

“That great natural curiosity”: The Old Man of the Mountain as Lusus Naturae



Sometime between midnight and 2:00 A.M. on May 3, 2003, the seven hundred tons of Conway granite known as the Old Man of the Mountain lost their grip on Cannon Mountain in Franconia Notch, New Hampshire, and crashed hundreds of feet into the talus slope below. As the rock dust began to clear, the New Hampshire Division of Parks and Recreation opened an online [Scrapbook](#) for those “mourning the loss of this familiar icon” to report their “remembrances” of the Old Man. Letters poured in, sometimes accompanied by photographs or poems, memorializing the profile. New Hampshire natives and nonnatives alike report themselves “deeply saddened,” even “devastated with the news” that “the Old Man passed away,” and explain that losing the Old Man is “like losing a member of one’s family.” But while some recommend his reconstruction, many join the Schindler family of New York in pleading, “Please, please, please!!! Don’t let the Governor put up some bogus plastic ‘Old Man of the Mountain’ to replace the original.” “Men can never recreate what nature carved out thousands, possibly millions of years [ago],” observed one mourner. “Trying to ‘recreate’ the Old Man,” explained another, “would cheapen what God/Nature created.”

The popular conviction that the Old Man of the Mountain was a deliberate and irreplaceable work of “God/Nature” demonstrates the longevity of the nineteenth-century identification of this granite formation as a natural *curiosity*. A visiting college student in 1831 seems to have been the

first to label the profile—which measured sixty feet from forehead to chin, and hung fifteen hundred feet above the floor of Franconia Notch—“that great natural curiosity,” meaning a rarity of nature that evoked a sense of wonder. By midcentury, regional guidebooks were proclaiming it “one of the greatest curiosities in the world,” and calling the Franconia Notch—site of the Basin, the Flume, and the Pool, as well as the profile—“a huge museum of curiosities.”



“Old Man Above the Clouds,” stereo card, ca. 1884. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

More specifically, the Old Man represented a kind of curiosity called the *lusus naturae*, a play or joke of nature. As the seventeenth-century Danish physician Olaf Worm had observed, “Nature has joked (*lusit*) uncommonly in all the outward appearances of natural things.” Stones shaped like coiled serpents, shells that resembled flowers, tree fungus formed like the human ear: all illustrated nature’s playful tendency to shape some natural forms to resemble others, often crossing the boundaries between the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms. And one of the most common forms of the *lusus naturae* was the geological formation that resembled a human profile, whether of King Arthur, St. Vartan of Armenia, or Christ himself. The identity of the Old Man of the Mountain was playfully debated: was it Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, or Daniel Webster? A Titan, a Sphinx, or “some hoary patriarch of antiquity”? A Roman warrior in a metal helmet or a “Revolutionary worthy” in a three-cornered hat? Whoever he was, the Old Man of the Mountain was “a work of Nature in her mood of majestic playfulness,” as Nathaniel Hawthorne observed in his short story, “The Great Stone Face” (1850).

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, natural historians had usually seen the *lusus naturae* as a phenomenon that defied scientific explanation. But the Old Man of the Mountain was a creature of the nineteenth century: first noticed by Euro-Americans—workmen on the Franconia Notch road—in about 1805; first

mentioned in print in 1827, in the *American Journal of Science*, edited by Yale geologist Benjamin Silliman; and increasingly recognized as an important tourist attraction after 1830. And the rising interest in the profile paralleled a growing fascination with the science of geology, which was entering American college curricula, and drawing popular attention among the middle and upper classes, in the 1820s and '30s. Professional geologists and amateur rock hunters flocked to the White Mountains (which included the Franconia Range), regarded as a superb site for the study of geomorphology. On a trip to the region in 1832, Hawthorne described one fellow tourist as "a scientific, green-spectacled figure in black, bearing a heavy hammer, with which he did great damage to the precipices, and put the fragments in his pocket." The partnership between geology and tourism was strong: while tourist guides expounded upon the geological forces that had shaped popular destinations, geologists' reports included "scenographical geology," the discussion of "those striking features of our scenery, that are the result chiefly of geological changes, and which produce landscapes abounding in beauty and sublimity." The Old Man of the Mountain was thus a *lusus naturae* for a highly geological age.

By the early nineteenth century, the science of geology was seriously coming to terms with the immense age of the earth. A century earlier, most geologists had worked within the seemingly unassailable assumption that the history of nature was coterminous with the scriptural account of the Creation. By this calculation, the age of the earth was roughly six thousand years, and Adam and Eve had arrived on the scene just a few days after God's fiat of light and the emergence of dry land. But the findings of eighteenth-century natural historians such as the Comte de Buffon and James Hutton began to suggest that the earth was perhaps millions of years old, and to detach human history—reported in Holy Scripture—from the considerably longer history of life forms—recorded in the fossil record. The new geology even uncovered an extensive "Azoic" period, before the appearance of any life forms, evidenced in rock that contained no fossils. These findings informed the dominant system of rock classification at the end of the eighteenth century. "Primary" or "primitive" rock was the oldest type, unstratified and non-fossil-bearing, typically found in mountain regions. "Secondary" rock came next, with its fossil-bearing strata, typically found in the lower hills. "Tertiary" or alluvial rock came last, a mixture of unconsolidated rock and gravel, typically found on low land.

The earliest geological assessments of the White Mountains indicated that "These mountains every where present a primitive character" and "are now such as they came from the hand of their Creator; venerable from their age, and sublime from their elevation." For well-informed geologists, this view did not necessarily date the White Mountains to the earliest moments of earth-history, since the process of earth formation was increasingly understood to be gradual and ongoing, or "uniformitarian." But for many nineteenth-century visitors to Franconia Notch, this fragment of geological knowledge offered all the grounding they required to claim that the Old Man of the Mountain was original

to the Creation as recorded in the Book of Genesis. In 1850, Mrs. Mary Glover—later known as Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science—suggested that at the very moment when “creation vast began, / And loud the universal fiat ran, / ‘Let there be light!” the Old Man of the Mountain had risen “from chaos dark set free” as “a monument of Deity!” This view proved surprisingly resistant to modification by Louis Agassiz’s glacial theory of New England geomorphology, which was gaining ground among geologists by mid-century. In 1878, the poet Charles Fletcher Lummis addressed the Old Man of the Mountain saying, “From out the womb of Chaos wast thou born, / When the first sunrise from the gates of morn / Stepped forth celestial and drew back the bars / Of darkness.” But even when Romantic tales of the profile’s origins rested on the Biblical Creation myth, many still assumed the new geological sense of deep time, which assigned an immense age to the earth before the beginnings of human history. The Old Man of the Mountain, wrote Thomas Starr King in 1859, “was pushed out from the coarse strata of New England thousands of years before Adam.”

And therein lay the wonder of wonders that was the Old Man of the Mountain. The hand of God had sculpted a human face in primitive mountain rock many thousands—perhaps millions—of years before he created humankind. Across that lonely time gap separating Adam and Eve from the creation of the earth, and even from the oldest living forms documented in the fossil record, the Old Man had endured: “Confronting Time with those sublime, / Impassive, adamantine features.” The Franconia profile was thus enlisted to the task of offering theological reassurance to Americans confronting the terrors of geological deep time. First, the profile offered a demonstration of the most persuasive Enlightenment argument for the existence of God, the argument from design, classically stated in William Paley’s *Natural Theology: or, the Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*: “There cannot be design without a designer.” Just before entering Harvard Divinity School in 1842, Transcendentalist Samuel Johnson wrote of his encounter with the Old Man: “Nothing I have seen so wonderfully evidences the Action of an intelligent Author of Nature than this,” “the most perfect transcript of living man that ever was produced.”

Second, the ancient profile clearly indicated which creature from his vast Creation the “Author of Nature” most valued. Just as the earlier scientific revolution in astronomy had threatened humankind with insignificance by vastly expanding the spatial compass of the universe, the revolution in geology challenged human self-importance by vastly expanding the temporal duration of earth history. How important could humankind be, given the many (and multiplying) geologic eras that had elapsed between the formation of the oldest Azoic rock and the first appearance of human creatures on the earth? To this troubling question, the Old Man of the Mountain offered a soothing answer: however late humankind’s arrival on the scene, the Franconia profile proved that man had been God’s central purpose all along. As an unidentified orator (usually supposed to have been Daniel Webster) famously proclaimed, “Men put out signs representing their different trades; jewelers hang out a monster

watch; shoemakers, a huge boot; and, up in Franconia, God Almighty has hung out a sign that in New England he makes men." What was most important was that God Almighty had hung out that granite sign some millions of years before he created the life form it advertised, proclaiming his ultimate purpose in the very medium, Azoic rock, that had initially seemed so threatening to human self-importance.

Third, and perhaps most important, the Old Man of the Mountain was uniquely situated to bridge the "abyss of time" formulated by the new geology. The most unsettling aspect of geological deep time was the loneliness of pre-Adamic history, a time span of many millions of years that had gone unwitnessed by human eyes. The nineteenth-century appeal of the Old Man of the Mountain lay in the Romantic fantasy that a granite profile—New Hampshire's "oldest inhabitant"—had served as the eternal witness to all earth history, human and prehuman. As a White Mountains guidebook explained in 1846, "During unnumbered ages he has held his solitary vigils here, looking down with '*infinite dignity*' upon changes no human eye has witnessed." Poet Harry Hibbard attributed the Old Man's undoubted wisdom to "all that thou hast had a chance to see, / Since Earth began." Though "Man's life-tide ebbs and flows as flows the sea," wrote Charles Lummis, "Thou lookest out upon eternity." By 1878, John Townsend Trowbridge was imagining the Old Man as an eyewitness to all the processes of geomorphology, including Agassiz's glacial age and, somewhat paradoxically, those processes that had shaped the profile itself:

With unconcern as grand and stern,

Those features viewed, which now survey us,

A green world rise from seas of ice,

And order come from mud and chaos.

Canst thou not tell what then befell?

What forces moved, or fast or slow;

How grew the hills; what heats, what chills,

What strange, dim life, so long ago?

High-visaged peak, wilt thou not speak?

One word, for all our learned wrangle!

What earthquakes shaped, what glaciers scraped,

That nose, and gave the chin its angle?"

In the end, the Old Man did actually "tell" what geological forces had created him. Before his final tumble from Cannon Mountain, twentieth-century geologists had concluded that, though the Conway granite of the profile formed 181 million years ago and the Cannon Cliffs were first plucked out by glacial action about 12,400 years ago, the particular configuration of granite ledges that made up the Old Man of the Mountain had appeared relatively recently—perhaps shortly before those road workers noticed him in 1805 (a possible explanation for the failure of the earliest explorers and settlers of Franconia Notch to make any mention of this natural curiosity during the half century before 1805). The Cannon Cliffs are the most active bare rock slope in the White Mountains; they are being steadily eroded by a geological process called exfoliation—which probably would have peeled off the Old Man's face years earlier had construction workers not strapped it to the mountain with turnbuckles, first in 1917 and again in 1958.

When the Old Man finally went, he took with him the remains of his most devoted caretaker, Niels Nielsen, who had provided annual maintenance of the profile from 1965 to 1991: adjusting the turnbuckles, applying epoxy to granite fractures, and doing his best to stabilize this beloved monument. After Nielsen's death in 2001, his son David honored his father's labor by placing his ashes in the Old Man's left eye, unintentionally ensuring that his father's remains would soon be buried with the Old Man's in the talus pile below. In the end, the Old Man of the Mountain proved just as mortal as the race of creatures whose face he resembled, the race that had tried and failed to ensure that the Old Man would last forever. Nevertheless, his "birth" (to echo a favorite metaphor of his nineteenth-century admirers) was well timed to coincide with the geological discovery of deep time, and to reassure generations of Americans of their ultimate importance within the divine scheme of Creation.

Further Reading: For a useful and accessible anthology of nineteenth-century writings about the Old Man of the Mountain, see John T.B. Mudge, ed., *The Old*

Man's Reader: History & Legends of Franconia Notch (Etna, N.H., 1995). Since the landmark's collapse, Robert Hutchinson has compiled a memorial volume, *The Old Man of the Mountain* (San Francisco, 2003), filled with historical and contemporary photographs. The richest collections of printed works about the Old Man are located in the White Mountains collection at Dartmouth College, and at the New Hampshire Historical Society. [Click here](#) for online discussions of the Old Man's demise. On the history of geology and the age of the earth, see Francis C. Haber, *The Age of the World: Moses to Darwin* (Baltimore, 1959); and P. Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time: The History of the Earth and the History of Nations from Hooke to Vico* (Chicago, 1984). On the geological history of New England, see Chet Raymo and Maureen E. Raymo, *Written in Stone: A Geological History of the Northeastern United States* (Hensonville, N.Y., 2001).

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