

## **SQUARE LEDGE**

by Steve Smith

ELEVATION: 2620 ft./799 m

LOCATON: Sandwich Range, east side of Mt. Passaconaway, Town of Albany

USGS MAP: 7 ½' Mt. Chocorua

### **GEOGRAPHY**

Square Ledge, a low eastern spur of 4043-ft. Mt. Passaconaway, is fronted with one of the most impressive backcountry cliffs in the White Mountains. This 350-ft. wall of Conway granite faces E into the broad upper valley of Oliverian Brook, the remote basin on the N side of the Sandwich Range between Mts. Passaconaway and Paugus. It is located at the E end of a small ridge projecting NE from "Nanamocomuck Peak" (3340 ft.), itself a SE spur of Mt. Passaconaway. Local historian Charles Edward Beals, Jr. described the cliff as "a gigantic scarred face of perpendicular ledge."

Wrote the authors of the 1901 Wonalancet Out Door Club guide to the Sandwich Range: "The rock splits in great rectangular blocks and breaks away from below so that the upper part of the cliff overhangs the base. Facing the east it is dazzlingly beautiful in the morning." A good vantage for seeing the cliff is the open ledge area on the S knob of Mt. Paugus.

The wooded summit of Square Ledge is a rather sharp little knob at the W end of the ridge, separated by a small notch from the broad hump behind the great cliff. More cliffs line the S side of the Square Ledge ridgecrest – not as high as the main rock face, but still impressively craggy. These cliffs, as well as a squared-off side profile of the main ledge, can be seen from the northern viewpoint along the Walden Trail on "Wonalancet Hedgehog."

On the W a ravine drained by the W branch of Oliverian Brook separates Square Ledge from the main mass of Passaconaway. To the N a ridge runs

down from Square Ledge to a broad, flat area of the Oliverian Brook valley, beyond which is the northern of the two Hedgehog Mtns. To the S is a high basin drained by Square Ledge Brook, a tributary of Oliverian Brook.

Though there is no open summit on Square Ledge, an outlook atop the great cliff provides a view E across the valley, and a ledge reached by a rough side path near the summit offers an impressive view up to Mt. Passaconaway. Other partial vistas may be found along the ridgecrest. There are three trail approaches to this remote and beautiful place, two of them providing a loop from the Kancamagus Highway to the N. The section of trail that ascends from the SE is quite steep. Despite its relatively low elevation, a hike through this area impresses with its wild, craggy character. With the expansion of the Sandwich Range Wilderness in 2006, the entire area around Square Ledge is protected as forever wild.

The cliff face has hosted nesting peregrine falcons almost every season in recent years, and access to the E outlook may be restricted during the nesting period (April 1-August 1). It has also become more popular with solitude-seeking rock climbers in recent years.



*Square Ledge from across the Oliverian Brook valley*

## NOMENCLATURE

The sheared-off face of the great cliff gave rise to the name “Square Ledge.” There is another, much smaller crag by this name on the E side of Pinkham Notch.

## HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS

**Late 1700s:** Crude road is cut by loggers to haul giant white pines – reserved as masts for the King’s navy – from Albany Intervale up Oliverian Brook valley under Square Ledge, over low point between Mts. Passaconaway and Paugus, and down to lowlands to S. Route is later dubbed “Old Mast Road.”

**1837:** First road is laid out from Conway into Albany Intervale, ending at settlement known as “Passaconaway” at N base of Mt. Passaconaway.

**1880:** AMC commissions James M. Shackford, farmer from Albany Intervale, to cut trail to Mt. Passaconaway from Oliverian Brook valley.

**1892:** Wonalancet Out Door Club organized by innkeeper Kate Sleeper and other habitués of lowlands to S of Sandwich Range, sparking era of trail-building in region.

**1898:** Path is cut by WODC from S section of Old Mast Road over height-of-land and then up to Square Ledge.

**1899:** Dr. William H. Rollins cuts path from Dicey’s Mill Trail on Mt. Passaconaway down to Square Ledge.

**1906-1916:** Swift River Railroad conducts intensive logging operations in Albany Intervale. Spur line runs a mile up Oliverian Brook, serving seven lumber camps in the valley.

**1912:** Major fire in upper Oliverian Brook valley burns surrounding mountain slopes.

**ca. 1917:** USFS opens trail up Oliverian Brook from Albany Intervale, replacing northern section of Old Mast Road, which had been disrupted by logging.

**1919:** Trail from Mt. Passaconaway to Square Ledge reopened after being destroyed by logging several years earlier. About this time branch trail is opened leading from Oliverian Brook Trail up to foot of Square Ledge, where it joins route from Wonalancet.

**1922:** AMC guidebook reports that Passaconaway Mountain Club, short-lived group based in Albany Intervale, has opened trail up W branch of Oliverian Brook, approximately on route of today’s Passaconaway Cutoff.

This trail is abandoned ca. 1940 due to flood and slides.

**1965:** Passaconaway Cutoff reopened.

**1982:** Upper part of Passaconaway Cutoff relocated away from brook.

**1984:** S slopes of Square Ledge included in newly created Sandwich Range Wilderness.

**Mid-1990s:** Middle section of Oliverian Brook Trail relocated to E on higher

ground.

**1999:** North Conway rock climbers put up several new routes on main cliff.

**2006:** Sandwich Range Wilderness is expanded, now includes slopes and valleys on N side of Square Ledge.

## TRAIL APPROACHES

NORTH APPROACHES from Kancamagus Highway (NH 112)

### *Eastern Route*

**Oliverian Brook Trail, Square Ledge Branch Trail, Square Ledge Trail**

8.8 mi. round trip, 1400-ft. elevation gain (to summit outlook and return)

### *Western Route*

**Oliverian Brook Trail, Passaconaway Cutoff, Square Ledge Trail**

8.4 mi. round trip, 1700-ft. elevation gain (to E outlook and return)

*Loop Hike: Ascent via Eastern Route, Descent via Western Route*

8.4 mi. loop, 1550-ft. elevation gain

TRAILHEAD (1240 ft.): The N approaches to Square Ledge begin at a parking area for Oliverian Brook Trail, reached by a 0.15 mile side road that leaves the Kancamagus Highway 1.0 mi. W of the junction with Bear Notch Rd.

Two approaches to Square Ledge are possible from the trailhead for Oliverian Brook Trail, and combined they make an excellent loop with a variety of wild scenery in the Oliverian Brook valley. The final climb to the clifftop along the eastern approach is very steep, and there are several short, steep pitches along the ridgecrest. Since it is probably easier to ascend rather than descend the steepest section, the trails are described as a loop up via the eastern route and down via the western route.

From kiosk and gate at S end of parking area, walk 200 ft. S on gravel road, then turn L into woods at sign for Oliverian Brook Trail and meander through pines. Trail turns R onto original route at 0.1 mi. Trail continues S, crossing old roadbed, with gentle ups and downs. At 0.6 mi. make short descent and turn R on section of old railroad grade, used by Conway Lumber Co. ca. 1910. Oliverian Brook Trail is seen here to L. Just beyond, X-C ski trail splits off to R. Oliverian Brook Trail continues ahead, passes

between small beaver ponds that sometimes flood trail, and keeps to level, straight grade. Bear L off RR grade at 1.1 mi. and climb at easy grade along Oliverian Brook with several nice streamside vignettes. One section is on narrow bank beside section of brook strewn with many large boulders.

Enter Sandwich Range Wilderness at 1.7 mi., make somewhat tricky crossing of steep rocky brook, quickly cross second, smaller brook, traverse wet area with rock cribbing, and reach jct. on R with Passaconaway Cutoff at 1.9 mi./1500 ft. Stay L on Oliverian Brook Trail. After flat, mucky section, bear L and soon cross west branch of Oliverian Brook at 2.2 mi. by confluence with main stream. Trail continues gentle meander up valley through lovely open forest of spruce, hemlock and hardwood. At 2.7 mi., after nice section along streamside bank, cross Oliverian Brook at shallow, gravelly spot (may be difficult in high water). On far side trail soon bears L away from brook. Continuing up remote valley, look R for glimpses of Square Ledge through trees. At 3.1 mi. climb briefly beside tributary, then cross it and ascend along main brook to jct. R with Square Ledge Branch Trail at 3.3 mi./1750 ft.

Turn R onto Branch trail, immediately crossing Oliverian Brook on rocks. Ascend at easy to moderate grade with good footing on bank high above Square Ledge Brook, with peeks at cliffs to R, then climb more steeply away from brook. Grade eases before reaching Square Ledge Trail at 3.8 mi./2100 ft. Turn R here, cross brook, pass old logging camp site, and approach base of cliff on level section, then swing L and climb easily. One opening in tree canopy provides restricted view up to great rock face on R. Trail now climbs up through jumble of boulders with rough footing, then angles up to R very steeply along base of impressive wooded cliffs up to L. One 5-ft. ledge scramble has convenient root for handhold; above here footing is better though grade remains steep. At top emerge through rock portal and swing R to wooded shelf behind top of main Square Ledge cliff at 4.2 mi./2550 ft. Here trail makes horseshoe bend to L while short side path leads R to clearing just back from edge with nice view E across valley to Mt. Paugus and SE to Ossipee Lake beyond Paugus Pass.

Main trail makes short additional climb with two ledge scrambles, then



meanders along wild spruce-wooded ridgecrest, passing



*Cliffs along the eastern side of Square Ledge Trail*

open ledge vantage on L looking towards Wonalancet Hedgehog. Trail dips slightly to col, then makes short, fairly steep climb to point near wooded summit of Square Ledge at 4.4 mi./2620 ft.; highest point is to L of trail. Just beyond on L, where trail starts to descend, obscure path leads along shelf to scramble up 4-ft. ledge and, overgrown but well-beaten, continues 100 ft. through brush out to white ledge with imposing view up to Mt. Passaconaway and distant view NW. Use caution as ledge drops off abruptly on L, hidden by scrub, where path makes R turn onto open rock. From side path, Square Ledge Trail drops steeply along R side of rock

face, meanders across col, then makes steep climb of 140 ft. to shoulder of Nanamocomuck Peak. Here trail makes horseshoe to R at edge of wooded cliff, then descends steadily 0.1 mi. to jct. with Passaconaway Cutoff at 4.8 mi./2550 ft.

Turn R on Cutoff and descend moderately through birches. Footing is rocky in places. In 0.2 mi. trail drops over steep ledge; when leaves are down, there is restricted view N to Hedgehog Mtn. with Nancy Range on L and Mt. Tremont on R. Trail continues down through mostly dying birches and then ice-damaged hardwoods, with Mt. Passaconaway looming hugely off to L across ravine. Descend into spruce forest, passing large boulder on R. Pass limited view of Hedgehog Mtn. and reach bottom of steady downgrade at 5.6 mi.; here short overgrown path leads L to nice rest spot on W branch of Oliverian Brook. Just downstream is nice cascade. Main trail turns R and descends at easy grade into fine stretch of hardwood forest. Re-enter conifers and cross west branch of Oliverian Brook (wading may be required in high water) at 6.0 mi. and continue at mostly easy grade through hardwoods and then fine hemlock forest to jct. with Oliverian Brook Trail at 6.5 mi. Turn L for mellow 1.9 mi. walk back to trailhead.

#### SOUTH APPROACH from Ferncroft

##### **Old Mast Road, Square Ledge Trail**

7.4 mi. round trip, 2250-ft. elevation gain

TRAILHEAD (1140 ft.): This route approaches from the tiny village of Wonalancet on the S side of the Sandwich Range. Trailhead parking is on the R (E) side of Ferncroft Rd., 0.5 mile from NH 113A at its sharp corner in Wonalancet. From the W, take Exit 24 off I-93 and follow US 3 to Holderness. Turn L on NH 113 and proceed 11.5 mi. to Center Sandwich. Turn L here, staying on NH 113 another 3.6 mi. to junction with NH 113A in North Sandwich. Continue straight on NH 113A and follow it 6.6 mi. to sharp R turn by fields of Wonalancet. Turn L onto Ferncroft Road at corner and drive 0.5 mi. to parking area on R.

From the E, take NH 113 from NH 16 at village of Chocorua. In 2 mi. turn R on NH 113A and follow it 7 mi. to where Ferncroft Road leaves on R at



sharp L turn.

This approach brings you on an easy climb over a low ridge near Paugus Pass and down into the Oliverian Brook basin, then up to the ledge. There is ca. 400 ft. of climbing on return trip. From Ferncroft parking area, follow Old Mast Road L at fork into woods, passing jct. L with Wonalancet Range Trail at 0.1 mi. and crossing bridge over Spring Brook just beyond. At 0.3 mi. Kelley Trail diverges R. Wide trail enters WMNF and makes pleasant climb through hardwoods with good footing and easy to moderate grade, crossing old logging road at 0.9 mi. Higher up trail enters mixed woods, then nearing height-of-land grade eases on slab through bouldery hardwoods. Reach 4-way trail jct. at 2.0 mi./2350 ft.

Continue straight (N) on Square Ledge Trail, crossing col and then descending moderately through ice-damaged hardwoods with profuse undergrowth into upper valley of Oliverian Brook. Trail slabs along up on W side of valley, swinging L twice for short climbs, then descends to follow and cross tributary brook. This is wild, little-used section of trail. After crossing plateau with Square Ledge glimpsed ahead, trail climbs for 0.1 mi. and then traverses to Square Ledge Branch Trail at 3.1 mi./2100 ft. Bear L on Square Ledge Trail for steep climb to E outlook at 3.5 mi. and summit at 3.7 mi., as described above.

## WINTER

The W approach from the Kancamagus Highway (via Oliverian Brook Trail, Passaconaway Cutoff and Square Ledge Trail) is the best winter route to Square Ledge and is an excellent snowshoeing trip with a few short, steep pitches to keep things interesting. The Oliverian Brook Trail parking lot is plowed. Though doable, the steep climb up the E side is not recommended as a winter route.

## VIEW GUIDE

**E Outlook:** The small clearing behind the main cliff opens a restricted view E across the broad upper valley of Oliverian Brook to the great wooded mass of Mt. Paugus, with its ledgy S summit on the R. Mt. Chocorua's

rocky Middle and First Sisters just peer over to the L of Paugus's broad summit, and farther L is a flat-topped NE spur of Paugus. Through the trees, on the far L looking down the Oliverian Brook valley, is the Moat Range, with South



*Mount Paugus from top of Square Ledge cliff*

and Middle Moat on the R and North Moat to the L.

Under Paugus's S knob is a wooded 2615-ft. knob that bears "The Overhang" ledges on its hidden S face. Farther R you look over Paugus Pass - the low point between Mts. Paugus and Passaconaway - out to distant Ossipee Lake. Green Mtn. in Effingham is seen behind and to the L of the lake. Wiggin Mtn. in Maine peers over the col to the R of Green's

summit knobs. To the R of Green and Ossipee Lake is the nearby hump known as Carrigain Outlook, with Maine's Fort Ridge on the horizon. Farther R are the Nickerson Mtns. (with the triple summits of Maine's Bauneg Beg Mtn. on the horizon) and Mt. Whittier and Bald Mtn. - the NE summits of the Ossipee Range. Through the saddle between the Nickersons and Whittier is Whiteface Mtn. in Wolfeboro. Access to this outlook may be restricted during the peregrine falcon nesting season (April 1-August 1).

**Summit Ledge:** This white ledge is a bit obscure and tricky to get to, and the distant view is best seen standing rather than sitting. But it's a nice sunny lunch spot and is notable for the impressive look up at Mt.

Passaconaway looming 1400 ft. above, close by to the W, with its lower spurs Nanamocomuck and Wonalancet Hedgehog to the L across the basin of Square Ledge Brook. Parts of the E slide of Passaconaway are visible. To the R of Passaconaway is an interesting distant view NW.

Coming off the R (N) slope of Passaconaway are South and North Hancock and that mountain's long E ridge, with the dark knob of Potash Mtn. below and much closer. A cirque below the E ridge of Hancock is well-displayed. To the R of Hancock is massive Mt. Carrigain, with the rock-faced nubble of The Captain poking up from the saddle between them. In the distance behind The Captain are South Twin Mtn., Mt. Guyot and the summit of Zealand Mtn. In front of Carrigain and to the R is the long, flat-topped Green's Cliff. Carrigain Notch is centered over Green's, with Carrigain's Vose Spur on the L and Mt. Lowell on the R. In the distance through the



*Mount Passaconaway from Square Ledge*

notch is seen part of the long ridge that extends W from Mt. Field. To the R of Lowell are Mt. Anderson and Mt. Field. By moving around on the ledge, one may also obtain views of Mt. Paugus nearby to the E and a distant view SE over Paugus Pass, similar to that from the viewpoint atop the E cliff, with the addition of Silver Lake visible over the col between Carrigain Outlook and The Overhang.