Recovery of the Old Bridle Path on Mt. Lafayette

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Before leaving home for the summer, I was entrusted by Mr. Miller, Councillor of Trails, with the task of reopening a route between Lafayette Place and Eagle Lake, which had been authorized by the Council. There were apparently three bases for working out a practicable route: (1) a location strictly upon the watershed between the Pemigewasset River and the brook which drains Eagle Lake; (2) the boundary between the present State and National Forests, which lies for a considerable distance substantially on the crest of this ridge; and (3) the old bridle path which had once connected Lafayette Place and the Lake.

The only preliminary study which Mr. Miller and I could make was of this old bridle path. From Harper's Magazine for June, 1852, we learned that it was opened during that season, and that the route had previously been used as a foot path—it may be assumed at least two years before. Frank O. Carpenter says in 1898 in his Guide Book to the Franconia Notch:

The old Bridle Path formerly began at Lafayette Place, the clearing two and one-half miles south of the Profile House on the road, and followed the only suitable route up the long, curving west spur, giving frequent outlooks and easy grades. This path, unused for forty years, was reopened in 1897 at the expense of the Appalachian Mountain Club. . . . The path leaves the road one-half mile south of the "half-way" clearing referred to. . . . At Dry Brook [follow log roads] . . . to the woods, whence the course of the old Bridle Path is followed, still plain after forty years. This path leads up over some steep but comfortable grades, over knolls giving a succession of inspiring views to the east or west, and along many almost level stretches, one mile (one hour) to the plateau on the west spur where it meets the Profile path coming in from the left.

The path is in all respects superior to the Profile path in ease, beauty of view and speed. One can walk from the Profile House down the road to Dry Brook, and ascend Mt. Lafayette by this route without much fatigue, cheered by many views, and reach the junction of paths by Eagle Lake, almost as soon as the ordinary climber would reach the summit by the more direct and shorter but fatiguing and viewless Profile path.
Mr. Miller and I felt that these encomiums, coming from the sponsor of the reopening, might perhaps be overdone; we knew that even the reopened route had not been maintained and had speedily been lost again, which did not argue for its value; and we had been told by Professor Karl P. Harrington that he had descended Carpenter's route with him, and had found it very rough and steep in certain parts. Accordingly we approached the problem with an entirely open mind as to actual procedure. In fact we planned to string both the bridle path and the boundary line, if they could both be found. Then I was to lay out whatever combination of these with a purely watershed route seemed best for a permanent location when I was on the ground.

The first day, with Reid, Hewitt, and Waring of the A. M. C. trail crew, I went up the Greenleaf Trail to Eagle Lake, where the work on the foundations of the Greenleaf Hut was in progress. We looked for the boundary line but could not find it. So we all started down the entrance to the old bridle path (noted in all descriptions of the Greenleaf Trail) in the scrub above Eagle Lake, reeling off the usual string line behind us as we went. We found that immediately when off the rocks of the summit plateau, where the surface soil is everywhere thin, the path merged into a distinct trench.

Such a trench is characteristic of many old bridle paths in the White Mountains, as is witnessed by every tramper on the Crawford and Davis Paths, and as may be seen also on some sections of the old Fabyan and Glen House bridle paths. The tread of any trail is a small or potential trench, and on a bridle path the weights of the animals with their burdens above and their iron shoes below wear the surface down rapidly through the soil on a slope, so that a trench is developed, the depth of which is surprisingly great. In general the depth is greater, the greater the grade, because on a steep grade the soil is more deeply dug and is pushed downward, and the subsequent erosion is greater; when the trench is on a side slope the soil is not so much displaced, and erosion tends to fill rather than to deepen the trench.

The seventy-five years which had elapsed since the path had been used had served to eliminate much of the artificial appearance of the trench; nature's curves had replaced the
cuts and jabs of man's shovels; the bottom was U-shaped, and the sides were rounded, so that in places it was hard to believe that it was not primeval. Almost nowhere had the wear penetrated entirely through the soil, so that the footing was soft; and the grade of course was easy. Our natural tendency was to look for blazes as an auxiliary check on the route, but a slight consideration told us that blazes would not have been necessary to indicate the location of a bridle path, and that even if they had been made, they would not be capable of identification after seventy-five years by rank amateurs like ourselves. We saw a few marks that might have been made by Carpenter when he reopened the path, but all these were uncertain and negligible.

We followed the trench without special difficulty off that summit, and since it lay on the crest of the ridge, it was clearly, with its other advantages, the ideal location for our trail. But on the next lower summit, which is choked with blowdowns and bushes, we lost it. We beat about for some time, and incidentally picked up a section of the boundary line, which however did not seem to be of any use; and since we did not yet know to what extent the old path could be traced or how much of it would be useful, we went on with our string line down the southern end of this peak. But part way down Hewitt saw the trench coming into our line from the west, and looking ahead we caught sight of a wonderfully beautiful section of the old path, a perfect corridor down through virgin growth. Going back along the trench a little, we realized that although we had actually scouted over some fifty yards of the path there, we had not recognized it, because, as it was on a level shelf, the trench had here been practically missing, for the reason given above but which we had not yet appreciated. Hewitt and Reid went back to see if it could be traced upward with greater success.

Waring and I followed the trench downward for a long distance, with only minor difficulties, largely through beautiful woods, and began to realize more fully the possibilities afforded by it for an ideal trail location. The fascination increased with every rod and became a challenge. Here, even allowing for Carpenter's reopening, was clearly a proposition comparable in character with the recovery of the Davis Path; it was such
an opportunity as may come to an amateur, only once in a lifetime; it was the last remaining problem of its kind in the White Mountains. Reid and Hewitt caught up with us and reported that they had recovered their section completely; and we all became keen to see if we could recover the entire route.

We came out upon the fire-swept southern end of the high ridge, where young growth had come up as thickly in the trench as beside it. Even here the four of us together were able to trace it, though slowly, to the extreme end of the ridge, which falls off sharply on three sides. There it was lost completely. We scouted carefully over the whole end, which is very narrow, but could not get the least trace of the route by which the path had descended. It was getting late in the day. We struck down the nose of the ridge, came to the head of a small slide in sight of the road, took a good look at the low ridge before us, descended the slide, and made a bee-line for Lafayette Place, finding the slope rough and boulder-strewn.

The second day the same four of us started from Lafayette Place, immediately opposite the present clearing. It seems strange to me now that we did so, but I had consistently misinterpreted two phrases in Carpenter's description: that the path had formerly begun at Lafayette Place; and that the path left the road a half-mile south of this. I had supposed these to mean that a later location of the bridle path, which he had used when he reopened it, left the road south of Lafayette Place. Such a route we did not now want to use. Further, the latter statement did not check with that of Professor Harrington, who told us that when he had come down with Carpenter he had reached the road a little north of Lafayette Place; but the fact that the route was rough and steep was evidence that it was not the course of the bridle path.¹

The day before, from the head of the slide, we had observed the long, sweeping curve of the low ridge beneath us; this we now followed back, running by the "feel of the ridge" (Goodrich's expressive phrase) and checking by compass.

¹ Professor Harrington now surmises that the way by which he and Carpenter came down (which was substantially the route by which we had descended the day before) was Carpenter's first idea; and that he afterwards changed it entirely, presumably on account of its difficulties, for the route which he describes. None of us can see why Carpenter did not use the route of the bridle path the entire way from the road. unless he could not find it. When he says that he followed log roads to the woods, above which point the course of the bridle path was plain, he suggests, if he does not actually imply, that the section below the woods was considered lost in the then fresh logging.
Mt. Lincoln
From the "Old Bridle Path"
bearings, at first 15° south of east, then swinging more to the north. Our idea was twofold: (1) that if the old bridle path had not descended to the brook on the east, we ought to find it somewhere near the foot of the high ridge and thereby find the route by which it had climbed the nose; (2) that if we did not find it, we would work out a better location for the trail than that by which we had descended from the point where we had lost the bridle path.

We are inclined to believe that, when well up on the low ridge, we picked up a bit of Carpenter's route as described by him; at least we found a line of blazes which might have been thirty years old, with a suggestion of footway, running logically and comparably with his description. We also found what seems to have been a spur of the bridle path running a few yards to the crest of this low ridge at the point nearest to the brook below, the only feasible place for obtaining water short of Eagle Lake; but we did not sense this until later.

Presently however we picked up the bridle path itself unmistakably on our left (i.e., north of us). We followed it without serious difficulty to the foot of the high ridge, then up the beautiful switchbacks on the east side. These were so choked with burned or fallen timber and by new growth that much of the way we had to crawl on the ground to follow the path, while in other places its course was deducible only by "elimination by subtraction": we could see no trace of it, but reasoned that it could not have gone in any other than a certain place. Soon we reached our downward string line. But we all felt that no amount of searching from above would have enabled us to recover the route, so great was the gap between the two points indicated by a trench. It was lunch time, and we went again down to the head of the slide, a most sightly place, and ate with great satisfaction, knowing that we had solved the hardest problem, and thinking that we could readily trace the path downward as far as we cared to use it.

But we reckoned without our host. For returning downward after lunch, we had recovered a quarter of a mile more toward Lafayette Place when again the trench vanished, in spite of a long search by the four of us. There was nothing to do but to work over to the route which we had strung upward in the morning. We convinced ourselves that it was probably im-
possible to recover it any farther, for it seemed just to have "petered out" in small hardwood growth. We set it down that logging and erosion had destroyed all traces of the trench below that point (and this we afterwards found to be stated as a fact in several editions of the A. M. C. Guide! Such had evidently become the established tradition).

That very evening however I found the exact description of the beginning of the old bridle path given in some of the older editions of the A. M. C. Guide, but deleted from the later ones:

It begins at a point on the Notch Road about 250 ft. N. of the Lincoln-Franconia town line posts. A cross, cut into the W. face of a yellow birch, indicates the beginning and a fragment of an old board sign nailed to a tree 50 feet distant in the bushes indicates the direction. Within another 100 feet or so, where the heavy timber begins and the angle of the slope rises from the little flat where the old hotel was located, the trench-like path is easily found, trending S. E. [The description then jumps to Eagle Lake!]

Of course I ought to have found this months earlier, but I hadn’t!

When I showed this to the trail boys we realized that it did not conflict with Carpenter, if the latter had meant that only his reopening, and not any location of the bridle path, had left the road farther down. So a third attempt at recovery was made a few days later, with Trailmaster Maker, and Hewitt, Waring, and Orr of the trail crew (Reid being on another detail). But the above description was at least thirteen years old, and forest growth changes a good deal in that time. We could not find the tree, the board, or the trench. We saw, or thought we saw, traces of trench everywhere, until finally, two hundred yards from the road, we came upon the real thing, so evident and so different that it made us feel foolish. Maker and Hewitt went back to trace it downward, and recovered every foot, including the board and the tree with the cross (this last no longer very evident).

Waring, Orr, and I followed the trench upward about half a mile without difficulty, when again it vanished. Immediate search was fruitless, nor did we pick it up by deploying and going ahead. But by this time we had it nearly "cornered down." Maker and Hewitt came up. We worked over to the point where we had lost the trench the second day coming down, then back to the spot where we had just lost it coming up. It was
only about 175 yards of level going from one to the other, and the conclusion seemed obvious: there must have been an offset or slab between the two.

And it was so. For the five of us, scouting carefully along this line, were able to pick up here and there bits of shallow trench and to piece them together. The sharp turns at each end of this section had eluded us and caused the trouble. In comparison with the rest, because this section was so nearly level, the trench was scarcely noticeable. We strung the gap, lunched, and went about other trail business.