

Waldron Bates, Pathmaker

Acadia National Park
Maine

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



On a giant boulder at the junction of the Gorham Mountain and Cadillac Cliffs Trails is a commemorative bronze plaque that is passed by three or four hundred hikers every summer day. How many of them wonder about the story of the man on the plaque, Waldron Bates?

History

Bostonian. Harvard graduate. Lawyer. Pathmaker. Pathmaker? How and why did Mr. Bates become known as a pathmaker? Bates began exploring Mount Desert Island in the 1880s during family trips. An active sportsman, he wrote articles for fish and game publications, toured Yellowstone Park in 1889, and was instrumental in the establishment of the Kebo Valley Golf Club. Like many others at the turn of the century (and today as well), he came to love this island and dedicated much of his life to making it better. Nowhere is this more evident than in his energetic devotion to hiking trails.

From 1900 to 1909, Bates was chairman of the Path Committee of the Bar Harbor Village Improvement Association (VIA). Beginning in the 1890s, VIAs in each of the four island towns created most of the island's hiking trail system we know today. Twenty-five miles of trails were added under Bates' leadership, among them the Giant Slide, Canon Brook, Gorham Mountain, and Cadillac Cliffs Trails. The hiking map you use today is a direct descendant of the very first comprehensive island path map published in 1896. The lead author of that map was Waldron Bates.

Trails

We don't know if Bates worked on trails himself (local men were usually hired), but we do know he wrote the first trail handbook for those men, establishing construction and maintenance standards. One standard he developed was for building cairns in a unique style we now call the Bates cairn (see photo). Acadia National Park is re-establishing this simple and historic style of cairn on the many east-side trails developed by this trail pioneer.

You can help us recover and retain this little piece of history. Please do not add to or build cairns or other rock objects. With thousands more hikers today than in Bates' era, tampering with rocks is damaging to the mountain environment. Leaving rocks where you find them preserves thin and fragile mountain soil, vegetation, and a more natural landscape.

Waldron Bates died tragically in 1909 at age 52 in a train accident, but his legacy of paths continues. So the next time you hike the Gorham Mountain Trail, tip your hat to the pathmaker on the plaque, Waldron Bates, and say thanks.