

# Conway Scenic Railroad: A Brief History



*Photo courtesy of the Conway Historical Society*

Until a decade after the end of the Civil War, stagecoaches were the preferred method of transportation to the North Conway area. The rail line from Conway to North Conway was completed from Conway on June 3, 1872, during the administration of President Ulysses S. Grant and extended to Intervale in October 1874. That same year, the Portsmouth, Great Falls and Conway Railroad built the North Conway station. Noted architect Nathaniel J. Bradlee of Boston designed the beautiful structure, which has changed little since it was built. The station measured 30 feet by 100 feet and housed separate men's and ladies'

waiting rooms, a ticket office, baggage room and restrooms. Two curving mahogany staircases led to offices in metal sheathed domed towers on the second level. An E. Howard, eight-day clock was installed in the face of the building facing the park.

Railroad carpenters had already built several Victorian-style stations along the line prior to reaching North Conway, but the North Conway station was truly a showcase for their craft. The station merited their finest efforts because the town, a prestigious summer resort, served as the northern terminus of the Conway Branch. Two years after opening, history was very nearly made at the station. On December 3, 1876, Alexander Graham Bell and his assistant, Mr. Watson, attempted a conversation over the telegraph wires between Boston and the station ticket office, a distance of 143 miles. Although the conversation was not heard by either gentleman it was a start; as they continued to experiment in long distance communication. For nearly 90 years the station was a landmark for train travelers. Passengers, mail, express, and newspapers arrived and departed through the station. Snow trains began running in 1932 to the town that was home to the "birthplace of American skiing." Countless skiers rode the snow trains as the sport of skiing grew with the development of ski lifts.

By the early 1950s, improved highways and America's love affair with the automobile led to a decline in passenger service. Passenger service to Boston ended on December 2, 1961, as a single B & M Buddliner headed south never to return. Freight customers continued to decline, too, and the last freight train departed on October 30, 1972. The station remained boarded up and in general disrepair for several years after passenger service was terminated. The Conway Scenic Railroad restored and reopened this magnificent station on August 3, 1974, to provide seasonal excursion train service in the Mount Washington Valley.

Now a National Historic Landmark, the station still reflects its original character even though a Gift Shop has replaced a waiting room, and there have been upgrades to heating, water, and electrical systems. During the summer of 1996 the station exterior was refurbished to include new roofing, paint, replacement of trim, and repair of the weathervane. To further protect its long and colorful history, a sprinkler system was installed. Today, one may board a train in North Conway during the summer and fall seasons for Crawford Notch and beyond. The original line to Conway still sees several trains a day during the operating season.



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