



## NEW HAMPSHIRE DIVISION OF HISTORICAL RESOURCES

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# THE VALUE OF RUINS

Europeans have long known the evocative power of ruins. The shells of castles, churches, forts, mills, and mining structures are spread across the continent, giving each country a tangible sense of its special identity and history, and drawing tourists from the rest of the world. So attractive is the ruin that wealthy British families of the eighteenth century often paid landscape gardeners and architects to build shattered temples and mossy grottoes where none had existed before.

Now the American landscape is aging. In New Hampshire, our rugged natural terrain is overwritten by a four-hundred-year record of human labor and ingenuity. Like the soil of more ancient civilizations, the land in New Hampshire holds evidence of more than one stratum of human occupancy. The forest floor is pockmarked with half-filled cellar holes dating from the age of first settlement. In our woods, we may trace ancient roadways flanked by stone walls that impounded long-departed herds.



**Ruins of concrete buttress dam (1929), Bearcamp River, South Tamworth, NH**  
(Photograph by James L. Garvin)

With little effort, we may discover stone-lined wells that still reflect the sky in their quiet water, foundations of forgotten barns that once groaned under the weight of harvests from newly plowed land, and broken milldams that powered our earliest industries.

New Hampshire people love these simple ruins of our first age of European settlement. For the past hundred years, writers have taught us to cherish the bucolic and rural in our landscape. Many beautiful words have been written in praise of our lichen-covered stone walls. Many anguished words have been uttered when insensitivity or greed has caused

these features to be erased from our sight.

But the New Hampshire landscape also holds ruins that we do not yet find beautiful. The writers who have worked for over a century to define New Hampshire's identity have not mentioned one of our defining characteristics as a place and a people. By consciously linking New Hampshire's image to rural ideals, these writers have deliberately ignored the fact that New Hampshire's economy has been more industrial than agricultural since the 1870s. The great mills of Manchester and Nashua, the myriad of smaller factories along our lesser streams, and the bridges of our railroads and highways offer as true a record of our history as do our stone walls and cellar holes.

As time has passed, many early manufacturing and transportation structures have been abandoned. Great numbers of them survive today only as archaeological sites. Whatever is left of them lies underground and unseen.

But many of our monuments to industry and transportation stand deserted in the landscape. Some are intact. Others are partly destroyed, suspended halfway between the status of structure and that of archaeological site.

These are New Hampshire's most ambiguous ruins. They are imposing and significant milestones in our development as a society. They are regarded as worthy of study and preservation by historians and industrial archaeologists, who recognize that they have the potential to remind us of our history and to reveal forgotten technologies. They are also potentially hazardous, tempting the unwary to injury or contact with toxic materials. And to many, they are ugly, often made more so by the assiduous work of vandals who delight in smashing every one of their vulnerable features.

Europeans accept the inherent dangers of ruins, assuming that if someone acts irresponsibly around a ruinous structure and is injured, it is not society's duty to compensate the reckless victim for his own folly.

We Americans are litigious and deeply afraid of legal liability. Instead of letting our structures stand and be softened by the slow processes of nature, we spend large sums to expunge them from the landscape. We do this partly out of fear of liability, and partly out of revulsion at the appearance of a crumbling structure that has not yet acquired the patina of centuries.

As our landscape and our society age, we need to cultivate an appreciation of all our ruins. Certainly, we must identify and remove toxins from our old industrial sites. But we must also learn to cherish the history that is inherent in a breached dam, a rusting bridge, the shell of a concrete factory, or a solitary smokestack. These are the noble remains of a society that became great not through wars and conquests, but by harnessing the power of water and steam and by building roads and bridges.

We also need to learn to see beauty in these structures. Europeans of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries invested immense effort in explaining

what made a broken temple or crumbling mausoleum picturesque. Many a work of art took inspiration from a poignant relic of past human effort within the landscape. But a ruined tomb is not inherently more beautiful than a concrete foundation. It is all a matter of attitude.

Perhaps we have reached an age as a society when it is time for us to study the efforts of aesthetic theorists of the early nineteenth century to define what was picturesque and beautiful in the European landscape. These writers and artists might teach us to find pleasure and value in structures that we now regard with disdain.

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