we still got it wrong the first time, as did another experienced climber I have spoken with since. We went to the base of the cliff and walked left, sticking close to the upper face, but below a complex of buttresses, and found a rotten gully a bit more than 100 yards over which otherwise fit the description. The entire time we felt we were heading too far left, but at the same time didn't feel we missed anything that met the description. Up the gully, we found a rotten amphitheater, with loose rock, and headed up. After two mostly traversing pitches on very unappealing rock (but a pretty location), we convinced ourselves that we were probably not in the right spot, and retreated. This was in the vicinity of the ice climb, Cauliflower Gully, but not quite as far over.

OUR RETREAT GAVE US A CHANCE TO REEVALUATE THE UPPER CLIFF AND determine where we went wrong. It also provided a welcome opportunity to satisfy some more curiosity I had developed about Mount Willard. In my research on the cliff, I reread a fascinating piece by Henry Childs in the December 1945 issue of *Appalachia*, entitled "Mount Willard Ramblings." Childs briefly mentions a still-routine ascent of the Standard Route, but the interest in the article for me lay more in his overall, detailed geography of the mountain. In particular, he mentions and locates two flumes—Butterwort and Hitchcock, both discovered in 1875 by the geologist C.H. Hitchcock, a Dartmouth professor and state geologist who completed a geological survey of New Hampshire from 1868 to 1875.² Butterwort Flume was named that because it contained a population of the small, carnivorous plant, butterwort (*Pinguicula vulgaris*), which prefers calcium-rich habitats and for that reason is very uncommon in the generally calcium-poor White Mountain region. I was curious to see if I could find the plant and also curious to confirm my suspicion, based on my reading of the Childs article, that what was once called

² Kilborne, F.W. *Chronicles of the White Mountains*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1916, pp. 208–214.

Butterwort Flume is now confusingly called Hitchcock Gully, at least by the climbers that frequent the gully as a winter climb.³ For these reasons, we retreated across the tree ledge to the east face of the mountain and rappelled down what most climbers would know as lower Hitchcock Gully. On the way we realized “walk 100 yards left” to find the upper pitches probably should have been interpreted as “scramble up and left by kicking steps up steep, loose pebbles while pulling on tree branches.” We figured we’d try that next time.

As I suspected, the current Hitchcock Gully is the old Butterwort Flume. On rappel, we found the population of Butterwort growing in a beautiful, moist, and shady spot at the top of the lower gully. This is where, in winter, climbers must leave the gully for twenty feet or so of rock climbing to reach the tree-covered ledge. The original Hitchcock Flume, which I later visited as well, is what winter climbers now refer to as the Cleft,⁴ although some recent editions of the Appalachian Mountain Club *White Mountain Guide* do still refer to it as Hitchcock Flume. In keeping with my “respect for my elders” theme, I should note that we stayed on rappel another 75 feet or so past the Butterwort, which Hitchcock found by scrambling around, almost assuredly unroped, in 1875.

FOR OUR SECOND ATTEMPT ON THE STANDARD ROUTE, WE DECIDED to skip the lower pitches, opting instead to climb a newly equipped line to its right, “Hugo’s Horror,” which we had observed a party enjoying while we wandered around the lower pitches of Standard on our first attempt. The folks who recently equipped this old route with intermediate protection bolts and belays did a wonderful job, and we enjoyed each pitch as much as the last. The contrast in the routes was striking—Standard with its vague line of very little protection, and the modern route where you could always see a bolt to keep you climbing in the right direction. The first was more adventurous, but the second had really fun climbing and got us to the tree ledge efficiently and without much stress.

We were right about the start of the upper pitches. We found them easily after scrambling steeply to the top of the buttress and crossing a low-angled but exposed slab. Henderson’s article has a wonderful description of the party climbing the upper pitches: “The labors of the vanguard were heroic to behold. Gilman valiantly led the way, dancing about lightly from foothold

³ Wilcox, R. *An Ice Climber’s Guide to Northern New England*. North Conway, NH: International Mountain Equipment, Inc., 1992.

⁴ *Ibid.*

to foothold and ever urging the rest to be brave and follow him. One or two others wielded mighty hammers, driving in pitons where these were needed, while behind came the self-sacrificing soul with the paint-pot and brush to leave a mark that others might follow where we had been.” Unbelievable. The leader is climbing it, THEN the protection is being put in, THEN they’re painting blazes up the route! The contrast in style I thought I perceived between the easy to follow, retro-bolted (protected with bolts long after the first ascent) Hugo’s Horror and Standard Route as it was originally conceived was actually no real contrast at all—the heightened adventurousness of Standard Route was at least in part because the pitons are very old and the painted blazes had worn off!

The upper pitches lived up to their reputation. The first lead up the right side of the rotten gully was loose and intimidating, although not physically hard. I climbed past where I should have and, in an attempt to find something secure, moved left and spotted a newish, two-bolt anchor. It wasn’t quite on the route but close enough to bring my partner up and regroup. From there, we could see where I went wrong and where the belay we were aiming for was, below and across from us. It looked like we could cut diagonally up and right to rejoin the second pitch, and Mason took the lead. The rock was rotten and protection was scant, so this pitch would make or break us. It was a great bit of route finding and Mason soon encountered an old piton right where we expected the route to be. After a few more, all very old and unreliable, he found a belay of a few old pitons. Unfortunately, either the rock, the piton, or both flexed when pulled on, so it was an unreliable, mixed blessing. He added a few pitons of our own, making it one of those anchors that was probably adequate but you’d never want to find out, and I followed. This was the key pitch, as from here, we could see the rest of the route, and it looked manageable. The next pitch took us to the vertically oriented tree ledge just left of the large cave known as the Devil’s Den. The rock was loose and the protection still wasn’t any good, but the climbing was reasonable and I soon reached the tree ledge, where there was a nice stout spruce to belay from. From here, both route descriptions say to scramble to the top of the ledge before climbing, but the ledge was all just steep pebbles and the rock to the side looked good, so we opted for the rock. With a good belay anchor and finally some appealing rock ahead, we felt quite a bit of relief at this point. That final pitch had the best rock of the upper tier and provided very nice climbing, all the while with antique pitons here and there indicating that this variation, rather than the steep, pebbly tree island, was an old one. It even had reliable protection.

All of the stresses from the uncertainty of the upper pitches melted away in the final meters of the climb, which were exposed to the wind and felt like the top of the long, alpine climbs that we both love. We scrambled, roped, a few hundred feet along the very edge of the cliff to the summit, where after a nice break in the sun we had a wonderful walk down the old carriage road. The Standard Route was worth the wait.

I've spoken with a number of climbers about this route since we climbed it and a common theme is the wonder we all share that this was a popular route in the 1930s and 1940s. I suppose when the fixed pitons were new and reliable and they had blazes to keep them on route, it would have been more straightforward, but we placed new pitons (we removed most of them) and they were often in unreliable rock, making me that much happier that I had modern, sticky rubber climbing shoes providing greater security, not to mention a dynamic, strong rope. Underhill stated that, when comparing the route to the original route on Cannon (since destroyed by rock fall) and the Pinnacle in Huntington Ravine, the climbing on Mount Willard is "on the whole more delicate." I agree. While physically easier than many of its peers from that era, I'd recommend almost all of the other prewar routes to new climbers as safer and more straightforward. However, it was a great adventure and certainly worth a visit for climbers curious about the old routes and who are comfortable with loose rock and marginal protection.

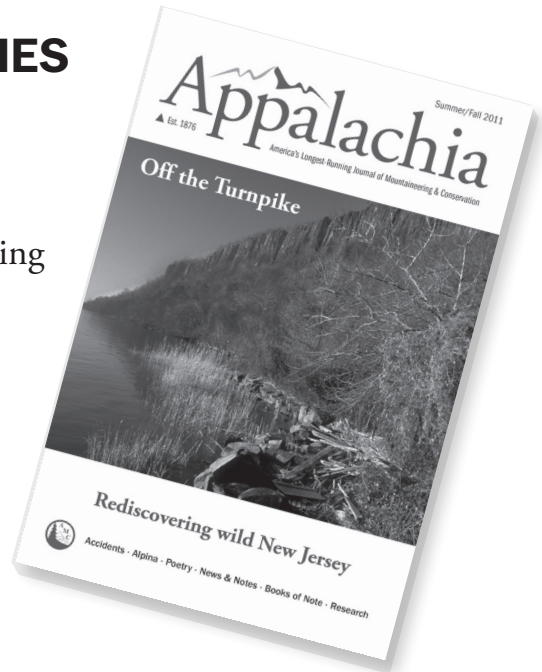
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