

The Russell-Colbath Homestead, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is a wooden frame dwelling constructed between 1831 and 1832 by Thomas Russell and his son, Amzi.

In 1961, the property was purchased by the US Forest Service to preserve and make known the heritage and environment of the Passaconaway Valley. The house has been restored to much of its original setting and is open to the public as a historical site. The White Mountain National Forest, in partnership with the White Mountains Interpretative Association (WMIA), provides living history programs during the summer and autumn months in the house.

The barn, completed in 2003, was a welcome addition to the Russell-Colbath Historic Site. The result of a cooperative effort with the Timber Framers Guild and the Passaconaway Valley Civic Association, it is post and beam construction; its frame is composed of rough sawn timbers milled from trees on the site with a portable saw mill.

Throughout the summer, the barn is used for interpretive programs. It is also available for rent for family gatherings, wedding receptions, or community events. Contact the Saco Ranger District for more information about programs or rental opportunities.

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# The Historic Russell-Colbath Homestead



*The Homestead and the Changing  
Passaconaway Valley*

## A Guide to the Historical Photograph Display



## *Then and Now — Changes in the Landscape*

The homesteaders, in their attempt to eke out a living, changed the landscape. They cut trees for firewood and building materials, plowed fields, and struggled to raise crops.



Passage of the Weeks Act in 1911 allowed the federal government to purchase lands in the East for management by the US Forest Service, resulting in the 1918 formation of the White Mountain National Forest. Since then, there have been further changes in the valley — the most visually notable being the conversion of working farmland to working forest.

*When this photograph was taken, Albany was 95 percent farmland. By 1976, only five percent of that farmland remained. Compare the view in the photograph with what you see today. The photo was reproduced from a Christmas postcard sent in 1907 from Ruth Priscilla Colbath to her friend Mrs. Durgin.*

## *The Homestead*

The Russell-Colbath house offers a glimpse into the life on a homestead and provides a sense of the struggle for survival and settlement in this remote mountain valley. A homestead typically consisted of a rustic dwelling, a small garden, and a barn for livestock.

*This photo is from the early 1900s when the Russell-Colbath homestead also served as the Passaconaway Post Office. Mrs. Ruth Priscilla Colbath (center) served as the first Postmistress in the valley, from 1892 to 1907.*



*To learn more about Ruth, stop and read the interpretive signs just west of the barn, or visit the the homestead interpreter.*

## The Community

At its peak in the 1850s, the community of Passaconaway was substantial. While not bustling, it hosted a mixture of permanent and transient residents, many of whom worked the local farms, mills or lumber operations. At its peak population, enough families lived in town to support seven one-room schools.

*Originally located across from the Russell-Colbath Homestead, the Passaconaway School, below, was maintained until approximately 1910, when it was privately purchased and relocated. Note the children without shoes.*



*Above, a typical hardworking family poses on the porch of a Swift River Lumber company cottage near Champney Falls. Note how proudly the girl's dolls are displayed.*

## Logging for Building and Income

Logging operations along the Swift River greatly influenced the development of the Passaconaway Valley. Forests were a source of wealth and income to many homesteaders. Workers risked their lives daily on the rugged terrain and dangerous log drives along the Swift River.

*Logging with horse and oxen was hard labor. This late 1890s photo shows a local man, Onslow Smith, using horses while harvesting timber near his Passaconaway farm. For more information about the logging era, take a short walk on the Rail 'n River trail.*



## Early Transportation

The first settlers traveled on foot or horseback as wagon roads did not exist, making commerce difficult. The town road to Passaconaway (right, now the Kancamagus Highway) was laid out in 1837 to avoid expensive bridge crossings. The new road made travel by horse- and ox-drawn carriage and wagon possible. Later, rail travel provided Passaconaway Valley residents with a new connection to the outside world.



## Hunting and Trapping

Hunting and trapping provided food and clothing for families, and income for the homesteaders. Selling and trading furs was common practice in the primitive backcountry.

*Left: The charismatic Jack Allen, shown in this 1903 photo taken in front of a Conway Lumber Field office, was a well known resident hunter, guide and trapper.*

## Tourism

The vast, open Passaconaway Valley and the majestic White Mountains inspired artists, such as Benjamin Champney, writers like Thomas Starr King, hunters, fishermen, trappers, hikers, and many other curious travelers. The late 19th and early 20th century also saw a rise in tourism in the area. Inns were built and large farmhouses were used as boarding houses for visitors.



*Above. A coaching parade forms in front of the popular Whittaker homestead in North Conway. Local hotels decorated horses and carriages, and paraded to town to compete for awards.*

*In the late 19th century, small-scale railroads were constructed in the Valley to facilitate logging operations. The Swift River Railroad had about 20 miles of rail line in the valley. The photo at left, taken in the early 1900s, shows their Baldwin Engine No. 1.*