

People of the Whites: Laban Merrill Watson (1850-1936)

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Laban Watson Oil Painting by Margaret Arnold

Laban Merrill Watson was the grandson of Stephen P. Watson, a Scotsman, who moved to Waterford, Maine with his family around 1826, and later purchased land and settled in Randolph, NH. Stephen drowned in 1830 when crossing the flooded Moose River. His son, Abel Nourse Watson (1818-1895) married Susan C. Holmes (1820-1862) of Jefferson, NH in 1837, and took over the property.

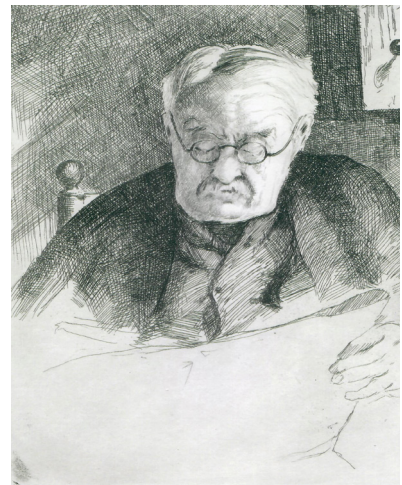
Laban Merrill Watson was born May 14, 1850, the son of Abel and Susan, and in 1876 became the proprietor with his father of the farmhouse subsequently renovating it into a three-room boarding house in 1876, and called it The Madison House. Abel and Laban expanded the Madison House in 1877 to fourteen rooms and renamed it The Ravine House. It faced the Presidential Range and King's Ravine on Mount Adams and offered a much needed overnight accommodation near the trails to Mount Madison.

Abel's wife, Susan, passed away in 1862 and he married Cordelia Wright Burbank (1826-1912) of Shelburne, NH. Cordelia had a daughter, Anna Burbank (1853-1928), from a former marriage whom Laban married in 1873.

Laban continued to add to the hotel to accommodate more guests. He moved the Starch Mill dry house down Durand Road in 1884 to add more rooms and he used the third floor for Town Meetings until 1888. Laban served as Town Selectman from 1874 to 1877 and was in the NH Legislature in 1878 returning again in 1923. He also served as a delegate to the constitutional convention of 1918.

Laban M. Watson joined the two year old AMC in 1878. That same year Laban and his father cut a trail, The Watson Path, from the Ravine House to Salmacis Fall, and continued it to Mount Madison in 1882. Laban supervised the building of

AMC's 1888 Madison Spring Hut, initially a stone hut on an acre of land donated to the AMC by the Brown Mills Company in Berlin, NH. The hut was one room with four bunks, a stove, and a table. Laban and Rosewell B. Lawrence, an AMC founding member and photographer, hiked Mount Madison and stayed in the hut in the winter of 1889. Laban managed a crew to create the Air Line Path, a straight, well-cleared trail. In 1924 Laban was commemorated for his path making at Memorial Bridge, built in 1923-24, that crossed Cold Brook in Randolph, NH. The bridge was built as a memorial to the early path makers. Because of an accident in 1906 when Laban fell off a load of pulpwood and broke his arm in three places between his elbow and hand, and because his children did not want the responsibility of ownership, Laban and Anna sold the Ravine House to William D. Bradstreet of Boston, MA in 1909. It was closed in 1960 and was razed in 1963. After the sale, Laban, Anna, and Cordelia moved to Cold Brook Lodge in Randolph, NH, and Laban continued farming, dealt with hay, and hauled wood to the Brown Mills Company in Berlin, NH.



*Laban Watson
Etching by
Leroy Woodard*

When Anna died in 1928, Laban lived with his daughter and husband, Edith Margaret (1878-1957) and John Henry (1868-1952) Boothman. They bought the Randolph Hill House, built in 1883, which they renamed The Mount Crescent House in 1894. It was torn down in 1971.

Although in his final years, Laban was feeble, he enjoyed playing cards and won a "Five Hundred" game two days before his death on October 1, 1936, at the age of 86. He is buried in the Durand Road Cemetery in Randolph, NH.

For additional information on the life and career of Laban Merrill Watson, you may want to read *Peaks and Paths*, by Judy Maddock Hudson, and Louis F. Cutter obituary for "Laban M. Watson", *Appalachia* 21 (1937) 416 et seq.. A big thank you to Yvonne Jenkins, Librarian, Randolph Public Library and Marcia Ann Gulesian for their assistance in documenting this article.

Frances Richardson has contributed many profiles to Mountain Passages of the people who made New Hampshire.