



"...in the mountains of New Hampshire there is a union of the picturesque, the sublime, and the magnificent; there the bare peaks of granite, broken and desolate, cradle the clouds; while the valleys and broad bases of the mountains rest under the shadow of noble and varied forests; and the traveler who passes the Sandwich range on his way to the White Mountains, of which it is a spur, cannot but acknowledge, that although in some regions of the globe nature has wrought on a more stupendous scale, yet she has nowhere so completely married together grandeur and loveliness – there he sees the sublime melting into the beautiful, the savage tempered by the magnificent."

Thomas Cole, "Essay on American Scenery," 1836

From Land to Nation

Nation-Building in the New Hampshire Landscape

John X. Christ

2018



Thomas Cole, *A View of the Mountain Pass Called the Notch of the White Mountains (Crawford Notch)*, 1839.

Telling Stories in Crawford Notch

The American tradition of landscape painting in the nineteenth century, a tradition we associate especially with the Hudson River School, traces its roots back to the paintings of Thomas Cole. Many of his works, including the one to our left, present themselves to the viewer as convincing documents of particular places. As one looks closer, however, it becomes apparent that these are not objective transcriptions of these particular places in time but are instead finely worked narrative constructions, stories in time that unfold to the viewer through space. These are tales of weather, geology, and adventure but also of geographic and cultural integration, of nationhood.

Thomas Cole, born in England in 1801 and residing in the United States since 1818, painted his view of Crawford Notch in 1839. To the eye accustomed to the visual tropes of the nineteenth century landscape, certain features are almost immediately evident. There is the stump of a felled tree just right of center in the foreground, a reminder of the dangers of human encroachment upon the wilderness. A storm passes off to the left, opening up to clearer skies, suggesting of a passage from the sublime power of the untamed wilderness to the beauty of a peaceful coexistence with the land.

The seemingly limitless power of the land presented itself with an especially raw narrative appeal as we peer back at the buildings toward which the man on horseback is riding. Crawford Notch is the site of the famed avalanche that in 1826 killed seven members of the Willey family and two workers. The evacuated Willey House, sited along the collapsing rock faces of the notch, survived. It was this awe-inspiring story that ignited many curious readers to first visit the White Mountains as tourists and artists.

Even with their dangerous twists, these stories provide a therapeutic response for tourists to the rapid industrialization and urbanization of nineteenth-century culture, providing a space for the middle class to commune with nature, breathe the fresh air, and take a break from the routines of daily life. They also had a moral and ethical dimension directly tied to their role in constructing an American culture rooted in the perceived uniqueness of the American wilderness and in the awe-inspiring power of God's creations.



Thomas Hill, *Crawford Notch*, 1872.

The Natural Sublime

The sublime power of nature, so evident in the narrative constructions of the American wilderness, played a key role in building a national identity for the young United States. In the early decades of the republic, the unfathomably powerful and vast American landscape was inextricably tied to devotion, both to the perceived purity of the untrammelled land as an almost Edenic creation of God and to what some have described as an emerging "national religion" of landscape culture.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the experience and perception of the land and our ability to mentally frame it as landscape, were deeply meaningful experiences with profound moral and ethical implications. Thomas Cole described these spiritual dimensions of the wilderness:

And to his cultivated state our western world is fast approaching; but nature is still predominant, and there are those who regret that with the improvements of cultivation the sublimity of the wilderness should pass away; for those scenes of solitude from which the hand of nature has never been lifted, affect the mind with a more deep toned emotion than aught which the hand of man has touched. Amid them the consequent associations are of God the creator – they are his undefiled works, and the mind is cast into the contemplation of eternal things.

He continues by describing how collective experiences are built upon individual sensations:

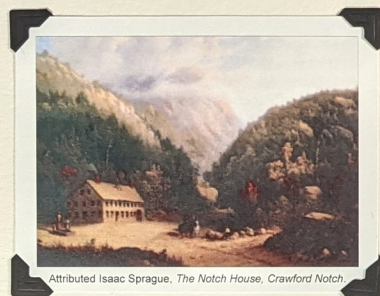
The delight such a man experiences is not merely sensual, or selfish, that passes with the occasion leaving no trace behind; but in gazing on the pure creations of the Almighty, he feels a calm religious tone steal through his mind, and when he has turned to mingle with his fellow men, the chords which have been struck in that sweet communion cease not to vibrate.

Unmistakably, the experience of sublimity before the land played a decisive historical role in wedding religion, nationality, and landscape in American culture.

It should not be forgotten that this emerging national ideology of the unspoiled and sublime wilderness rested upon a willful amnesia, an unwillingness to remember that the land had long been settled and cultivated by indigenous peoples. Cole plied his words carefully to describe the "savage beasts and scarcely less savage men" that once lived here. Without denying their existence, he dehumanized them as savages incapable of transforming the land beyond its raw state as a direct manifestation of the divine.

"Next to the ascent of Mount Washington, . . . you will wish to explore the attractions of this widely-famed pass in the mountains. The peculiar grandeur of this vast and awful gorge cannot be described in words, and the artist transmits the grand outlines but imperfectly. On either hand, the forbidding line of precipices tower above you in imposing grandeur, and you halt and turn to admire its save ruggedness."

Snow's Handbook of Northern Pleasure Travel, 1878



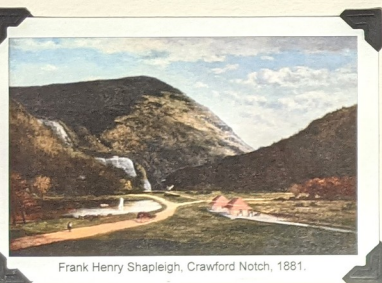
Attributed Isaac Sprague, *The Notch House, Crawford Notch*.

Tourism and the Education of Visual Experience

Landscape tourism is inextricably bound up with the framing and management of visual experiences. The hospitality industry provided not only food and accommodations to tourists but helped educate their sensibilities so that they too, like professional artists, would be able to discern in the land the presence of composed and consumable landscapes. Windows and verandas looked out onto such views. The images printed within the pages of the railroad brochures and the guidebooks that lured them to the mountains presented aesthetically ordered and meaningful scenes that would anticipate and educate their more direct experiences when the time finally came to make the voyage north.

Tourists visited Crawford Notch and the broader White Mountain region to enjoy the beauty they had been taught to perceive in the land. They came to explore for themselves the places about which they had heard and seen so much. They came to find solitude and spiritual renewal through their periodic escapes from urban industrial life in America's metropolitan centers. And though they did come for these wilderness experiences, they also came for the social distinction of luxurious consumption. They came for the mountain houses and resort hotels, for opulent dining experiences, and for intellectual reverie, the last guided by, among others, the artists-in-residence that rounded out the experiences offered by many of the region's hotels.

Frank Henry Shapleigh was just such an artist-in-residence, residing at the popular Crawford House from 1877 to 1893. As an individual that, by many accounts, shared the sophisticated tastes and manners of the middle class guests, he would not only mingle with them but provide a model of the tourist to be emulated. His presence mirrored the pedagogical role of his paintings in shaping the consumption of White Mountain scenery. Though not pictured directly, his painting on the opposite page describes a view that one might find from the Crawford House. And unlike the preceding pictures by Cole or Hill, Shapleigh does not shy away from the amenities enjoyed by tourists. In the distance, a train arrives into the Notch and along its tracks are seen a depot and telegraph wires. The tourism industry played a key role in the rapid geographic integration of the White Mountains into the cultural and economic fabric of the United States.



Frank Henry Shapleigh, *Crawford Notch*, 1881.

"There is in the human mind an almost inseparable connection between the beautiful and the good, so that if we contemplate the one the other seems present."

Thomas Cole



Winslow Homer, Artists Sketching in the White Mountains, 1868.

"In copying nature, we have attained a nationality by the reproduction of scenes appertaining to our climate, and of beauties familiar to every eye. ... From admiration of locality, the mind of every reflective being passes to appreciation of nationality, and from the enthusiasm of nationality, is but a step to the grandeur of universality."

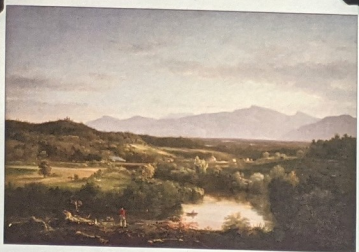
Cosmopolitan Art Journal, June 1857

A Site of Imagined Communities

The appreciation of the White Mountains and other scenic landscapes is a process that encompasses far more than an individual finding well-ordered moments of beauty in the land, though that personal experience is often the point of departure. These views gained meaning and consequence in their cultural accretion into the connective tissue that bound communities and the nation together. The tourism industry and landscape painters of the nineteenth century, sometimes willfully and sometimes not, participated in a process of creating what the scholar Benedict Anderson has referred to as an "imagined community" of shared interests and culture that forms the backbone of our society's notions of nationality and the modern nation-state.

We must remain careful, though, not to assume that this process was an easy one or one free of the contradictions and deep fissures that mark the broader course of the history of the United States. Nation-building never attains full inclusiveness or conclusion. Not only is this imagined community built upon its ability to distinguish itself from other nations external to itself but internally too there are exclusions of class, race, gender, and region that resist integration, whether because of the complexity of the process itself or through the refusal of these groups to comply with the dynamics of the normative vision proffered. "Like other cultural endeavors such as institutionalized religion and education," the art historian Angela Miller writes, "landscape images worked their power over viewers, in theory at least, by formalizing values that unified people of similar social backgrounds across geographic lines." Yet she goes on to describe just how incomplete this integration ultimately is with regard to the dynamics described above as well as the competing aesthetic idealizations of the land as wilderness, as pastoral, or as the bedrock of a modern industrial powerhouse striving to reach its Manifest Destiny.

That the White Mountain region has the ability, an ability it shares with certain other regions, to stand in synecdochically for the nation as a whole should not come as a surprise. After all, the peaks of its most commonly celebrated range of mountains, the Presidentials, were named after a selection of U.S. presidents with Washington towering magisterially above them all. This practice of naming is just the most literal of the many ways in which the nation has been symbolically inscribed into the land.



Thomas Cole, River in the Catskills, 1843.



Asher B. Durand, Progress (The Advance of Civilization), 1853.

"Yet I cannot but express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes are quickly passing away – the ravages of the axe are daily increasing – the most noble scenes are made desolate, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation. The way-side is becoming shadeless, and another generation will behold spots, now rife with beauty, desecrated by what is called improvement; which, as yet, generally destroys Nature's beauty without substituting that of Art. This is a regret rather than a complaint; such is the road society has to travel; it may lead to refinement in the end, but the traveler who sees the place of the rest close at hand, dislikes the road that has so many unnecessary windings."

Thomas Cole

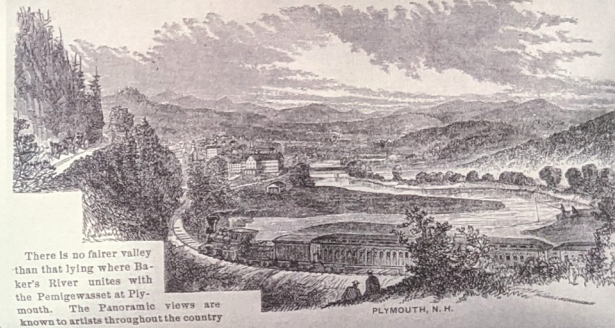
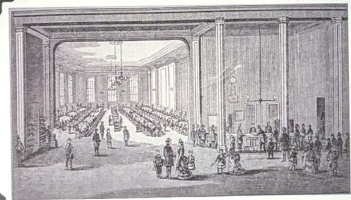
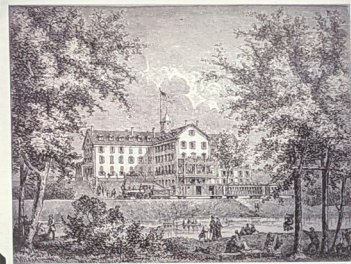
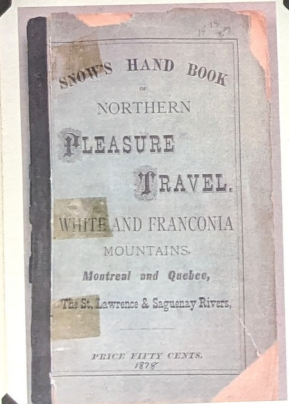
Modernization Grips the American Land

American landscape painters of the nineteenth century, as we have already begun to see, did not ignore the impact of modernization. Even where completely absent from the finished picture, the backdrop of modernization is at the root of the drive toward landscape tourism and art. Industrialization was the enduring foil to the wilderness in so much American culture. Yet, to see industry and the natural land in a purely antagonistic relationship would do a disservice to the complexities of this cultural moment.

Thomas Cole was among the most adamant in his exhortation of industrialization, logging, and the train. And yet it was also Cole who created what is often credited to be the first painted representation of a train in American art. *River in the Catskills* is a puzzling picture. Scholars of American art have wondered just how one is to understand this train. Is it, like the figure in the foreground with the ax and the tree stumps, a subtle reminder of the dangers of modernization and the potential loss of the wilderness that was so central to Cole's visual narratives? Or has he naturalized it into the picturesque landscape, an acceptance of a certain level of development, that like the pastoral farmlands with their picturesque vales might be integrated into his American vision?

Turning to the works of Asher B. Durand, we are left mulling fewer questions about his ultimate intent but are left similarly beguiled by a certain nostalgia that creeps into even his most positive evocations of technology. In *Progress*, Durand spatializes historical development as a journey toward the horizon and the vaguest hint of a city that almost imperceptibly rises there. As we leave the wilderness, we progress toward ever newer forms of transportation and communication, including telegraph lines leading us out of the foreground, the train just visible along the shore in the middle ground, and the wonders of what might await us on the horizon. As Angela Miller has written: "Durand and his audience were conditioned by the utopian promise of technological change, abetted by nationalist rhetoric and popular images, to view technology, working in tandem with natural features, as the agent that would draw together the republic." But why do we remain in the wilderness witnessing this marvel from afar alongside the American Indians standing to the left. We return to the words of Miller: "*Progress* epitomizes the powerful undertow of nostalgia running beneath the progressive current of national life in these years."

A journey north to the White Mountains, frequently made by rail, took many visitors through Plymouth, NH, where they might stay the night at the Pemigewasset House.



There is no fairer valley than that lying where Baker's River unites with the Pemigewasset at Plymouth. The Panoramic views are known to artists throughout the country

PLYMOUTH, N. H.

Two individuals sitting on a hill enjoy the scene of a train passing through the land. Its tracks pull our eyes through the space mirroring the curves of the Pemigewasset River and frame a view of Plymouth in the middle ground and the White Mountains in the distance.



Edward Hill, Crawford Notch from the Elephant's Head, 1886.



Edward Hill, Crawford Notch from Mount Willard.

"The celebration of the train as an agent of nationalism was only one point along a spectrum. . . . If nationalists insisted that trains unified communities, the new technology also imposed on small rural communities a regimented schedule determined by metropolitan timetables which interrupted their sense of organic time adjusted to the natural rhythms of work and community life."

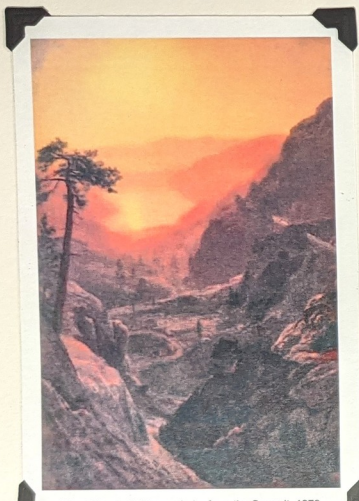
Angela Miller
Empire of the Eye
1996

The Railroad Reshapes America

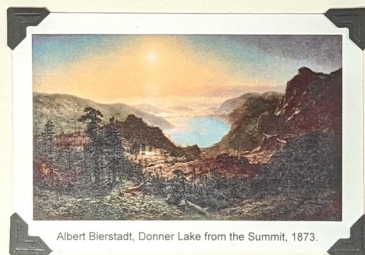
The railroad reshaped American geography in profound ways in the nineteenth century. It facilitated the integration of diverse regions by moving people and goods across space at greater speeds. Visually, its tracks, guided by the engineer's predilection for relatively even grades, incised horizontal lines across the land, almost echoing the contour lines of a topographic map. These and numerous other factors account not only for the train's increasing technological and economic but also cultural and symbolic hold on American society.

By many accounts, the train was, in its early years, a magnificent and awe-inspiring sight as it moved across the land. From within its cars, the landscape was transformed in yet further ways as the scenery, framed by its windows, rushed by at tremendous speeds. The railroad grew ever more deeply entwined with scenic imagery and the sublime landscape. "What captivated them," the historian Leo Marx writes, "was the coming together of the locomotive's smooth, metallic efficiency, compact with purpose, and the organic forms of the landscape." While today's tourist trains through the White Mountains have replaced some of this modern dynamism with nostalgia, the railroad remains an exciting and enticing element of the tourist economy to this day.

The prominent presence of the train running through Crawford Notch guided my decision to choose this site as a case study in the American sublime. Unsurprisingly, it was the train running through this notch and not one of the growing number of logging railroads stretching through the mountains that attracted artists. Railroad magnates not infrequently commissioned such pictures, thereby promoting their own visions of the railroad's integration into the land, bringing nature and technology into a harmonious coexistence that could fuel the further growth of their business and quell worries about the negative impacts of modernization. Far from destroying the wilderness, as Cole worried, the railroad could allow for a more open and dynamic access to nature.



Albert Bierstadt, Donner Lake from the Summit, 1873.



Albert Bierstadt, Donner Lake from the Summit, 1873.

The Technological Sublime

American culture and national identity were constructed not only through an engagement with the natural sublime of the wilderness but also the technological sublime of the railroad and then later the skyscraper, the suspension bridge, the hydropower dam, and other technological feats. The train impressed with its sheer size and speed as it surged across the land. It also enabled the American ideology of Manifest Destiny to be achieved not only *in name* by expanding U.S. territorial boundaries as far as the Pacific Ocean but also *in fact* by providing a means of integrating that land into a cohesive whole.

Nicolas Brinded, following the path laid by such scholars as Leo Marx and David Nye, has studied the role of the train in American nation-building. The sublime, he writes, is "a mythic structure that became linked to an American idea of nationalism. In the nineteenth-century, the first painters of American scenery used the aesthetics of the natural sublime to hint at the grandeur of the New World, and the boundless possibility and plenty offered by the largely untouched continent. In the later nineteenth-century and early twentieth century the sublime mutated into a celebration of man-made feats. Railroads, bridges, and skyscrapers came to be regarded as an American technological sublime, and were celebrated as examples of native industry and craftsmanship. The technological sublime replaced the natural sublime both figuratively and literally, as the country became more and more overrun by Euro-American colonization, and wilderness areas were annexed to National Parks."

Among the greatest feats of the railroad in the nineteenth century as it stretched ever farther westward, was its successful traverse of the Sierra Nevada at Donner Pass. Donner Pass, like Crawford Notch, is the site of a widely reported tragedy, the snowbound Donner Party who reverted to cannibalism as they starved on their way to California. The successful traverse by train, though beset by many setbacks due to the harsh winters and the difficulties involved in installing protective sheds over the tracks, was described as a marvel of ingenuity and technological prowess. Collis Huntington, vice president of the Central Pacific Railroad, commissioned the painter Albert Bierstadt to paint this triumph. The result, in which the route is a small but not necessarily minor element, brings together the natural and technological sublime in a patriotic hymn to American greatness.

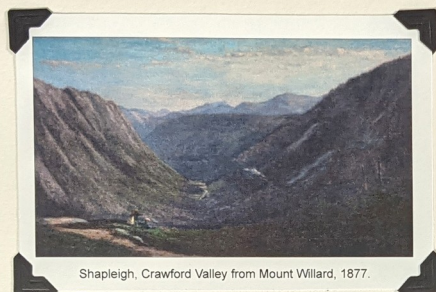
Building a Nation

Landscape tourism in the White Mountains was founded upon the celebration of the American land as a national resource to be appreciated for its beauty and its sublime power. The railroad, though an emblem of peril to several patriotic boosters of the American wilderness, notably Cole, fairly quickly became tightly entwined with the enjoyment and meaningful appropriation of the land as image, as landscape. As Nicolas Brinded emphasizes, the railroad, far from detracting from the scenery, "was a vehicle of territorial conquest and nation-building" even in the context of landscape painting and tourism. "The nation-building aspect of the railroad," he continues, "is both physical and symbolic: the railroad connected the nation in a way that transformed commerce and travel, and helped to actually build one 'nation' as opposed to a number of disconnected regions; symbolically it served an important role in altering the myth of the American nation, from a place of agrarian plenty into a place of great technological prowess." Even in the era of the technological sublime, nation-building continued to point back to the natural sublime that has informed national identity in the United States since at least the nineteenth century.

Not all citizens have had the opportunity to fully participate in this process. Landscape tourism today, just as in the nineteenth century, is built upon certain exclusions based upon class, race, gender, and region. While outdoor and nature-based recreation has made some strides in this regard, many of the old limitations tied to wealth and often expressed through disparities of cultural capital and education continue to shape demographic patterns and especially practical modes of participation in landscape tourism. Many of these patterns roughly follow broader trends in the access of various groups to full participation in democracy and nation-building in the United States. Perhaps this is a sign of further changes to come as we search for better forms of inclusiveness and solidarity, as we build new political cultures that are able to unite us in ways that move beyond our reliance upon national identity as their organizing force.



Shapleigh, Crawford Notch from Bugle Cliff, 1893.



Shapleigh, Crawford Valley from Mount Willard, 1877.

In Shapleigh's pictures, the train moves through the Notch disturbing neither the sublimity nor the beauty of the natural environment. Sightseers atop Mount Willard gesture toward the train as it passes through, a brief moment of excitement and wonder at the technological sublime before the awe of the natural sublime reasserts its commanding presence.

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