

# Notes From Scaling New Hampshire's 4,000 Footers: Peak Fall Hiking in Crawford Notch

BY: KEITH GENTILI



*Crawford Notch North - Photo Credit: Keith Gentili*

*The following is an excerpt from Chapter 19 of “White Mountains State.” Published by TMC Books in Conway, NH, the book details a four-year journey summiting New Hampshire’s 48 highest peaks and uses a college analogy to illustrate the education of a Granite State hiker. Thus, “White Mountains State,” which was recognized at the New Hampshire Literary Awards in 2023, includes frequent references to curriculum, maturation, and recreation.*

*Chapter 19 spotlights a September 26 trek in Crawford Notch via the Webster Cliffs to the Southern Presidential summits of Mount Jackson (4,052 feet) and Mount Pierce (4,310 feet). Featuring peak foliage, this 10.5-mile thru-hike began on the Webster Cliff Trail, stopped at the Mizpah Spring Hut, and concluded at the AMC Highland Center.*

Just as I did during both my “freshman” year (The Kinsmans) and “sophomore” year (The Hancocks), I put a birthday hike on the calendar. I had to as I was building the completion of my entire NH 48 journey around finishing by my 48th birthday—September 27, 2015—that was now a year away. It also was a nice time to evaluate my progress each summer, kind of an annual report card as the hiking season was winding down. I targeted the Southern Presidential peaks of Mount Jackson and Mount Pierce.

Individually, these two mountains can be among the easiest 4,000 footers to climb for hikers taking them on as straight out-and-back treks. The summit of Jackson is just 2.6 miles from the Crawford Notch Depot, with a very moderate elevation gain of

2,152 feet. On November 19, 2019, I took my daughter Julia, then 18 years old and wearing Microspikes, to the summit of Jackson for her first 4,000-footer.

The direct route to Pierce features what is considered the oldest continuously maintained hiking path in America, the Crawford Path, as it dates back to 1819. This trail also has a very moderate grade, and the summit of Pierce is just 3.1 miles from Route 302 in Crawford Notch.

However, I wasn’t interested in those routes. Just as I mapped out the Willey-Field-Tom hike with a start at the Crawford Notch floor and a finish up top, this was my goal here. I had read a lot about the Webster Cliffs and the aptly named Webster Cliff Trail. It was a longer, more-extreme adventure featuring additional scenic overlooks as it brings hikers along the edge of the cliffs for a couple of miles. This became the plan and, it being a Friday, I had just one taker when the invitations went out.

“This was just two weeks after the Wildcats-Carters hike. I knew coming out of that hike that I had always wanted to hike the 48. I had talked about it, but it seemed like this unachievable thing,” said Jason Unger. “But the idea of getting these two peaks in, after getting the Wildcats, Carters, and Moriah would put me at eight of 48 and it was like ‘Game On.’ The drive didn’t seem as long anymore, and everything was coming into focus. That was a big part of it for me.”

I picked up Unger in New Boston and we made the traditional stops in Goffstown to get supplies including gas, food, and drink. The drive was smooth, and we were in Crawford Notch two hours later ready to get on trail. We parked at the bottom of





Jason Unger (left) and Keith Gentili (right) - Photo courtesy of Keith Gentili

Crawford Notch, elevation 1,275 feet, about a mile south of the Willey House site, which served as the trailhead to the Willey-Field-Tom hike (Chapter 12).

“It was a beautiful fall day. Just a bluebird day,” said Unger. “We parked in the area off Route 302 directly across the street from the Webster Cliff Trail.”

As we geared up and stretched out next to the car, we got a visit from a hiker coming off the trail. He was middle aged, had an accent, and was chatty. This section has the Appalachian Trail (AT) running through it and, during this time of year, September in the White Mountains, it’s common for AT thru-hikers to descend upon New Hampshire. After a nice discussion about trail conditions, the state of New Hampshire hiking, and each of our plans for the day, we parted ways.

“We walked across the street, got right on trail, crossed the Saco River, and began climbing the Webster Cliffs,” said Unger. “It’s a cool trail. A lot of exposed rock and some scrambling. It was a lot different than we had done two weeks earlier along the Wildcats and Carters. I packed a lot smarter. It was a day hike, so I was traveling much lighter. I definitely learned something coming out of that first hike.”

*The 4000-Footers of the White Mountains* says, “This is the longest and hardest but most scenic approach to Mount Jackson, including a traverse of the spectacular Webster Cliffs and summit of Mt. Webster, with numerous (sic) views over Crawford Notch.”

The footbridge over the Saco River was built in 2007 and provided us with a nice view upstream. The fall colors were dominant, and we were both excited about the day. Then, we began climbing. The Webster Cliff Trail ascends quickly. At 1.1 miles, we were at 2,075 feet. We continued to climb, thanks in part to the trail’s switchbacks, for another .7 miles, where we got our first big view down into Crawford Notch. This was 1.8 miles in and at 3,205 feet.

“We got up to there and all the leaves were popping,” said Unger. “We saw the leaf-peeping train cross the trestle and I got a picture of it. Just a prime fall day.”

For the next 1.6 miles, the Webster Cliff Trail delivered. We went in and out of the forest, along the cliffs, got great views, and just frolicked our way to the summit of Webster (3,910 feet). During this stretch, I noticed Unger taking a lot of pictures as well as setting a very nice pace. I knew it was going to be a full day on trail, and our two targeted peaks were still miles away.

And while not a 4,000-footer, Webster has earned its way on the 52 With a View list.

“Looking down on the Mount Washington Hotel and the entire valley was cool,” said Unger. “It was great to be up there and to see all that.”

From the summit of Webster, we had 1.3 miles along the Webster Cliff Trail over to Jackson. It was a nice stretch, and we were in a great mood as we neared our first 4,000-foot summit. Although we had celebrated atop Webster for a little time, it was on the Jackson summit (4,052 feet) that we would really fuel up.



Webster Cliff Trail - Photo courtesy of Keith Gentili

“We had lunch and a beer on Jackson,” said Unger. “And took in that view of the Presidential Range and Washington.”

It would be 2.6 miles before we reached Pierce and our day’s final summit. However, in between our two peaks, sits the AMC’s Mizpah Spring Hut. This would mark my third straight hike featuring a hut (Chapter 17, Madison Hut; Chapter 18, Carter Notch Hut). Combined with the Greenleaf Hut (Chapter 1), Lonesome Lake Hut (Chapter 3), and Zealand Falls Hut (Chapter 15), this visit would mean my NH 48 travels got me to six of the eight AMC White Mountains high huts so far.

“We stopped at the Mizpah Hut,” said Unger. “We got a brownie there, maybe some lemonade, and talked to the caretaker.”

The Mizpah Hut, elevation 3,800 feet, has a bit of a vacationland feel to it. Instead of big mountain views to salivate over like some of its peers, there’s a small green lawn for sitting. It’s sort of a break from the mountains, designed for relaxing. We did just that before getting back on the trail for our final .9 miles to Pierce.

Unger continued to take photos throughout our adventure, and he continued to set a nice pace. I felt comfortable with him taking the lead, as we were now more than seven miles into our hike. We reached the summit of Pierce (4,310 feet) cleanly and agreed it would be our final break of the day. We sat there for a bit, staring off at the majestic summit of Mount Washington. Assuming we would get down fine, Unger was now at 8/48 and I just hit 38/48.

Then, we banged out our 3.1-mile descent along the Crawford Path. Just like the day’s first 7.4 miles, this section went smooth. As we reached the end of our hike, we saw the monument on a rock honoring the Crawford Path National Recreation Trail as the “The oldest continuously used mountain trail in America.” Unger took a photo, then we hopped out onto Route

302 and crossed the street. We found a patch of grass to sit on at the AMC Highland Center.

“When we got back down, you had to hitchhike back to your car,” said Unger.

It’s true. That was my plan. I told Unger, I would hitch a ride to my car, as it was only four miles south along Route 302. I hitched a bit (possibly a bit too much) during my high school and college years, times when I was carless, or my vehicle was broken down. I always thought of it as an adventure, but it did come with its risks.

In the fall of 1985, I hitched from Fitchburg State to the University of Massachusetts for a weekend that included a Fools concert in the Orchard Hill Bowl. I got a ride all the way from Route 2 in Leominster from a dude on his way to UMass as well. It was a great night that ended the same way the following morning started, with Kate Bush’s “Running Up That Hill” playing on a linear tracking turntable. We fell asleep with it on repeat, and it just kept playing. Some 36 years later, my daughter Sarah is hooked on the television show *Stranger Things* and Bush’s “Running Up That Hill” is a cultural phenomenon.

I once hitched home after a closing shift at Lechmere. It was sort of a Best Buy of its day, a superstore of electronics, home goods, and sporting goods. It was during the summer before my senior year in high school. My home was about 11 miles away in Holliston, but the direct route went through some bad sections of Framingham (Mass.). I got picked up along Route 126 near the center of town and instantly got a bad vibe from the driver. He took me all the way into my neighborhood before he started asking me questions that I was not going to answer. As we went into a tight corner, the car slowed, and I jumped out. After a small tumble, I ran straight into the woods as I knew I’d find my own way home.

On this day, I knew folks departing the Highland Center were heading either north or south. I just needed to find some hikers heading my way.

“You got a ride in the back of a pickup truck from a couple who just finished their hike,” said Unger. “They were in the parking lot and were headed in that direction. You just jumped in the back and 20 minutes later returned with your car.”

We then began our return drive to New Boston with one more stop. I was getting pretty good at post-hike meals. The Woodstock Inn always delivered. Between brewing its own beers including a 4,000-Footer IPA, and a monster menu including Death By Sandwich and Death By Burger, we always left there satisfied. Black Mountain Burger in Lincoln was another spot that provided just what we were looking for after hikes—a great burger and IPA.

I had also heard great things about Biederman’s Deli in Plymouth. Word had it they made a great sandwich and poured killer craft beer. We stopped at Biederman’s and drank Maine Beer Company’s The Other One with our sandwiches.

“That hike was notable for me. It was the springboard for me to get to the 48. After that, my run of hikes started,” said Unger. “The desire had always been there, and it became real after that. I had heard about the 48 for a long time just from talking to people at work or whatever. For me, well before we ever did the Wildcats-Carters hike, it was something I was interested in. But it just seemed so far away, and I never knew when I was going to get the time. All these different hurdles. By going

up there and doing it, it made it all feel within reach.”

Unger finished his NH 48 the following fall, just 13 months after the Wildcats hike when he and Ron Reimer completed an early October Pemi Loop—a 30-plus mile loop that includes at least eight 4,000-footers. He would go on to complete the New England 67 a few years later. In the summer of 2022, he was close to finishing up his New England Hundred Highest. Unger also made a short movie of our Jackson-Pierce hike and posted it on YouTube. The first time I watched it, I was stunned. It was such a uniquely different contribution to my NH 48 journey than any of the Fitchburg State Hiking Club members had made.

“I’m not sure why I made it. Not sure what really spurred me,” Unger told me. “I was taking a lot of pictures, and I had the 48 bug at that point, which goes back to the whole decision we made at the Carter Notch Hut to go on and to get back out two weeks later on this hike. I stitched the pictures together that weekend. Then I put a soundtrack to it. It was just free music I found online to complement some of the pictures. It was the leaves, the train, a couple pictures of us, and some of the White Mountains-area signs. It was just over two minutes probably. It’s still out there.”

*Keith Gentili is the author of **White Mountains State** and is a two-time New England Press Association Columnist of the Year. He is also the Editor & Publisher of the award-winning New Boston Beacon, an AMC-NH member and a member of the AMC New England Hundred Highest Club (including the 4,000 footers). Gentili lives in New Boston, NH, with his family.*

