

# HISTORIC ROOTS

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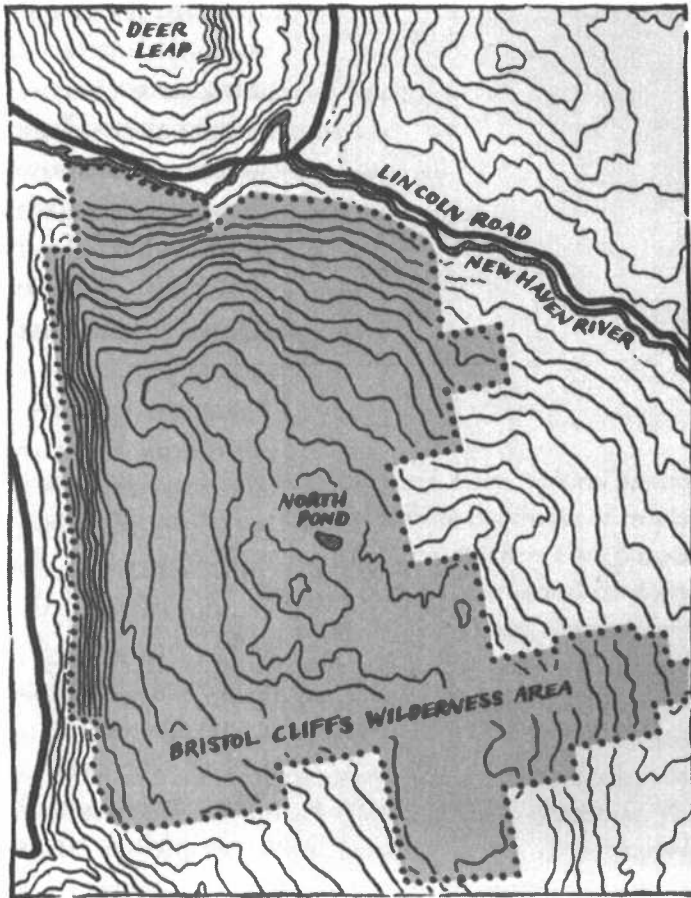
No. 3

# THE BRISTOL CLIFFS

By JOHN ELDER<sup>1</sup>

Harvey Munsill was one of the first settlers in Bristol, Vermont, arriving there with his family during the 1790s. When he was an old man, in the 1860s, he began to write a history of Bristol. He made lists of the citizens, the churches, the businesses, marriages, births, and funerals. But his history is not just dry lists. The section called "Accidents and Incidents" makes the town's past seem very like our present. Here's an excerpt from the first entry.<sup>2</sup>

*Orcemus Shumway, about three years old, in the month of June 1806[,] wandered a way from home....[He followed] the main travelled road, as is supposed, West from Bristol village to near the top of the hill, called Stoney Hill[.] [A]nd there[,] taking a Woods road leading north into the Woods, and night coming on and dark[,] the Child was unable to*



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Map of the Bristol Cliffs

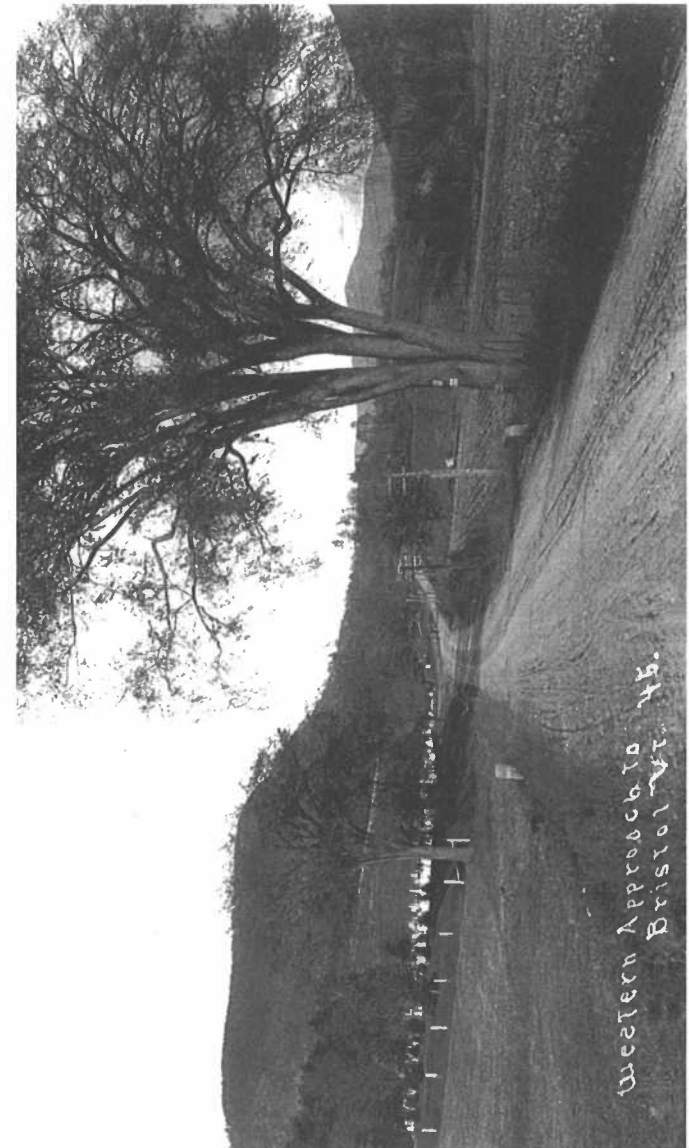
<sup>1</sup> Reprinted by permission of the publishers from *READING THE MOUNTAINS OF HOME* by John Elder, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Copyright ©1998 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

<sup>2</sup>The words and punctuation marks that appear in brackets [ ] in the text have been added to make the meaning clearer. The dots (...) mean that something has been left out.

*find its way home and remained in the Woods alone. Through the night ... his anxious parents made diligent search to find him, but without success. Early the next morning[,] notice was given that a Child was lost in the Woods.*

*This notice was sufficient to call out the inhabitants of Bristol[,] old and young[,] as well as some of the neighboring towns....[They] immediately organized in to Companies and formed a line and commenced a march through the Woods ... until about two o'clock in the after noon....The Search [was] for a short time suspended, and all returned to the Village.*

*The Parents of the Child were almost frantic. The question was asked by many what can be done[,] and the response from the many [was:] Search until the Child is found....[B]y this time assistance had arrived from the neighboring towns, and so increased their numbers as to enable them to form a verry extended line....[They] commenced again to search the Woods where they had not before been. [A]nd after a diligent Search of about three hours[,] the Child was found. [He was] setting down by a large pine*



*The road up Stoney Hill in Bristol, in 1945. In 1806, Bristol's 100 families lived in cabins on land that was still mostly wooded.*

*tree, some what frightened by the sight of  
so many strangers.....*

*When the fact was announced that the  
Child was found[,] and unhurt, the  
declaration was reasserted with an  
earnestness that rent the air, and rolled  
back a rejoining echo, from the moun-  
tain[:] the Lost Child is found.*

One night, my son and one of his friends did not come home for dinner. He was fourteen, much older than the child in Munsill's history of Bristol. We knew where they were, we thought. They were probably at a shelter they had built on the mountain as part of an assignment for school. But something might have happened. The other boy's father and I decided to hike up into the mountain to look for them. We had flashlights, but the dark of the night made the search difficult. We called their names, but all we heard was echoes and the sounds of the woods at night. In the middle of this, I remembered the story in Munsill's history. I wondered what the ending of my story would be.

After hours of climbing and calling, we found no one. So we started down, towards home. We could not imagine what we would



*Search by flashlight.*

find there. Stones slid under my boots. And because my flashlight had burned out, I could see even less of what was around me than on the way up. I followed close behind my friend and still had to guess what lay in the path ahead.

When we got home, we found my son safe and unharmed. But sleep that night was hard for me to find and the distance between the past and present seemed no distance at all.