

How New York Lost its Marble

WILMINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY/DOUGLAS A. WOLFE COLLECTION



Above: The Whiteface Veterans Memorial Highway was completed in 1935. Skiers paid \$1.50 for a truck or snowcat ride to the summit. From there, they could ski back down the highway or access the upper slopes of Marble Mountain via several hiking trails. Right: Art Draper, the first supervisor at Marble, rides the chairlift with his dog, Patch.



OLYMPIC REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

Marble Mountain near Lake Placid is the largest ski area in the Eastern U.S. ever to be abandoned.

BY PHIL JOHNSON

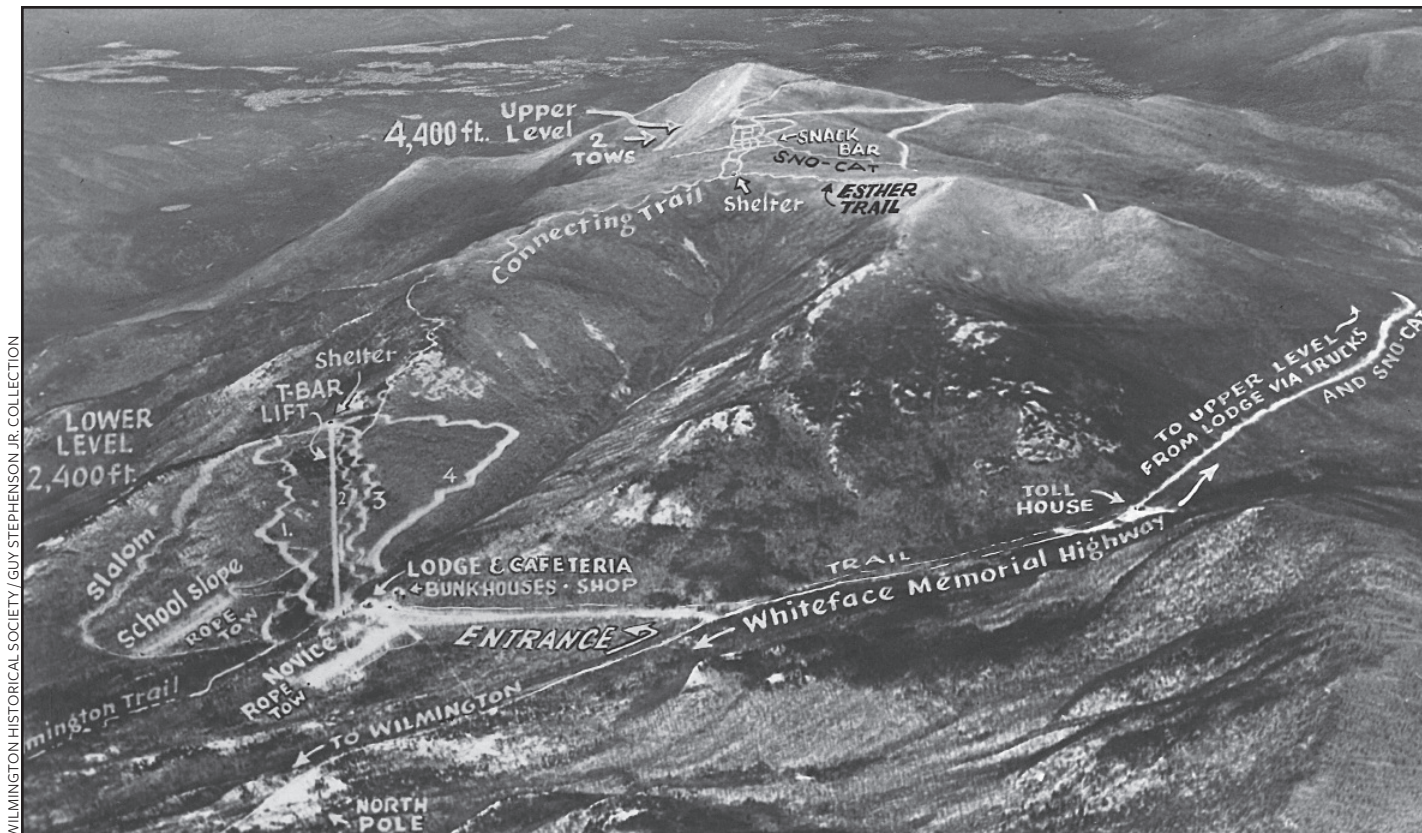
To get the full benefit of the sweeping northern vista from the newly widened Wilmington Trail at Whiteface Mountain near Lake Placid, pick a calm day. Otherwise, get ready for a blast of what ski historian and meteorologist Jeremy Davis characterizes as “howling, persistent winds” that 60 years ago brought down Marble

Mountain. Intended to be New York State’s signature ski resort in the 1950s, Marble lasted just 10 years before it closed. It remains the largest ski area east of the Mississippi to be abandoned.

It turns out you can’t move the mountain, so the state moved the ski area: The “new” Whiteface resort, dedicated in 1958, is just around the corner. With 87 trails

and 3,430 vertical feet, Whiteface played host to the 1980 Winter Olympic alpine events and continues to host international and national competitions regularly. How close was Marble Mountain to Whiteface? Its Porcupine Lodge, just off the new Lookout Mountain chairlift, is still used by the Whiteface ski patrol.

The original development, planned in the 1930s, was first



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known as Whiteface Mountain Ski Center and later as Marble Mountain. It was located on a more northern face of Whiteface, a stand-alone mountain with four peaks. The area wanted winter tourism, and Marble was to be New York's answer to major Eastern alpine ski hills, like Stowe in Vermont and Cannon in New Hampshire, that were built in the 1930s.

The Marble Mountain layout offered 2,500 vertical feet of skiing. The site was chosen, in large part, because most of the land had already been cleared by loggers. It was also accessible from the Whiteface Veterans Memorial Highway, completed in 1935 and modeled on the Pike's Peak Highway in Colorado. Locals liked to call the eight-mile highway the longest beginner ski trail in the state.

The village by that time already had a reputation for winter sports. The Lake Placid Club, which had operated year-round since 1905, was popular with the well-connected New York City crowd and was instrumental in bringing the 1932 Winter Olympics to the Adirondacks.

The Lake Placid Games included jumping and cross-country skiing; alpine skiing wasn't an Olympic sport until 1936. While there were small hills for downhill skiing nearby, none came close to what was being offered elsewhere in New England. It was 1938 before a Class A racing trail was cut on Little Whiteface...and that was before lifts.

"It was three hours up and three minutes down," recalled the late Vernon Lamb, a Lake Placid native and longtime ski official.

By the mid-1930s there was little dispute about building an alpine ski area north of the village on Whiteface Mountain, which includes the connected peaks of Little Whiteface, Esther, Lookout and Marble. The only question was where to put it.

People like Art Draper—a Harvard grad and *New York Times* reporter who moved to the Adirondacks in 1938 to work as a state forest ranger—saw problems with the proposed Marble Mountain site. He wanted the new ski area to meet the international race standard of 2,800 vertical feet, and Marble fell 300 feet short. But other local leaders, including the 1932 two-

Hannes Schneider and Otto Schniebs designed the alpine trails at Marble Mountain and Herman "Jackrabbit" Smith-Johannsen designed the upper cross-country trails. The area opened in 1949 and closed in 1960, doomed by its frigid, wind-scoured site.

man bobsled gold medalist J. Hubert Stevens, who would become chairman of the Whiteface Highway Commission, disagreed.

Because the highway up Whiteface was already in place, and much of the cleared land was considered attractive for alpine skiing, the Marble Mountain site was pushed forward. Most of the terrain was owned by the state, and governed by restrictive usage language. So to build the ski area, with its 20 miles of trails, the state constitution would need to be modified.

Year earlier, a similar statewide vote to build the Whiteface Highway had passed easily with 64 percent approval. The vote was much closer this time. Labeled the "Ski-Slide Amendment" by proponent Hal Burton, then the *New York Daily News* outdoor columnist, it passed by a margin of less than 10,000 votes. Much credit for the outcome was given to the advocacy
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of well-known broadcaster and skier Lowell Thomas, a long time friend of J. Hubert Stevens.

The vote was held in November 1941. A month later, the U.S. was at war and the construction of a ski area was of little immediate concern.

While development of the ski area was halted, its future remained on the minds of locals. In 1944, jurisdiction over the project shifted from the state Conservation Department to the newly created Whiteface Mountain Authority. The Marble Mountain site was re-affirmed.

When the war ended, the project went forward under Draper's leadership. Otto Schniebs, who had been teaching skiing in Lake Placid since the 1930s, and the skimeister Hannes Schneider from North Conway, New Hampshire, were among those who laid out trails. Herman "Jack-rabbit" Smith-Johannsen, long connected with the Lake Placid Club, also did considerable trail work on the mountain.

The initial plan called for five trails on the upper mountain at the 4,000-foot level, with more to be added on a lower site, near the Wilmington turn of the highway.

But a shortage of material, including iron for the lift towers, plus logistical difficulties in getting workers onto the mountain, contributed to a three-year construction delay. A 9,000-foot chairlift intended to make Marble a year-round tourist attraction was scrapped and surface lifts were substituted, including a Roebling T-Bar more than 3,000 feet in length that could transport 700 skiers per hour.

Early reports on the project were enthusiastic. In January 1946, the New York State's Department of Public Works report to the Whiteface Mountain Authority said: "The Ski Center will be ideally located for skiing, as the major portion of the trails and slopes will be on the north sides of the mountain, where ideal snow conditions will prevail for three to four months during the winter."

The Marble Mountain T-Bar was completed in October 1948. The first skiers came down from the top on Christmas Day of that year, and the formal opening was on February 19, 1949, with Governor Thomas Dewey in attendance. But the problems were immediate. Marble Mountain lost money from the start.

Its location turned out to be its fatal flaw. Not only were many of the trails steep and difficult, but high winds magnified by the V-shaped basin frequently blew away the snow and scoured the trails.

Douglas Wolfe, who grew up in Wilmington and recently retired as operations manager of the State University of New York's Atmospheric Sciences Research Center at Whiteface, explains: "Whiteface Mountain is what is known as a 'crest summit.' Unlike most mountains, which are located in clusters, the Whiteface summit—which includes the peaks at Esther, Little Whiteface, and Marble—is isolated. This means prevailing winds from the north and northwest come up and over the mountain, rather than swirling around it. This creates a natural downslope acceleration of the wind, which makes for colder temperatures and snow cover that evaporates or gets blown off."

In short, Marble Mountain turned out to have terrible climate conditions for a ski area.

By the early 1950s, the area was in trouble. Draper had left Lake Placid before the project was completed and ended up managing Belleayre Mountain in the Catskills.

One day in 1954, he received a phone call from the office of newly elected New York Governor Averell Harriman, who wanted to come and ski. Harriman, who had developed Sun Valley in the 1930s on Union Pacific railroad property his family owned in Idaho, was very familiar with ski areas. As he skied with Draper at Belleayre that day, the matter of skiing in Lake Placid came up. Later that season they skied together in Lake Placid and shared their concern with the Marble Mountain leadership.

By that time the area had already suffered one major setback when its new base lodge burned to the ground in May 1951. A new lodge was built on the same site. But despite that investment, and other tweaks and modifications, it was becoming clear that the area was not living up to expectations.

Lost Ski Areas of the Northern Adiron-

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The Roebling-Constam T-bar had a length of 3,300 feet with a vertical rise of 900 feet. Skiers could exit at several spots along the trails. The T-bar was removed from the defunct ski area in 1967.

dacks author Jeremy Davis cites the view of many at the time by quoting an editorial by Sidney T. Cox in the local *Adirondack Daily Enterprise*.

“New York’s first attempt to provide large-scale recreation skiing facilities has proven a failure so egregious as to damage the reputation of the entire state as a winter tourist area ... in the two most recent winters, when New England and other New York ski areas were enjoying their best seasons in history, the Whiteface Mountain Authority’s development—an \$850,000 investment originally—lost \$27,269 and \$28,258 respectively.

“The reason for this fiasco is simple enough: Not enough snow... the record of the number of days of operation of the Whiteface Mountain Ski Center shows clearly that there was not sufficient snow in any year to attract the number of visitors needed to make the project self-sustaining ... The dismal record is therefore all the more noticeable and has made the Adirondack region something of a laughingstock both in New York and in neighboring states.”

It is one thing when criticism comes at long range. But in this instance, it was local opinion. Marble Mountain had run out of friends.

The New York legislature decided to take another look at the project it had created a decade earlier. In 1955, a committee agreed to reconsider the site of the ski area and in 1957, \$2.5 million was authorized to cut trails, install two chair lifts and build a base lodge at a new Whiteface Mountain site. A requirement of the plan was that at least one of the new trails had to be at least 2,800 vertical feet to meet the Olympic requirement. Draper, who clearly had the ear of the Governor, was retained to become the full-time manager of the effort.

The result: greatly improved facilities and trails and a far more benign weather and wind pattern on the hill. It was clearly the right move. Governor Harriman joined Draper for the dedication of the new Whiteface in January 1958, an event that gained national attention when a power failure on the Riblet chairlift stranded the Governor, Draper, and



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PAUL CASSON/ASRC

Above: The motor shed and ticket office were downslope from the main lodge; skiers took a rope tow to access the lodge from the ticket office.

Left: The lodge is now an atmospheric sciences research center. At left is the Flag Tree, an evergreen shaped over the years by the prevailing wind.

others 100 feet in the air for more than an hour.

Once Whiteface opened, Marble Mountain served as an overflow area on weekends and holidays. But without any attention or resources, it withered and finally closed for good after the 1960 season. The lifts were dismantled and sold.

What does survive at Marble Mountain today is a handsome base lodge that was built from logs salvaged from a hurricane that came through the area in 1951. Since the ski area was closed, it has become the headquarters for the State University of New York’s Atmospheric Sciences Research Center in the Adirondacks. The round building skiers and others see at the top of the Whiteface Ski Center is an ASRC field station. There is a public hiking trail along the old T-bar lift line, and a storage shed now known as Porcupine Lodge, near the present Lookout Mountain chairlift, is still

in use by the ski patrol.

Some skiers still believe that Whiteface is colder and windier than most ski areas. That’s hard to say. But for those who want visual proof of what it’s like Marble Mountain when the wind blows, check out the “Flag Tree” just south of the Marble Mountain lodge. It’s a huge evergreen, and all branches point in one direction: away from the prevailing wind. 🌲

Author Phil Johnson is the ski columnist for The Daily Gazette (Schenectady) and a past president of the Eastern Ski Writers Association and the North American Snowsports Journalists Association.

Thanks to ISHA editorial board member Jeremy Davis for contributing to this article. Davis publishes the New England Lost Ski Areas Project (www.nelsap.org), a Website that compiles information about closed ski areas in the region, and has written four award-winning books about lost ski areas.