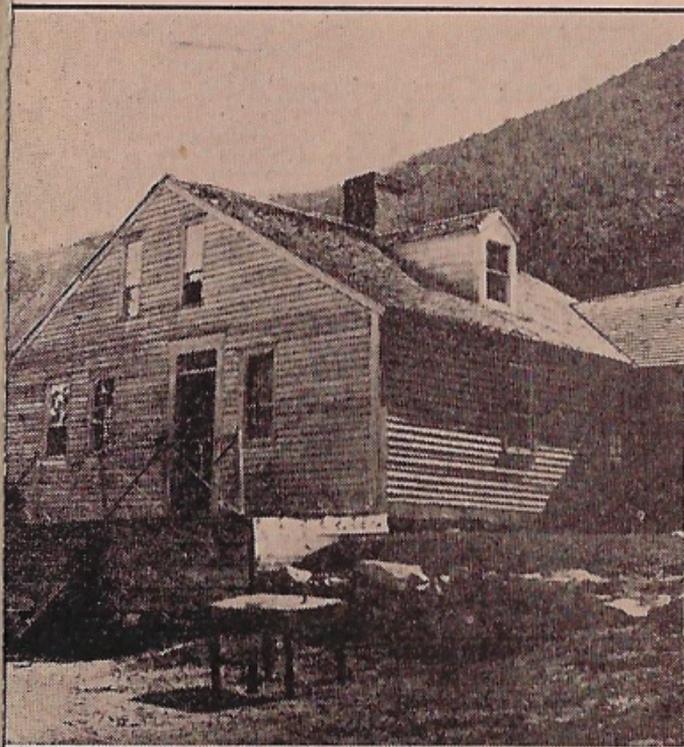


The Willey Slide

THE ORIGINAL



WILLEY HOUSE

Kentons View Co.

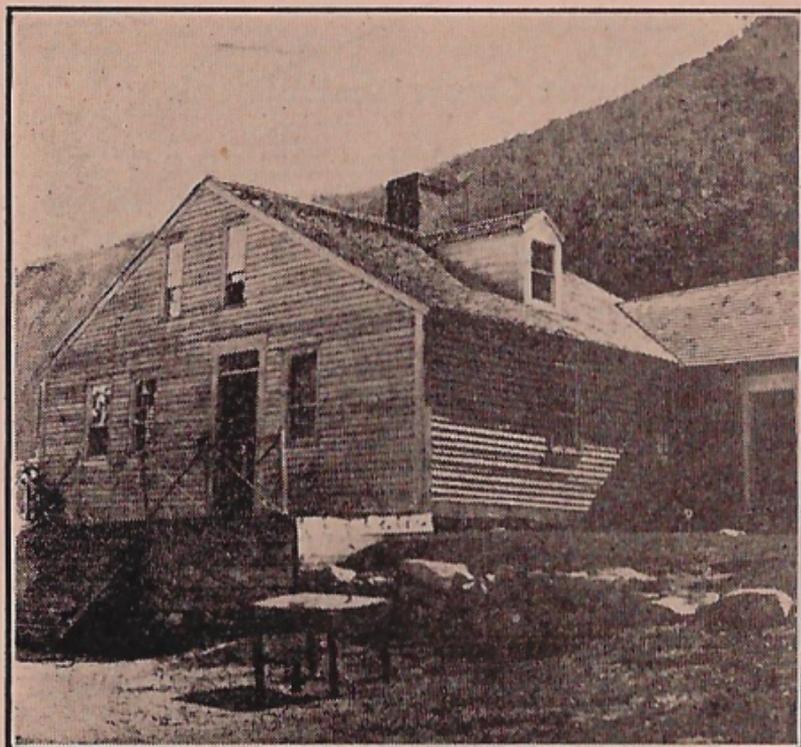
Its History, Legend
and Romance.

Illustrated

The Willey Slide

Its History, Legend, and Romance.

THE ORIGINAL



WILLEY HOUSE

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A narrative giving briefly the History of
Crawford Notch and The Willey Slide,
also the Soltaire legend and the
Nancy romance.

By Rev. GUY ROBERTS.

First Edition.

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Whitefield, N. H.

Introductory

In order to a clear and pleasing consideration of the main subject of this booklet,—“The Willey Slide,”—a brief sketch of the Crawford Notch in which it all centers, is quite essential and will be of special interest.

About Crawford Notch.

Crawford Notch is the name given to an awe inspiring mountain defile 15 miles in length which begins at Bartlett, N. H., and runs in a generally northwestern direction thru the Notch to where at an elevation of 1900 feet the Crawford House (*) now stands as landmark, watershed, (**) and guardian of this most famous Notch.

Beginning at Bartlett the flanking mountains rise on either side gradually drawing nearer and higher as one ascends the 15 mile defile, until

*The present tho originally smaller Crawford House, was built by Mr. J. L. Gibb in 1859, replacing its predecessor (which burned April 30th., 1859.) in the brief space of 60 days, with lumber drawn 17 miles, serving 100 guests in the dining room on July Fourth of the same year.

**Occupying as it does the height of land in the Notch, the Crawford House roof forms a water-shed, rain falling on the Notch side flowing into the Saco and the Atlantic at Biddeford, Me., while that falling on the Fabyan side enters the Ammonoosuc and Connecticut Rivers, reaching the Atlantic at Long Island Sound.

at The Upper Gateway of The Notch there was originally barely room for the meanderings of a bridle-path, while even now in its narrowest spot it is but 22 feet wide. The infant Saco not yet freed from its Notch given swaddling clothes, emerges a tiny rivulet from what was once a “beaver pond,”—Saco Lake, now called,—and finds a narrow passage-way thru The Gateway of The Notch, gradually widening as it traverses the valley, at last to lose itself in the broad Atlantic at Biddeford by the sea.

“From the heart of Waumbek Methna, (*) from the lake that never fails, Falls the Saco in the green lap of Conway’s intervalles;
There, in wild and virgin freshness, its waters foam and flow.
As when Darby Field (††) first saw “them,” near three hundred years ago.”

The Crawfords.

Crawford Notch well gets its name from that stalwart mountaineer Abel Crawford, son-in-law of the mountain famed Eleazor Rosebrook, and his two sons. Abel Crawford had been living in the Nash and Sawyer Location near the present Fabyan House site. After selling out

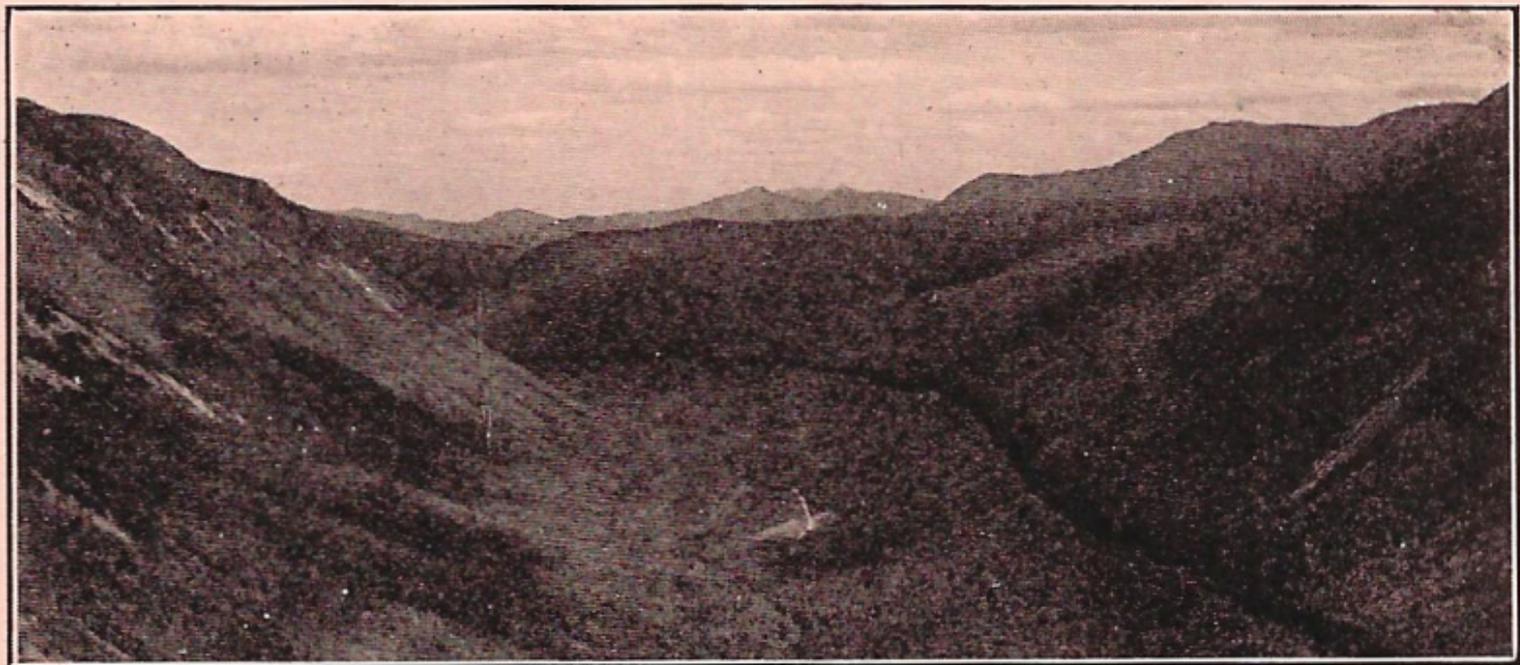
*Indian names, Waumbek, signifying, “White;” and Methna, “Mountains,” hence, “White Mountains.”

††It is claimed that Darby Field was the first white man to visit and explore the White Mountains, which he did with special reference to Mt. Washington, in June, 1642.

to his father-in-law in 1792, "rather than be crowded by neighbors," he moved 12 miles down the Saco Valley where sometime previous to 1820 he built The Mount Crawford House, its location being east of the railroad at the present Bemis station. Here for many years he kept an Inn of the old fashioned type famous for its hospitality, and here he lived to the age of 85 well known and greatly loved as "The Patriarch of The Hills." At the age of 75, in 1840, Abel Crawford made the first ascent of Mt. Washington by horseback. His eight sons were all more than six feet tall, Ethan being six feet, two and one-half inches, and was called "The Giant of The Hills." Another son, Thomas J., kept The Notch House from 1829 to 1852, the site of which is now marked by a sign-board near the Upper Gateway. It was Thomas who built the famous carriage road up Mt. Willard. Space forbids us to even list the varied activities which so identified the various Crawfords with this mountain defile as to naturally prevent any other word than Crawford as even being thought of as a name for this majestic Notch.

Discovery of Crawford Notch.

It is claimed that this Notch was known to the Indians, though seldom used by them because of their superstitious fear of the mountains, and they have left no legends concerning



CRAWFORD NOTCH FROM MT. WILLARD, showing railroad at right, and the Willey House location in center.

it. Its discovery by white men is credited to one Timothy Nash, who in 1771 while in pursuit of an eluding moose climbed a tree on Cherry Mountain in hopes of espying him, but saw instead the depression in the mountain wall which he later explored, following the Saco down thru and notifying Governor Wentworth of his discovery. Realizing the value of such a route to the upper Connecticut Valley and wishing to test it as a possible trade route, he offered Nash the grant of a tract of land (later known as the Nash and Sawyer Location) extending from the Upper Gateway to beyond the present Fabyan House, if he would bring a horse through from Lancaster. Nash aided by one Benjamin Sawyer, brought the horse thru, tho not without great difficulty, and received the promised reward.

Notch Roads and Early Notch House.

Using the proceeds of a confiscated Tory estate a rude road was later built thru the notch, it being laid out higher up than the present road and crossing the Saco no less than 32 times in ascending the valley. In places it was so steep that horses and wagons had to be drawn up or let down with ropes, "Sawyer's Rock" being one such place. The first merchandise to go over this road after its completion

was a barrel of tobacco taken down thru from Lancaster to Portsmouth by one Titus Brown. This was followed by a barrel of rum going in the opposite direction, it being a gift from a Portland firm to any one who would get it thru the Notch. Captain Rosebrook accomplishing the feat, tho most of it was consumed enroute by "those who helped to manage the affair."

This road was succeeded by an incorporated turnpike in 1803 it being the tenth in New Hampshire, and was paid for by a lottery, the cost being \$40,000—for the 19 miles from Bartlett up thru to the present Fabyan site. This road soon became an important route of commerce to and from the seaboard, and long lines of vehicles heavily loaded with all kinds of merchandise passed thru the Notch both summer and winter. This horse drawn traffic naturally demanded the services of public hostelries, hence the need that brought forth such houses as The Mount Crawford House previously mentioned as at Bemis and run by Abel Crawford; Eleazor Rosebrook's Inn (*) erected

*This was the first public house erected in the White Mountains for the accommodation of travelers. The present Fabyan House is its third successor, being built in 1873 by The Mount Washington Hotel Co. The two houses preceding this were on the large mound, 60 feet high, called "The Giant's Grave," which was leveled by the above company to provide the present Fabyan site.

in 1803 on "The Giant's Grave" at the site of the present Fabyan House, and The Notch House built near The Upper Gateway in 1829 and run by Tom Crawford.

There was need, however, for some place of refuge more in the center of the Notch, as it was nine miles from The Notch House to The Mount Crawford House toward the lower end of the valley.

Along in 1792 or 3 a Mr. Davis had built a small one and one-half story house down in the Notch which was eventually to become famous as The Willey House. This was later occupied by a Mr. Hill, and others, and for a number of years afforded timely shelter in a small way to wearied or belated travelers, and was then abandoned. Ethan Allen Crawford is supposed to have run this for a short time along in 1824. In the fall of 1825, following several months of vacancy, Samuel Willey, Jr., one of the early settlers of Bartlett, moved his family into it, repairing and improving the place that it might better minister here in this sort of "half way" location to the increasing travel of the Notch. In case a traveler was caught in the Notch in a real "nor'wester," as often happened, the genial shelter afforded by the Willeys was most welcome, for—as the teamsters used to say,—“the wind then blew so furiously that it took two men to hold one man's hair on!”

Filled in as the Notch naturally was by the ever converging mountains and the dense forest growth, Davis naturally built his "Willey House" by the side of the one open clearing to be found in the upper part of the Notch. Here was room for the buildings without much clearing and something of a meadow for forage use. Just what influence caused Mr. Davis to dig his house cellar just where he did is not known, but the site later proved to



Cellar-hole, of the original Willey House built in 1772.

be the only really safe one in all this region. This location is seen to-day in the partly filled in cellar-hole, at present enclosed by peeled logs and marked by a sign-board erected by the State bearing the following inscription,—

“State of New Hampshire Forestry Department. Crawford Notch

Reservation No. 6. Site of the original Willey House. Acquired by a special act of the Legislature in 1911. Visitors are welcome but must be careful not to start fires or injure trees."

The Surrounding Mountains.

In front of this location, (which is some 1400 feet above the sea) beyond the large open space now freely available for camping purposes and across the Saco, Mt. Webster raises its sheer, crumbling, scarred, awe inspiring, ledgy walls to an elevation of 3876 feet at its summit. This precipitous wall can be scaled tho the feat is not an easy one, and is fraught with considerable danger to life and limb. On the opposite side Mt. Willey, forest clad, rises abruptly from the very back of the present buildings some 2800 feet, overtopping its neighbor across the valley at an elevation of 4261 feet. The ravine formed by a part of The Willey Slide can still be clearly seen high up the mountain side, tho now again forest clad. Next toward the north and a little further back, the summit of Mt. Field appears with its 4300 feet of elevation, majestically looking down upon all its Notch neighbors. Nearly opposite Mt. Field the sheer outstanding southern front of Mt Willard seems to defy all approach to the Gateway of The Notch which it jealously guards at its right, and

altho its elevation is but 2786 it presents a sheer rise from the valley floor of some 1200 feet. Thus is the Notch and the valley of the Saco mountain walled to an average depth of 2000 feet for nearly 11 miles in length in a most impressive manner. One often feels while gazing at Mt. Webster's bold defiant wall from the Willey location, as tho it was really moving in to crush all intruders within these sacred confines, back to the worthless dust from which man sprang!

"The Devil's Den"

A spot of special interest to many is "The Devil's Den" which is clearly seen from the Willey camping site, as a dark-mouthed cavern high up on the sheer cliff of Mt. Willard. This has twice been explored in recent generations, it being last visited in 1870 by certain members of a geological survey party who were let down from the cliff above by means of 125 feet of rope, the spot being inaccessible by any way affording foothold. Nothing mysterious was found within it at this time, not even the "bones and other ghastly remains" that tradition says Abel Crawford found there at the time of his visit years ago. Evidently "His Satanic Majesty" long ago removed his headquarters to a more cosmopolitan site!

The Building of the Railroad.

Mention should be made of the railroad that now traverses the Notch, it being but second to the Cog Road up Mt. Washington in the daring and skill displayed in its construction. To the Anderson brothers of Maine, Samuel J. and John F., is due the credit for putting this road thru and that under greatest of difficulties. A memorial tablet at the Spring opposite The Stickney Memorial Church at Bretton Woods, now commemorates this fact. Originally known as The Portland and Ogdensburg Rail Road, it was chartered in 1867 and finished to Fabyans in 1875. Between North Conway and Crawfords, a distance of 30 miles, it rises 1369 feet, while for the nine miles from Bemis to Crawfords the rise is 116 feet to the mile. In 1888 this road fell into the hands of The Maine Central by whom it has since been operated. The building of this and connecting railroads naturally changed the character of the traffic thru the Notch from the commercial to the scenic, and such it is to-day.

The Coming of the Willey Slide.

In the summer of 1826 a severe drought set in, so that by late in August the mountain region seemed crisped to a powder. Dust lay ankle deep with vegetation parched and lifeless. Thus the soil was prepared

to be acted upon in a peculiar manner in case of heavy rains. In June two comparatively small landslides from Mt. Willey so frightened the Willeys that they thought to seek a safer home, but as the weeks passed with nothing unusual happening, Mr. Willey decided to stay, but took precaution to build a strong "refuge hut" some 80 rods below the house and across the road, for a safe retreat in case of a serious avalanche.

The drought at last broke on Sunday, August 28th., and more than broke. During Monday the storm was severe. Toward evening the low hanging clouds were most forbidding in their aspect, heavy, dark, and threatening from which came

"Such sheets of flame, such bursts of horrid thunder,
Such groans of roaring wind and rain,"

as well accompanied the deluge that lasted half the night. Between 9 o'clock Monday night and the dawn of Tuesday, the Saco rose 24 feet, flooding all the interuales between the Notch and Conway. One house near Bartlett was floated away, Ark like, family and all, tho later rescued. Cattle, horses, sheep, fences, trees, boulders, bridges, buildings, and saw-mills all contributed toll to the angry waters. Around Ethan Allen Crawford's house at The Giant's Grave a pond of 200 acres was formed in a few hours, the water rising to within 18 inches of his

doorway. The Mount Crawford House at the lower end of the Notch was two feet deep in water. Mrs. Crawford in the absence of her husband, bravely battled thruout the awful night with a pole from the windows keeping logs and debris from jamming against the house to its destruction. For long terrible hours all inhabitants were in consternation with many a house trembling as tho from an earthquake shock, expecting every moment to be engulfed by the raging flood.

Tuesday morning dawned at last cloudless as to sky but never darker as to human outlook. Devastation the worst ever was on every hand. The mountain sides were more gorged and denuded than by all the storms of the preceeding century. Hundreds of acres were ravaged by landslides or covered with debris. Twenty one of the 23 bridges along the 18 mile Notch turnpike were carried away, while the road was so completely destroyed that the people of Portland later contributed \$1500 toward its re-building, the balance needed being secured from other sources and by an assessment on the share holders.

Destruction of the Willey Family.

At this time there were living at the Willey House, Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Willey Jr. and their 5 children aged as follows,—Eliza, 12; Jeremiah, 11; Martha, 10; Elbridge,

7; and Sally, aged three. There were also two hired men, David Allen aged 37, and David Nickerson, 21 years old, nine souls in all.

Altho fully conscious as they must have been of the awfulness of the storm it is evident that the family,—excepting Mr. Willey,—retired for the night much as usual. Just how the family met death will never be known with certainty as to exact details. Whether on hearing the frightful noise that accompanied the slide and heralded its coming, they fled from the house before it seeking the "refuge hut" previously referred to and were overwhelmed by it; or whether they had previously, for fear of being drowned out, fled to the higher ground (*) at the foot of the mountain and were there caught by the avalanche and carried away with it, we cannot tell. However, it is all but certain that in one or the other of these ways of attempted escape the family were overtaken and destroyed as they rushed from unrecognized safety into

"The tyranny of the open night too rough
For nature to endure."

while past the awful scene of death and desolation the runaway Saco swept on to other conquests as

*At this time there was a small field of less than an acre in extent in between the Willey House and the base of Mt. Willey, on which wheat was growing. This entire field was deeply buried by the slide.

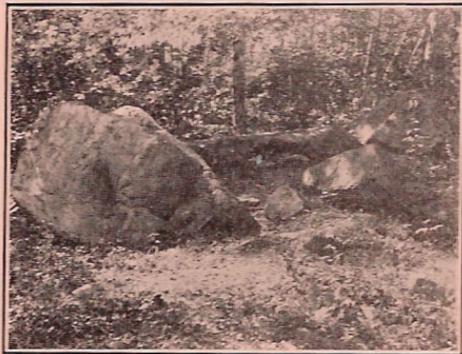
“overhead the moon and stars struggled into sight cheerless watchers of a cheerless night.”

As to the slide itself it was unusual in that its lateral length was over half a mile, much of the precipitous forest clad face of Mt. Willey slushing off and sliding into the valley, finally stopping suddenly with the crest of the avalanche projecting over the lower or ground portion. The rumble and roar of this great avalanche was heard for miles around, reaching as far as Whitefield and other surrounding towns. In its downward rush it also strangely divided itself some 60 yards back of the Willey House as it came in contact with a ledgy ridge bearing large boulders, (††) and thus flowed by on either side of the little house directly in its pathway, carrying away the stable above the house but leaving the house itself unharmed, coming together again in front of it and covering the meadow and field with the frightful debris in places to the depth of 30 feet. This strange action of the slide in the sparing of

††Edward Melcher, one of the rescue party, states that “a rock well sunken in the ground near the corner of the house” was the barrier that divided the avalanche just back of the house. A large spruce tree catching on this rock arrested the onrushing debris which piled up like a wall as high as the roof of the house and only some 6 feet from it on the back side. From the top of this rubbish one could easily step onto the roof of the house.

the house and the destruction of its 9 inmates when all might have been saved had they but remained inside, gives to the story a most peculiar pathos.

The unburied portion of this dividing ridge, with its ledge and boulders, can still be seen in the



BOULDERS AND LEDGES, on which it is claimed the slide split, thus sparing the Willey House.

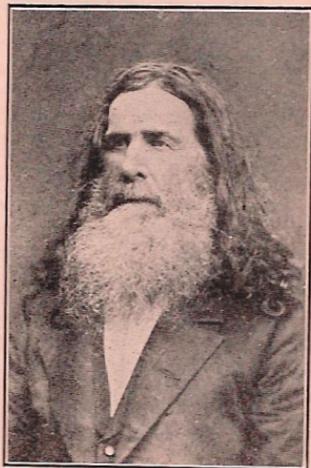
woods several rods back of the old cellar-hole. The camping site now enjoyed by hundreds of autoists annually with never a thot of fear, was largely formed by the debris of the slide.

Discovery of the Willey Disaster.

Not until Wednesday night did suspicions arise that all was not well with the Willeys in their Notch

home. The first person to go thru the Notch after the freshet was one John Barker who arrived from Ethan Allen Crawford's at about sunset on Tuesday. Finding the house deserted and thinking that the Willeys had betaken themselves to Abel Crawford's, he remained for the night. After a night made sleepless by the low moaning of what proved to be an imprisoned ox and which he released in the morning, he made his way to Bartlett where he reported the fearful slide that had occurred at the Willey House. A rescuing party composed of Ebenezer Tasker, Jonathan and Joshua Rodgers, Samuel Tuttle, Abram Allen, Samuel Stillings, Isaac Fall, Levi Parker, Mr. Eastman, Abel Crawford and Edward Melcher started at once that night arriving Thursday morning, when search for the family believed to be burried in the ruins began. Shortly after noon the first body, that of the hired man, David Allen, was found by Edward Melcher. Mrs. Willey and then Mr. Willey were next found not far away. Mr. Willey was clothed, excepting a torn off coat-sleeve. David Allen and Mrs. Willey were found entirely denuded and terribly mangled. These bodies were temporarily buried where the Willey Hotel was later built, (adjoining the old Willey House), after a brief service conducted by Elder Samuel Hasaltine of Bartlett, who read Isa. 40:12. On Friday, Sally the youngest child was found and buried.

Saturday yielded the body of David Nickerson the other hired man, while Eliza, the eldest daughter, was found on Sunday across the Saco. The bodies of the other three children,—Jeremiah aged 11; Martha, 10; (*)



MR. EDWARD MELCHER, member of the rescue party to discover David Allen, the first one of the buried Willey family.

and Elbridge, 7;—have never been found. Considering the amount of debris that buried them it is remarkable that all save these were found. In December, following, the recovered

*The "Solitaire" romance as found on the following pages recites a probable exception.

bodies were buried at "The Bigelow Place" in Conway. Their last resting place can now be seen in the little old cemetery, stone walled, across the pasture just north of the Merriman house, 1-5th. of a mile south of the Intervale House, at Intervale. A large old fashioned slate headstone here records the manner and date of the death of the Willey family, with their ages, that of Mr. and Mrs. Willey being 38 and 35 respectively. The individual graves are not otherwise marked.

John Baker found clothing evidence of the hasty departure of the family. Beds showed occupancy, while the little shoes and stockings and other clothes of the younger children, were found as they had been left when retiring on that fateful night. The Bible was also found opened on the table (***) at the 18th. Psalm, beginning,—

"The Lord also thundered in the heavens."

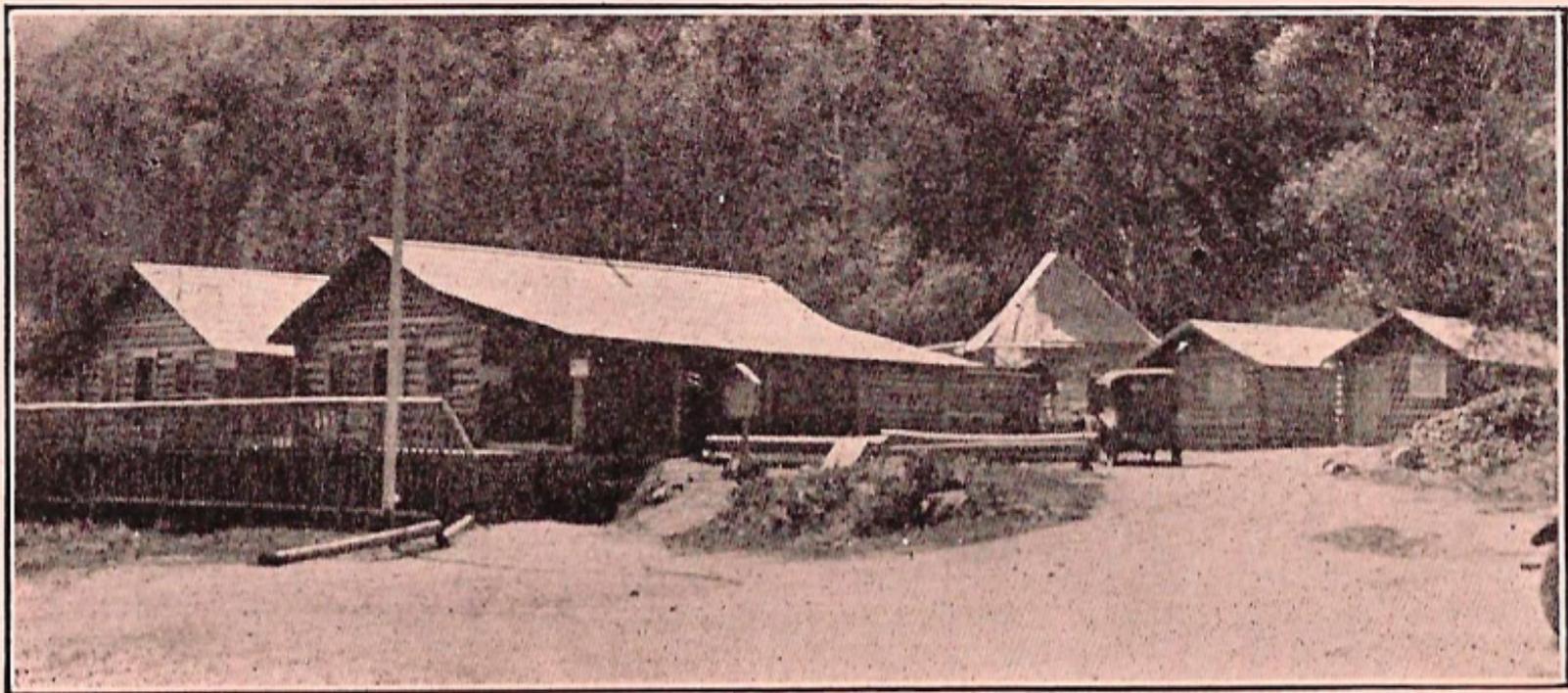
to which the reader is referred. The only living things to escape the avalanche were the dog and a pair of oxen, the two horses being crushed to death by falling timbers while the other stock was swept away.

Subsequent History.

The Willey disaster did not long deter others from again occupying the place. Within a little more than

††This table with the Bible on it, is seen in the picture on the first page.

a year a Mr. Pendexter reopened the Willey House for the accommodation of guests. Succeeding Mr. Pendexter the following parties have run the Willey House, Col. Moore, Messrs. John Moore, Alexander Bond, John T. Dutton, Dutton and Wilson, John T. Dutton, Frank Atwood, Jack Whalen, Jack Mahew, and Henry Leonard. In 1884 Horace Fabyan then owner of the Fabyan House, repaired the Willey House and built adjoining it a two and a half story hotel 40 by 70 feet which was run with more or less of success for many years, being destroyed at last by fire in 1898. The large stable across the road was spared by the fire and stood unused thereafter until a few years ago when it was removed. This left the Willey House location again without buildings of any sort until the early summer of 1922 when the present buildings of "The Willey House Camps" were erected by Donahue and Hamlin of Bartlett, N. H., under a State concession. Here one now finds eating and lodging accommodations at a reasonable charge, a souvenir store, toilets, auto filling station, small log cabins for rent for the night or longer, and also plenty of free camping room in the open space opposite the buildings. As previously implied all this has come about in consequence of the Legislative enactment under Gov. Bass in 1911, which resulted in the purchase of 5975 acres of land in the Notch at



THE WILLEY HOUSE CAMPS, as open to the public from May thru November. Site of the old Willey House marked by tablet and logs.

a cost of \$62,000. This "Forest Reservation No. 6" extends from the Upper Gateway southward thru the Notch for a distance of 6 miles, both ends being marked by appropriate signboards. Because of this wise provision by the State this majestic Notch will be spared the fate of the woodman's axe and preserved indefinitely as a master piece of the handiwork of God.

"Earth's crammed with Heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his
shoes."

The Soltaire Legend.

At the time of the Willey disaster there lived a man in a cavern on Black Mountain in Jackson, N. H. A hermit he would naturally be called, altho the name does not go well with a character of such refinement as was his. Altho less than 50 years of age his grey streaked hair fell in masses about his shoulders in perfect keeping with a long full flowing beard. His cap was of coon-skin, his jacket of fox-skin with breeches of buck-skin, while leather moccasins encased his feet. Like the Crawfords his physique was herculean and vigorous; with over six feet of stature. In his cavern home high up in the mountain the entrance of which was naturally concealed by a dense curtain of bushes, he passed the last 20 years of his life.