

# State's Rock of Ages Tumbles

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FRANCONIA NOTCH - The Old Man of the Mountain, New Hampshire's iconic symbol, the stone deity who watched over the state's residents and countless visitors, lost its 10,000-year battle with gravity sometime over the last two rain-soaked days, crumbling mysteriously to the ground in a stream of small stone pieces.

When Friday's fog lifted and yesterday's skies dawned blue, crisp and clear, two state park workers on their usual morning rounds looked up toward the Old Man and couldn't find him. "We both sidestepped, thinking we're just not seeing something right," Amy Cyrs said.

Cyrs called her boss to say the Old Man - whose image appears on the state's license plates and highway signs and the New Hampshire quarter - had simply disappeared, and the phone chain began, prompting a cavalcade of state officials and workers, Old Man devotees and tourists to descend on the Notch yesterday.

Among them was New Hampshire Gov. Craig Benson, who announced that his office would start a fund to potentially pay for the Old Man's restoration or a memorial.

By noontime and for several hours thereafter, dozens of people were staring with wonderment at the faceless, nameless slab of rock that had replaced the Old Man's granite gaze, strong hooked nose and craggy, creviced face. Just a few days before,

his 40-by-25-foot face jutted out from Cannon Mountain, a daring 1,200 feet above Profile Lake.

"He was what New Hampshire is: rock solid, stern, beautiful, fun," said Dick Hamilton, president of the White Mountains Attractions Association. "He's become so much a part of us for so many years."

Officials don't know what brought down the Old Man, whose visage, officials believe, was formed by a glacier sometime around 8000 B.C. Friday's weather, though rainy and cool, wasn't particularly harsh. And officials said they haven't any records of unusual seismic activity in the region, or any reason to believe foul play was involved in his demise.

David Wunsch, the state geologist, reminded onlookers that New Hampshire's mountains are eroding over time. The Old Man was likely a victim of that simple fact of nature, he said. Wunsch said he was sad but not surprised to see the Old Man go.

"There's no way to tell exactly when or how long he would've stayed up there," Wunsch said.

The Old Man was a natural creation, but he'd had help from the state in recent decades. Wunsch estimated that New Hampshire spent about \$10,000 a year to help keep the rocks in place.

David Nielsen, whose family members have been the Old Man's primary caretakers for more than 40 years, arrived at Franconia Notch midday. Sunglasses shaded

his wet eyes as Nielsen patiently took questions from reporters and hugs from friends and strangers.

"My dad used to say God put him here, when he'd get good and ready he'd take him away," Nielsen said, his chin trembling, his face growing red. "And that's what he did."

Nielson last scaled the Old Man - an annual family ritual - in July 2002. He said it looked then as it has in recent years - precariously perched and delicately balanced, with three steel, turnbuckles helping to hold him up by the forehead.

Yesterday, those turn buckles were virtually all that remained of the Old Man. His face was ripped out from under them, revealing dark, wet dirt and a scattering of smaller rocks.

Nielsen said the Old Man had long been vulnerable. A wide crack ran behind his brow. Another gap, large enough for a hiker to crawl up into, ran under the man's chin. With spaces that vast, water, in all its forms, was the Old Man's enemy.

"It's the springtime wetness that causes this," Nielsen said. "You worry about this stuff every springtime. There was absolutely no way you could've predicted it. It's just a total, utter shock."

Niels Nielsen, David's father, was the Old Man's primary caretaker between 1960 and 1989, when David Nielsen took over. The older Nielsen, who was a former seaman and World War II veteran and had worked for the state as a bridge construction supervisor, was said to love the Old Man like he did his own children.

Yesterday, David Nielsen said his father often joked that he dangled dangerously over the Old Man's brow to simply give him a shave and a haircut.

Niels Nielsen first glimpsed the landmark during a 1947 trip to New Hampshire with his fiancée. Before his death in September 2001, Nielsen told the Monitor that he was awestruck at the sight of him.

"I have made several trips around the world, but I have never seen anything that compares with our Old Man," he once wrote. Last year, Nielsen's family tucked his remains in the Old Man's left eye socket, per his wishes, and yesterday, those remains were swept away with the Old Man himself.

White settlers first discovered the Old Man about 200 years ago. New Hampshire lore tells the tale of two Franconia road crew workers, Francis Whitcomb and Luke Brooks, who were the first people to make a record of the Old Man. In the 1820s, innkeepers at Crawford Notch began spreading word of the Old Man to hikers and a sign was erected next to Profile Lake showing travelers how to glimpse the Old Man, who from the wrong angle plainly looked like the granite rocks that surrounded him.

Word of the Old Man spread quickly. In 1832, author Nathaniel Hawthorne visited. He later published a short story called "The Great Stone Face." An 1857 guidebook told visitors from New York how to find the Old Man: Take a train for Boston and another to Weirs Beach. Take a steamship partly across Lake Winnepesaukee. From the northern shore, take a stagecoach to Franconia.

By the mid 1800s, the Old Man's fame grew through reports of adventurers and through works of art, and tourism in the White Mountains started to boom, according to historian Peter Wallner.

"For the development of New Hampshire, it was definitely an important symbol," Wallner said.

The Old Man was showing his age by the early 1900s; even then, his brow was his primary weakness. In 1916, New Hampshire Gov. Rolland Spaulding offered state money to keep the Old Man in his perch.

And then, of course, by 1960, the Old Man's care became a state priority and a Nielsen family tradition. The Old Man's myth was mighty, as New Hampshire lawyer, orator and senator Daniel Webster once proclaimed.

"Men hang out their signs indicative of their respective trades," Webster said.

"Shoemakers hang out a gigantic shoe; jewelers, a monster watch; even the dentist hangs out a gold tooth; but up in the Franconia Mountains God Almighty has hung out a sign to show that here in New Hampshire, He makes men."

Yesterday, men, women and children made a pilgrimage to the Notch, to gaze up at the Old Man's resting place. They took photographs and drew pictures. Children wrote articles for school papers. Parents recorded home videos. A helicopter growled overhead as it made repeated trips to within feet of the Old Man's remains, allowing officials, reporters and even mourners, like David Nielsen, to look closely at what had washed away.

"It's sad; it could make a grown man cry," said George Bald, commissioner of the state Department of Resources and Economic Development. "It's just a terrible situation."

Reached by phone yesterday, former Republican governor Hugh Gregg was shocked to learn the news. He said the state had been so careful through the years to watch over the Old Man. He couldn't understand why he'd fallen so suddenly.

"It's a unique form of nature that God gave to us," Gregg said. "Those things out at (Mount) Rushmore were made by man, but this was made by God."

Benson zoomed in on a helicopter yesterday afternoon. In a leather jacket and sneakers, the governor addressed reporters and onlookers. He called for an effort to "revitalize" the Old Man, and he said his office would set up a fund to raise money for such a project.

"It's a bit like going to a wake and seeing somebody who's passed away," Benson said after his helicopter trip to see the Old Man. "It's a change."

Martha Macomber, a Holderness mother, brought her three children to see what was left of the Old Man. They'd first heard word of his disappearance on the news but couldn't believe it was true.

"I thought, you know, nature does its thing, nothing is forever," Macomber said, adding that after all, "It's just a bunch of rocks. It's only symbolically important."

The Old Man was in fact both, a bunch of rocks and a symbol, a stoic, improbable representation of New Hampshire's motto: "Live Free or Die."

While many New Hampshire residents worked to preserve the Old Man through the years, no men knew the Old Man like the Niensens. His upkeep was their public service, their part-time work, their art, their labor.

"My dad and I used to like to say that any child born today will get to see the Old Man," David Nielsen said yesterday, before walking across a make shift, grassy landing pad.

And with a fast flutter of a helicopter's propeller and the rumble of its engine, the machine lifted off the ground, taking David Nielson toward the remains of the Old Man, and his old man, toward the sky.