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William W. Geller

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**The Mount Katahdin Peaks:
the first 12 women climbers, 1849-1855**

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William W. Geller
108 Orchard Street
Farmington, Maine 04938
207-778-6672

geller@maine.edu

websites:

Maine Sporting Camp History: Piscataquis River Watershed
Mountain Explorations (Katahdin and West Branch of the Penobscot River history)

The Mount Katahdin Peaks: the first 12 women climbers, 1849-1855

The first seven women climbers, two in one group and five in another, were Mainers and they all climbed the mountain within nine days of each other in August 1849. The next five were in one group in September 1855. Who was the rarely mentioned woman who accompanied Elizabeth Oakes Smith on her ascent? The names of the women in the first group of five are only sometimes mentioned, and not always each of them; what were their names? What are the correct names, as opposed to the pseudonyms, of the second group of five? What were the backgrounds of each of these 12 women? What was the impetus for these women to climb Katahdin? Who were the women who followed these forerunners and by at least 1894 had placed a tin box with writing material in the rocks at the summit so others could add their names?

The first two women climbers

August 11th, 1849, Mount Katahdin - "...Know then that we the undersigned did, on the day specified, reach to the highest point of Mount Katahdin; the first [two] women who were ever here;" ¹

¹ A member of the Keep party copied the Smith and Mosman note left on Pamola and Keep included it in his article "Katahdin - Again" in the *Bangor Democrat* of October 23, 1849. A copy of the article is available at the Maine State Library. The full text of the note follows at the end of this paper.

News of the climb to the summit of Pamola Peak, one of the peaks of Katahdin, appeared in *The Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* of Wednesday August 29, 1849 and noted Mrs. Smith and a female friend from Bangor had just made the first woman's ascent of Katahdin. A letter from Marcus R. Keep to the editor of the same paper appeared in the Saturday September 1, 1849 issue and announced his party, which included five women, had climbed Katahdin on August 20th and found a bottled note with Mrs. Smith's name below the Pamola summit. Neither article mentioned Mrs. Smith's female companion's name.

Using the pseudonym "A Pilgrim," Mrs. Smith wrote a four-part trip account that appeared in the September 12, 15, 26, and October 8, 1849 issues of the *Portland Daily Advertiser*.² She identified her companions as a guide and "Mr. and Mrs. M." The newspaper articles and the note the two women left in a bottle in the cleft of a ledge at their camp below the summit of Pamola Peak are the only known accounts of the trip. Smith did not mention the trip in her autobiography.³

The bottled birch bark note, found and copied by the Marcus R. Keep party during their descent, appeared in the October 23, 1849 *Bangor Democrat* in Keep's article, "Katahdin – Again." The note was the only source that contained the names of each member

² The four-part Smith 1849 account can be read at www.mainememory.net/artifact/18649/

³ Wyman, Mary Alice. *Sections from the Autobiography of Elizabeth Oakes Smith*. Lewiston, Maine: Lewiston Journal Company, 1924.

Kirkland, Leigh. "A Human Life: Being the Autobiography of Elizabeth Oakes Smith: A Critical Edition and Introduction." Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Georgia State University, 1994. This contains an unabridged copy of the autobiography.

of the party: E. Oakes Smith, New York; N.C. Mosman, Bangor; David Mosman Esq., Bangor; James H. Haines, guide.

For about 150 years writers who have mentioned this ascent have identified only one of the two female climbers, Mrs. Smith. The only researchers to mention N.C. Mosman appear to be Laura and Guy Waterman (1989), Stan Tag (1994), and Tina Roberts (1997).⁴

N.C. Mosman, Nancy Crockett Mosman, was born (1822) and grew up in Portland, Maine where she and David Mosman married in 1842. They raised two children Mary and Fitz Howard, both born in Bangor before the trip. Nancy was a contributor to the Female Medical Education Society and the New England Female Medical College in 1853. David, born in 1809 in Searsport, Maine, on the river just below Bangor, was a successful Bangor hardware merchant beginning in the 1840's. He also had guide type skills in relation to travel in the Maine woods. By 1865 Nancy was living with her son on his farm in Boxford, Massachusetts. She died in 1892 followed by David a year later. Their gravesites are in North Reading, Massachusetts.⁵

⁴ Waterman, Laura and Guy. *Forest and Crag: a history of hiking, trail blazing, and adventure in the Northeast mountains*. Boston, MA: Appalachian Mountain Club Books, 1989.

Tag, Stan. "Forest Life and Forest Trees: Thoreau and John S. Springer in the Maine Woods." <http://isle.oxfordjournals.org/content/2/1/77.full.pdf> or www.mainewoodsdiscovery.com

Roberts (Tina), a University of Maine graduate student, did the research and gave a talk that was reported by Mary Anne Lagasse in the August 8, 1997 *Bangor Daily Newspaper* under the title of "Women in the Wilderness > UM student traces the steps of a Katahdin Pioneer."

⁵ This information comes from two sources: ancestry.com and *The Maine Register*.

Smith, sixteen years older than Nancy Mosman, also grew up in the Portland area and their families may have attended the same church.⁶ In 1822 Elizabeth married Seba Smith, a successful newspaper owner and writer who was twice her age. Seba's success as a writer peaked in the mid-1830s and he lost the family's money through two speculation forays in the later part of the 1830s. The family's financial situation forced them to move c.1838 to Brooklyn, New York where Elizabeth, who had always written, continued to do so with renewed vigor in order to support her family.⁷

How the Smiths and Mosmans may have known each other remains a mystery.

The Mosmans perhaps knew and retained Haines to lead the trip. Haines had worked with Marcus R. Keep in 1846 in laying out the route to Pamola from the Hunt farm on the East Branch of the Penobscot River, the starting point and route of the Mosman-Smith trip.⁸

For these two women climbing Katahdin was more than a recreational excursion. The opening paragraph of their bottled note suggested this was a pilgrimage, as did Smith's pseudonym "A Pilgrim." They were interested in drawing attention to the unacknowledged capabilities of women, a concept with which they started their second paragraph of the note.

⁶ This information comes from two sources: ancestry.com and Smith's autobiography.

⁷ Wyman, p143.

⁸ Neff, John W. *Katahdin: An Historic Journey*. Boston: Appalachian Mountain Club Books, 2006, p.39.

“Whereas, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them, and it is the privilege of man to carve out his own career, whether in the council hall, the battlefield, or the varied walks of literature and art; while women are doomed for the most part to regard these as Pisgah heights overlooking to her an interdicted land; what wonder, then, that having achieved even an ordinary greatness she should be tenacious of its honors; what wonder if by the exercise of courage and endurance beyond her sex she has been able to reach a point never before attained by any of her kind she should desire to secure the glory thereof, to magnify her office as it were.”

At least one writer suggested Smith wanted to be the first woman to reach the summit, heard of Keep’s plan for an ascent with women, and hurried to Maine to make the climb.⁹ Whether or not that is true remains undocumented. The bottled note clearly indicated that a number of persons told the Mosman-Smith party, while enroute to the Hunt farm, of Keep’s boast to have his wife make the first woman’s ascent of Katahdin. Perhaps Smith previously knew of the trip, but not the boast.

In the last sentences of the bottled note Mosman and Smith reproached Keep on the matter of his boast by quoting from scripture: “Let not him who girdeth on his armor boast

⁹ Waterman, p123. They cited the sources for this information as the *Bangor Democrat*. No place in the three Marcus R. Keep articles is there a mention of another person planning the Smith trip or confirming Smith purposely timed the trip in order to be first. This same page has the pseudonyms, not the real names, of the five women who climbed Katahdin with Higginson in 1855. The person who they listed as the sixth woman, Theo, was Theophilus Brown. This Waterman book is the source Polly Welts Kaufman used for the same information in her 1996 book, *National Parks and the Women’s Voice; A History* published by the University of New Mexico Press.

like him that layeth it aside.' [1 Kings 20:11] We doubt not the daintiness of the foot nor the pretty ambition of its owner, but ours (of which we say nothing) is there before it, and while we sympathize with her disappointment we beg her to reap consolation from the thought we hope to bear our honors meekly, and never in all time leave any memories unworthy the lofty and hallowed associations of Katahdin. And now God bless you, and farewell!" Their choice of words suggested their effort was not about being first, rather to demonstrate a woman's capabilities.

Mosman and Smith "bore their honors meekly" based on what they published about the trip. Smith's four part newspaper series, which reads like Thoreau's "Ktaadn," is descriptive, observant, reflective and humble.¹⁰ A portion also captures the women's feelings of inadequacies in relation to different aspects of the journey. However, the trip gave them a broader sense of strength. How Mosman used that new inner strength and conviction is unknown other than through her support of medical education for women.

For Smith perhaps the trip was in part a climax to her writing of the 1840s; it started by focusing on folklore and spirituality and gradually progressed to public advocacy that included the women's movement. The trip might have boosted her confidence to write her ten article series, collectively titled "Women and Her Needs," published by the *New York Tribune* between November 1850 and June 1851; starting her Lyceum lectures in December 1851 with such titles as: "Womanhood," "Woman," and "Considered as Inferior to Man;" publishing *Bertha and Lily*, a woman's rights novel in 1854; and facing the

¹⁰ Thoreau, Henry D. *The Illustrated Maine Woods*. Edited by Joseph J. Moldenhauer. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974.

criticism she received for her ten part series, and from many who thought lecturing was not a proper role for women.

At the time of this trip Elizabeth was a successful writer and recognized as a transcendentalist. By 1851 people like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Amos Bronson Alcott, who were members of the movement, were strongly supporting Smith. Another was Henry David Thoreau, whom she first met on December 30, 1851 when he came to her lecture at the Concord Lyceum.¹¹ However, she probably read about his 1846 Ktaadn and West Branch trip in *The Union Magazine of Art and Literature* (New York) through five installments between July and November 1848. His trip was, in part, a transcendentalist's exploration, and perhaps, had an influence on Smith. A focus on personal accomplishment was generally contrary to a transcendentalist's ideology.

The second group of women climbers

August 20, 1849, Mount Katahdin. "... we [five women] soon came to where the ridge or wall was but a few feet over and in some places but a few inches (six or eight at most) with no possible stepping place but upon this narrow top [Katahdin's 'knife edge']..." – Marcus R. Keep

On Saturday September 1, 1849 *The Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* printed Marcus R. Keep's short letter announcing his party, which included five women, had climbed Katahdin on August 20th. Keep then wrote a series of three articles about the trip and they

¹¹ "The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau: Journal Volume 4:1851-1852, ed. By Leonard Nuefeldt and Nancy Craig Simmons (Princeton University Press, 1922), p233-234.

appeared in the *Bangor Democrat* of October 9, 16, 23, 1849.¹² He included the trampers' names. Some writers who authored information about this trip have included some, but not always all the women's names.

Keep first attempted to ascend the mountain in 1846 when he and James H. Haines reached Pamola Peak. Feeling like he had visited a "court of God," Keep wanted to make such a visit possible for women. In 1848 he returned with John Stacy to lay out and blaze the trail from the Hunt farm.¹³

In September 1848 Caroline T. Eastman of Bradford, Maine and Martha L. Mason of Bangor, Maine volunteered for the trip that was for the expressed purpose of demonstrating that women could make the ascent. They quickly set the trip start date as August 13, 1849. The trip was not kept secret and some expressed skepticism and thought the attempt was ridiculous. Keep, however, was confident, citing examples that included the significant farm work done by women. Over the course of the year Miss Esther Jones of Enfield, Maine, Miss Almira Lowder of Bangor, and Miss Hannah Taylor, who married Keep just prior to the journey, joined the party. John (a farmer) and Thomas Lawton of Passadumkeag were also on the journey. Keep was living in Passadumkeag at the time.

The party reached Pamola Peak and then crossed the knife-edge with a couple, including Hannah, going on to the main peak, Katahdin. Since they topped each of Katahdin's five major outcrops, each woman chose a name for a peak. Whether the names were ever put forth for official recognition is unknown.

¹² A transcription of each of these articles is available at the Maine State Library.

¹³ Neff, p.37.

Each of these women apparently believed in and wanted to demonstrate that women were capable of climbing Katahdin and should be able to share its glory. These women were representative of Maine women from large and small communities.¹⁴

Caroline was a teacher in Old Town, Almira became a member of the faculty of East Maine Conference Seminary of Bucksport, Esther worked at her parent's inn in Passadumkeag, farmed, and became a merchant. Hannah became a rural clergyman's wife. The women quieted the naysayers.¹⁵

On their descent one of the women of the Keep party found the Mosman-Smith bottled note in the cleft of the cliff at the Smith campsite below Pamola's summit. Everyone read the note and agreed to have it published, apparently without comment. They too bore their honor meekly and unknowingly helped preserve some history.

The third group of women climbers

September 1855, Mount Katahdin - "... The top of the mountain can be depicted at a single stroke, to any well-instructed woman. Merely fancy the rim of a teacup, five miles round, with a piece broken out of one side. We [five women, five men and three guides] had done it; we had ascended Katahdin [Pamola Peak], and the reality was more than our dreams..."¹⁶

¹⁴ The source of the following information about each of these women comes from ancestry.com.

¹⁵ Waterman, p.125.

¹⁶ "Going to Mount Katahdin," *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of Literature, Science and Art*, September 1856, p.254.

The first announcement of this successful ascent appeared under the title of “A Trip to Katahdin” in the *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* on September 29 and October 1, 1855. The writer signed the account “A.B.” and used either letters or pseudonyms for the names of the others except the three guides.

A second trip account, anonymously written, appeared under the title of “Going to Mount Katahdin” in the September 1856 issue of *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine of Literature, Science, and Art*. The voice of the writer seemed to be that of one of the women on the trip. This account also masked the names of the party except for those of the guides.

Years later Thomas Wentworth Higginson confessed to organizing the trip and purposely authoring the article in the voice of a woman, but he never publically revealed the real names of the five women and the five men. Apparently the real names of the five women and five men have never been identified in a public document.¹⁷

Information from the anonymous account in *Putnam’s Magazine*, Higginson’s personal correspondence of 1855, and an August 10, 1908 letter from Higginson to Fanny Hardy Eckstorm, provide a logic puzzle which results in the following list of party members’ real names with each woman’s dress character and pseudonym (in parentheses): Lucy Chase (Pilgrim, Alice), Sarah Chase (Quaker opera dancer, Fanny or Kate), Martha Gordon (Stage struck nun, Fanny or Kate) Mary LeBaron (Little Bo-peep, Mary), Rebekah Northey (La Fille duRegiment, Rachel), Amory Battles (Bangor), Albert Brown (Worcester, Massachusetts), Theophilus (Theo) Brown (Worcester), Mr. Chase (Waterville, ME),

¹⁷ The Waterman book cited names, but they were the women’s pseudonyms.

Thomas Higginson; Ben Mosher (teamster/guide); Alex McClane and John E. Stacey (guides).¹⁸

Higginson, a Unitarian preacher in Worcester, Harvard graduate, friend of previous climbers (Channing and Hale (1845), Thoreau (1846), and Smith (1849)), transcendentalist, prolific essayist, abolitionist, and women's movement champion, organized the trip to not only demonstrate the capabilities of women as Keep did, but apparently to also help advance reform in women's dress.

It seems likely that Higginson asked each of the women to join the trip. He was friendly with the Reverend Francis T. LeBaron family including their daughter Mary D., who lived in Worcester. Lucy Chase also lived in Worcester and Sarah Chase was likely her sister, whom Higginson met on a nutting expedition in 1854. Higginson was also a friend of the Northey family who were living in Salem, Massachusetts in 1855. Martha Gordon may have been from Worcester.¹⁹ As with the women who joined Keep, these women were

¹⁸ The Higginson personal correspondence was dated September, October, November, and a pre-trip letter to his mother that mentioned the Katahdin trip. They can be read on OASIS at Harvard University's Houghton Library, Higginson letters file of 1855 in MS Am 784. There are other Harvard OASIS "MS Am XXX" that contain Higginson materials.

The Eckstorm letter appeared in the following: Williams, Donald H. "T.W. Higginson on Thoreau and Maine." *Colby Quarterly* vol. 7 issue 1 March 1965 Article 5.

Mr. Chase was a last minute substitution for Reverend H.G.O. Blake who took ill during the journey to Bangor.

¹⁹ Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, writer, Higginson researcher, and Distinguished Professor of English and American Studies at Pennsylvania State University – Altoona provided some information on these women.

typical unassuming contributing community citizens demonstrating their inherent capabilities.²⁰

Amory Battle (“A.B.”), the Unitarian Bangor preacher and transcendentalist, and Higginson spent more than a year corresponding about the trip. One topic was the clothing the women and men would wear. Clearly the garb would not be the typical. The women modeled their climbing clothes at the Hunt farm on the morning they started for the mountain. They were all somewhat different and each woman took on a character name as reflected by the clothes. The women admitted to being opponents of short dresses, but their experience in getting to Hunt’s farm convinced them the planned for shorter dresses would be more practical. One could see stockings below the hemlines, tapered trousers, and boots, but their wonderfully adorned hats assured their femininity. They never mentioned what the hats may have looked like after the wind and rain on Katahdin.

True to the transcendentalist philosophy Higginson’s biography devoted only a few paragraphs to the trip and none of it focused on him.²¹

One common element of each of these Katahdin trips was the weather. Miraculously they all had a view from the summit. However, each party was confronted with typical Katahdin nasty weather. The Mosman–Smith party spent a night not far from the summit huddled under an un-pitched tent in driving rain and wind. The Keep party spent a day in camp; held there by rain. Rain and strong wind forced the Higginson party to change their

²⁰ Source for this conclusion is ancestry.com.

²¹ Higginson, Mary Thatcher. *Thomas Wentworth Higginson: The Story of His Life*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914, p.161.

camp location and wind prevented them from pitching their tent. The weather spirits treated the women no different than anyone else.

Reverend Keep realized his wish to provide a route for women to the Katahdin summit. For each of these trips the travelers started in Bangor and traveled north by horse drawn conveyance to reach the Hunt farm. From here they traveled the East Branch of the Penobscot River a short distance to the west bank at the mouth of the Wissataquiok Stream. The route ran overland to Katahdin Lake and on to Roaring Brook and then Avalanche Stream that they followed up the mountain to the landslide they climbed to reach the open area and continued to the summit. Keep continued to guide parties on his trail until 1861 and others kept it open until the mid-1870s when logging obliterated it.²²

How many other women followed these 12 early pioneers to the summit on any route before the turn of the century is unknown. The social notes in newspapers available through websites like Nineteenth Century Newspapers listed only one climb by a woman after the 1855 group. On October 2, 1884 Sarah and George H. Witherle climbed from the southern Sourdnhunk Mountains and reached the open tableland above the scrub not far from the summit.²³ In 1887 the first Appalachian Mountain Club excursion to the Katahdin area included a majority of women; how many may have made the ascent is unknown.²⁴ Once the railroad reached Norcross in 1893 the number of women likely increased. Bert Haynes and his wife Nellie, builders of Buck Horn Camps on Middle Jo-Mary Lake (Maine)

²² Neff, p.164.

²³ W., G.H., "Mount Katahdin," *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier*, August 17, 1886, issue 194, p.1.

²⁴ Waterman, p.262.

in 1895, climbed the mountain on their honeymoon in early 1895. At this time there was a tin box on top and in it were the signatures of women climbing the mountain. In late July 1897 the Haynes climbed it again with Joe Francis and his son-in-law Joe Dennis, and Cornelia Thurza “Fly Rod” Crosby, a guest at their sporting camp. Once on top Nellie pulled out the tin box so Fly Rod could add her name to a list that would steadily grow.²⁵

Top of Mount Katahdin
August 11th, 1849

O thou, whosoever thou art that shall next penetrate to this grand and solitary region, we give thee kindly greeting in the name of the Good Father, our Maker and Preserver, for surely Katahdin is worthy to be the footstool of the Eternal, and here should the heart be lifted up: and as touching this our mission we desire to say a few words with that modesty that beseemeth our sex.

Whereas, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them, and it is the privilege of man to carve out his own career, whether in the council hall, the battlefield, or the varied walks of literature and art; while women are doomed for the most part to regard these as Pisgah heights overlooking to her an interdicted land; what wonder, then, that having achieved even an ordinary greatness she should be tenacious of its honors; what wonder if by the exercise of courage and endurance beyond her sex she has been able to reach a point never before attained by any of her kind she should desire to secure the glory thereof, to magnify her office as it were. Know then that we the undersigned did, on the day specified, reach to the highest point of Mount Katahdin; the first women who were ever here; the first and only women who have achieved the perilous and toilsome ascent. And lest it should be thought we arrogate too much to ourselves, we must acknowledge our indebtedness to the manly aid of David Mosman, Esq. and the most efficient and careful pioneering of our guide, Mr. James H. Haines, who certainly bore unwonted hardship in providing for our comfort as the unconscionable packs of each fully testified, and the aching shoulders therefrom we fear may bear painful witness. So much to the chance pilgrim. And now a word in particular. On our way hither it was more than once told us of a rash

²⁵ Crosby, Cornelia (Fly Rod) Thurza. “A Trip to Katahdin with the Haynes family.” *Shooting and Fishing Magazine* (New York), 1897 or 1898. On the basis of the Haynes family records, privately held, the trip was in 1897, but exactly when it appeared in the magazine is unknown. This citation is based on an undated clipping in a Haynes scrapbook.

and boastful vow made by Rev. Mr. Keep, that his wife should be the first woman that set foot upon Katahdin. Inconsiderate man, thou shouldst have called to mind the excellent Scripture from which we doubt not thou hast often edified thy hearers, which runneth in this wise: "Let not him who girdeth on his armor boast like him that layeth it aside." We doubt not the daintiness of the foot nor the pretty ambition of its owner, but ours (of which we say nothing) is there before it, and while we sympathize with her disappointment we beg her to reap consolation from the thought we hope to bear our honors meekly, and never in all time leave any memories unworthy the lofty and hallowed associations of Katahdin. And now God bless you, and farewell!

E. Oakes Smith, New York.

N. C. Mosman, Bangor