



Ann Croto (above), visitor information host at the US Forest Service's Russell-Colbath House on the Kancamagus Highway, is one of several local history enthusiasts who recently produced a small booklet, detailing the history of the Passaconaway Valley landmark. Formerly known as the George House, the facility is open daily throughout the summer and provides an excellent insight into a 19th century northern New Hampshire farmhouse. (Tom Eastman/Mountain Ear Photo)

History of a Kancamagus Landmark Booklet Sheds Light on Russell-Colbath House

Thirteen miles west of Conway on US Route 112, otherwise known as the Kancamagus Highway, motorists come upon a home in the woods which is owned and staffed by the US Forest Service. Known previously as the George House, and now referred to as the Russell-Colbath House, the wooden Cape has long been the subject of White Mountain folklore, and it's also now the topic of a short history piece compiled by the White Mountains Interpretive Association (WMIA).

The booklet is now available for sale at the house and also at the US Forest Service's Saco Ranger District. Researched and written by Mary Leavitt in collaboration with Ann Croto for the WMIA, the booklet tells the captivating story of the old house in a way that makes its past readily available to tourists and local residents alike.

The booklet provides an understanding of the region's history for visitors to the Russell-Colbath House, which was built in 1831 by Thomas Russell and his son, Amzi. The appearance of the house has changed very little over the years. It is the only remaining 19th century homestead in the area.

The house was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1987. The US Forest Service operates the site during the summer as a museum of early American life.

The lamp in the window

Among the stories told in the book is that of the "Lamp in the Window," a compelling tale of heartache and sadness in the isolation of the Passaconaway Valley.

The story involves the daughter of Amzi Russell, Ruth Priscilla, the fourth of his five children, who was born in the house in 1850, and lived there until her death in 1930.

It was a fall day back in 1891 when Ruth's husband, Thomas Colbath, stood before the house and told his wife that he was going out but that he would be back "in a little while." That "little while" proved to be 42 years, and when he returned in September 1933, Thomas discovered he was three years too late, since Ruth had died and the property had been taken over by new owners.

A neighbor told Thomas that Ruth had always expected him to return from his unexplained sojourn, but never lived to see it. Every night for 39 years, the neighbor said, Ruth placed a lamp in the window of the wooden house for him to see on his return. She lived in isolation there in the Passaconaway Valley, even in winter, never giving up hope.

She lived a frugal life, but was by no means poor. She inherited her father's timberlands, sold sites for more than 30 hunting camps, but refused all offers to part with her home when the region was rediscovered as a summer resort in the 1900s.

Ruth served as postmistress from 1882 to 1907, and developed many friendships with the summer people who came in ever-increasing numbers. Her story became well-known in time, and before long, she was known as the "Hermit Lady of Passaconaway Valley." She is buried in the small cemetery located beside the house, along with such other former Passaconaway residents such as Jack Allen, the legendary guide and woodsman.

Following Ruth's death, the house was sold by her relatives to a couple from Lowell, Mass., who used it as a summer home from 1932 to 1938. It was then purchased by the federal government, which owns it today.

As for Thomas Colbath, he is reported to have gone to live with his sister in Wolfeboro for a few years, and then—just as mysteriously as before—he left her home and never returned.

Attempting to resolve why he left in 1891, historians may only guess, although WMIA staffers such as Ann Croto note they've always heard unfounded rumors here and there. As she noted in an interview with *The Mountain Ear* several years ago, "I've heard talk, but nothing I'd ever dare say in print. I just warn people, when they hear their husband is 'going out for a bit,' to not let him out of their sight."

Donations to support groups

Donations of \$1 are requested for copies of the booklet. Proceeds will be shared by the White Mountains Interpretive Association and the Passaconaway Civic Association, which also assisted in the preparation of the booklet.

The Passaconaway Civic Association portion will assist the group in funding the reconstruction of a barn which previously stood next to the homestead, while the WMIA portion of the proceeds will assist in funding the publication of a history of the area.

The not-for-profit White Mountains Interpretive Association is modeled on similar groups found at US Forest Service

and national park locations throughout the country. The WMIA was formed at the request of the USFS to assist in informing and educating the many sightseers, campers, hikers, skiers, and curious visitors to the area.

Government regulations permit the Forest Service to distribute and sell only government publications. The Forest Service is able, however, to approve and sell, for organizations such as the WMIA, guides relating to the flora and fauna of the area, books relating to the geologic or social history of the region, and maps and guides.

The White Mountains Interpretive Association also sponsors seasonal nature walks, evening campground programs, and cooperates with local groups in helping people appreciate and understand the natural resources of the region, according to WMIA chairman Lewis Bissell.

Membership in the WMIA is open to all. Queries may be addressed to Lewis Bissell, Chairman, Jackson 03846, or to the USFS, David Pratt III, Saco District Ranger Station, Conway, 03818.

Hours for the Russell-Colbath House are 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., daily. For further information, telephone the Saco District at 447-5448.

—Tom Eastman



Marcia Smith, a resource clerk for the Saco District of the White Mountain National Forest, displays a new booklet which explains the history of the Russell-Colbath house (formerly known as the George House) in the Passaconaway Valley. The White Mountains Interpretive Association is offering the booklet for sale for \$1 at the Saco District Ranger Station on the Kancamagus Highway in Conway. Half of those funds will go toward maintenance and development of the Russell-Colbath property, which is currently used as a US Forest Service visitor information center. (Rob Burbank/Mountain Ear Photo)