

# Franconia Notch: Highway Battle Site

By JOHN KIFNER  
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FRANCONIA NOTCH, N. H. —Inexorably, the four concrete lanes of Interstate 93 have crept from the north and south toward this beautiful gap in the White Mountains.

Carved by prehistoric glaciers, the steep-sided notch is the site of the granite formation known as the Old Man of the Mountain, New Hampshire's official symbol. The Old Man, one of the state's most striking natural attractions, is visited by thousands of tourists and is the playground of mountaineers, hikers and skiers.

Now, with the highway poised at both ends of the pass, Federal approval for the construction of the last remaining segment of the interstate highway between Boston and Montreal has once again ignited the battle, simmering for more than 15 years, over whether the notch itself should be paved over for I-93.

Along with the Department of Transportation's approval two weeks ago of construction of interstate sections connecting nearby Littleton, N. H., and St. Johnsbury, Vt., a series of events has built increasing momentum toward replacing the two-lane road wandering through the state park here with a highway.

These include New Hamp-

shire's hiring of a consultant for an environmental impact study last month, a necessary step toward road-building; the opening of a bypass ending at the south entrance to the notch this summer, and the passage by Congress a year ago of an amendment to the highway aid bill sponsored by Senator Norris Cotton, Republican of New Hampshire, allowing the construction of a "parkway" through the notch.

## Dislodging Feared

Conservationists raise the specter that the blasting and bulldozing might dislodge the overlapping ledges that form the Old Man—they are held together now by a series of bolts and turnbuckles designed and installed in 1916 by a mountaineer named Edward H. Geddes.

Highway proponents say that it would bring economic benefits to the impoverished North Country region by encouraging the tourist trade, and that it is necessary to absorb the north-south traffic generated by the already completed segments of the interstate highway.

The conservationists maintain that a major issue is "segmentation"—a practice, they charge, of building stretches of highway where there is little resistance in



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order to create demand for an entire system.

Federal approval of the new links had been held up for nearly a year, partly be-

cause the regional office of the Environmental Protection Agency protested that it would represent "an irreversible commitment to direct interstate and international traffic through the notch, thus triggering a demand for a much higher level of service through the notch than would otherwise be required."

New Hampshire has commissioned an 18-month environmental impact study, budgeted at more than \$1-million, to examine the effect of a highway through the notch or possible alternatives.

The study, Highway Commissioner Robert Whitaker said, would examine seven possible alternatives, including a new notch road, no building at all, a route west of the mountain and several other paths through the mountains.

"I think it's vital to northern New Hampshire," he said of the highway link.

## No Other Routes

"We just naturally need this route," Mr. Whitaker said. "Railroad service is almost nil, there's no other express highway north or south."

Many outdoorsmen believed Franconia Notch was safe after John A. Volpe, then Secretary of Transportation and now Ambassador to Italy, called the notch "one of the scenic treasures of New England" and said that he was "indefinitely postponing" the interstate construction.

One who did not share that belief was Lindsay Fowler, a young Williams College geology major who spent his summers in Franconia Notch working for the Appalachian Mountain Club as a hutman, an alpine guide and a "ridgerunner"—a kind of backwoods natural history lecturer.

From his vantage point atop the mountains, he can see the interstate highway approaching ever closer.

Distressed, Mr. Fowler took a year off from school to research the situation and prepare to fight what he considered the inevitable battle over the notch.

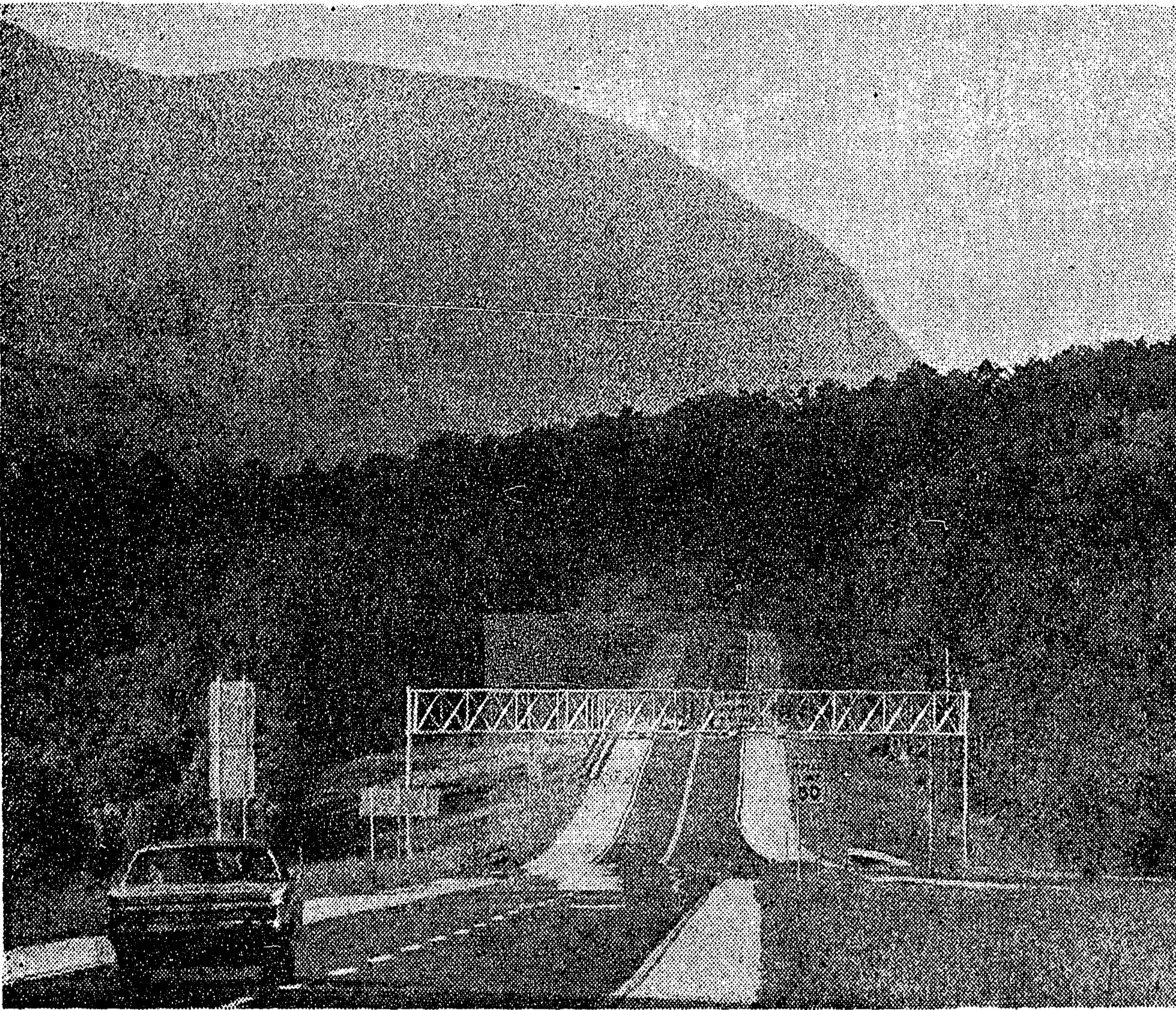
## Critical of Protectors

Mr. Fowler is now critical of the Appalachian Mountain Club and the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests—conservation organizations that have traditionally guarded the notch—for, among other things, their earlier support of Senator Cotton's amendment. Earlier this month Mr. Fowler formed his own organization, called Save the Old Man, Inc., to fight the highway proposal in court.

Last Wednesday, however, the Appalachian Mountain Club filed suit in Federal District Court in Concord to halt construction of the highway. And the director of the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire's Forests, Paul Bofinger, said his group, too, would oppose the road in court.

Clad in dungarees, a faded shirt and climbing boots left casually unlaced, Mr. Fowler strolled through the park the other day, pointing out the rock-strewn areas on the sides of the wooded slopes where there had been two landslides in the last 20 years.

He pointed to Boise Rock, under which a pioneer had survived a blizzard wrapped in the carcass of his horse and, shaking his head, said that would be "plucked up by a bulldozer."



The New York Times/Arthur Grace

Northern entrance to New Hampshire's Franconia Notch area, where Interstate 93 narrows from four to two lanes

## of the Day

re changes in the next 10 years ever seen."—Bertram Raphael Union No. 6, after automation contract. [1:5.]

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