



White Mountain National Forest *The Russell Colbath House*



The Russell Colbath House, located 12 miles west of Conway on the Kancamagus Scenic Byway, is maintained under the protection and oversight of the U.S. Forest Service. The nonprofit partner, White Mountains Interpretive Association (WMIA), staffs the house in the summer and early fall months, allowing visitors to travel back in time within its walls.

In February 1986, the Russell-Colbath House was nominated for the National Register of Historic Places. It was accepted on April 23, 1987, recognizing that “it embodies both local and regional significance not found in other places or structures on the forest.”

The following brief history of the house and of its former occupants highlights the major timeline of events that made this historic site the place it is today:

In 1831, Thomas Russell in the then Burton, NH (which would later become Albany) acquired five 100 acre lots for a total of \$5.25. One lot was numbered 13 in the Fourth Range of the North Division of the town. On lot 13, Thomas, assisted by his second son, Amzi (pronounced aim-zee), built the frame structure that stands today.

In 1832, Thomas and his wife, Ruth, sold lot 13 and the house to Amzi. On December 3, 1834, Amzi Russell married Eliza Morse George, after which they moved to the house. Eliza and Amzi raised five daughters here; one of who was Ruth Priscilla Russell. The family subsided on the meager garden crops they were able to grow, supplemented by wild game as well as fruits of the field, forest, and stream. They received a moderate income from a sawmill and from a store that they ran in their home at one time.

During the years from 1834 through 1877, Amzi acquired thousands of acres of virgin timberland. He was certain that the railroad would eventually come into the valley and transport his prized timber to the mills in Conway and Bartlett.

The logging railroads did eventually arrive, unfortunately too late in 1877, Amzi Russell died, leaving a mortgage and unpaid taxes on approximately 8,700 acres, all but the home lot of 100 acres and an additional 192 acres in three separate lots were sold to meet the family’s financial obligations.

In 1887, Eliza Russell deeded the property to her daughter, Ruth Priscilla, and Ruth’s husband,

Thomas Alden Colbath, who continued to farm the land and care for the aging Eliza.

In the late 1880s, the population of the valley had grown. There were 20 or more farms, two schoolhouses, and a small hotel. During the summer, many visitors came to enjoy the clean air and the relaxing surroundings.

In 1890, the first Passaconaway Post Office was set up in the house and Ruth Priscilla Colbath became the first postmistress. She held the position until 1906 or 1907.

One day in 1891, Thomas Colbath left the house, saying he would be back “in a little while.” Ruth never saw him again. She remained in the house where she had been born, eking out a meager living. It is told that she placed a light in her window each night, expecting Thomas to return.

On November 15, 1930, Mrs. Colbath died at the age of 80, still believing that her husband would eventually return. Three years later, Thomas Alden Colbath did indeed return to the deserted house and heard the story about his wife, now deceased, and a light that shone each night for 39 years in the darkness of the Passaconaway Valley.

Thomas indicated that he had no quarrel with his wife. He had remained in the area for at least a year after which he began wandering farther and farther

away. After a time, he said that he was too ashamed to return to his wife and home. What prompted his return? It is anyone’s guess.

Thomas discovered upon his arrival that he had no home, as the estate of his wife had been settled the previous year. The proceeds from the sale of the land and home had been divided among Mrs. Colbath’s closet known living relatives; four cousins. Thomas remained for a short time before he once again wandered away.

Buried in the village cemetery, just east of the house, are Thomas and Ruth Russell, Amzi and Eliza Russell, and Ruth Priscilla Colbath, in addition to other family members. Ruth Priscilla’s grave is the sole family member’s stone to be marked. It is situated where, in death, she can continue to view her home and the mountains she loved so dearly in life.

New owners, who used the place as a summer residence, renovated the house in 1935. The barn and shed were torn down at that time. In 1848, extensive repairs were made to preserve the aging house. It is fortunate that the owners did little to change the original setting as was feasible and is open to the public as a historic site.

For more information, call the Saco Ranger District office at 603-447-5448