

HISTORY AND LEGENDS OF THE ADIRONDACKS ~ HISTORICAL PROFILE

## Chestertown's Panther Mountain

John Sasso

The Chester Challenge is a hiking challenge which promotes family-friendly hikes in Warren County's Town of Chester. The challenge was established in 2015 and funded by State grant money administered through the Glens Falls Hospital's Health Promotion Center. Of the mountains and hills which are on the challenge, one that was considered but has not made it on the list - yet - is Panther Mountain. Panther is 1,506-foot prominence which overlooks the hamlet of Chestertown at its northwestern foot. Go to the following link for more information on the Chester Challenge:

[http://www.townofchesterny.org/uploads/2/6/1/3/26133319/chester\\_brochure\\_final\\_7-29.pdf](http://www.townofchesterny.org/uploads/2/6/1/3/26133319/chester_brochure_final_7-29.pdf)

Despite the simplicity of its name, there is some interesting history connected to Panther. It has been a prominent landmark for the citizens of Chestertown since the late eighteenth century, when the hamlet started as a settlement called Chester Four Corners. When the first post office was established there on June 27, 1808, Chester Four Corners became known as Chestertown, to distinguish it from Chester in Orange County.

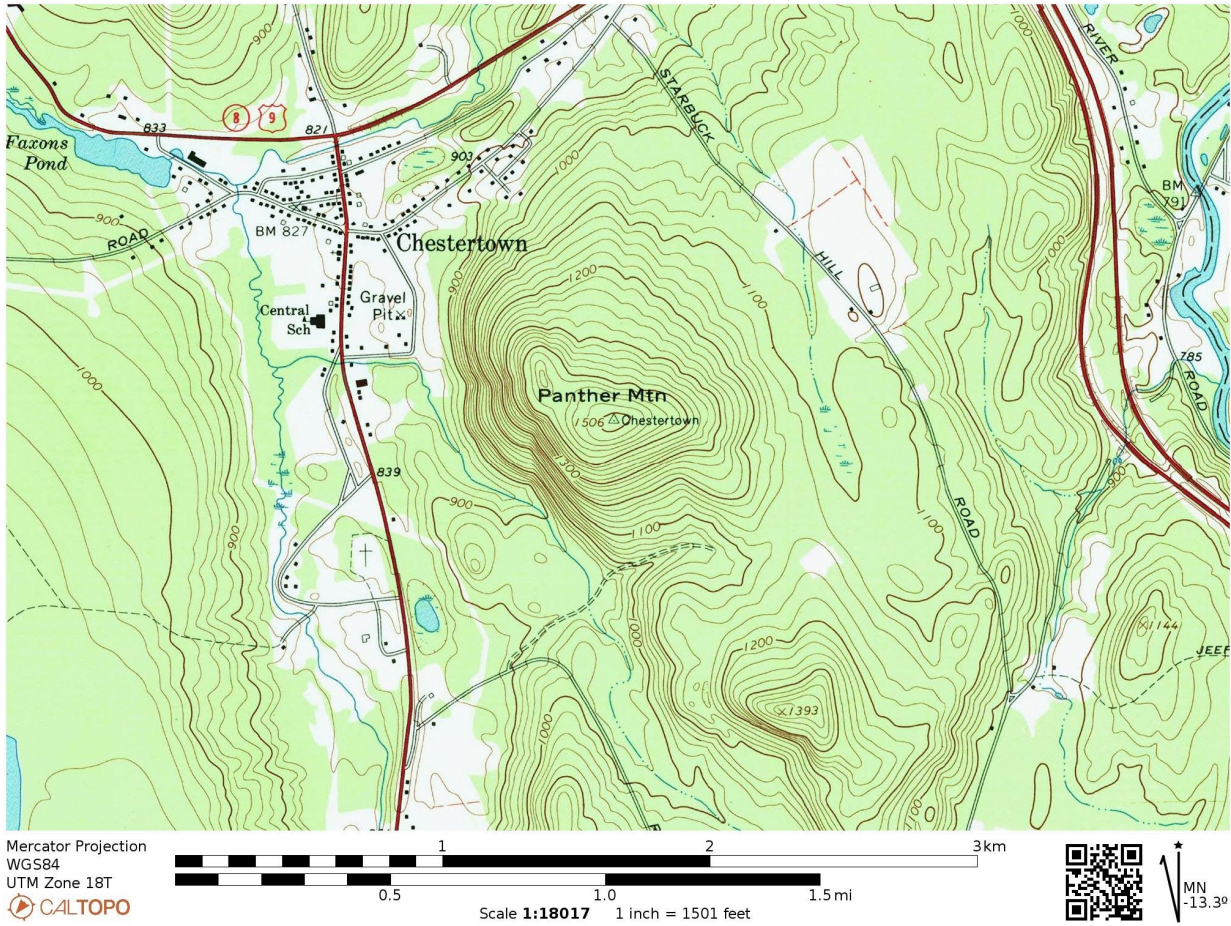


View from a lookout on the northwest sub-summit of Panther Mountain, looking to the northwest. Gore and Moxham Mountains can be seen. (Credit: John Sasso)

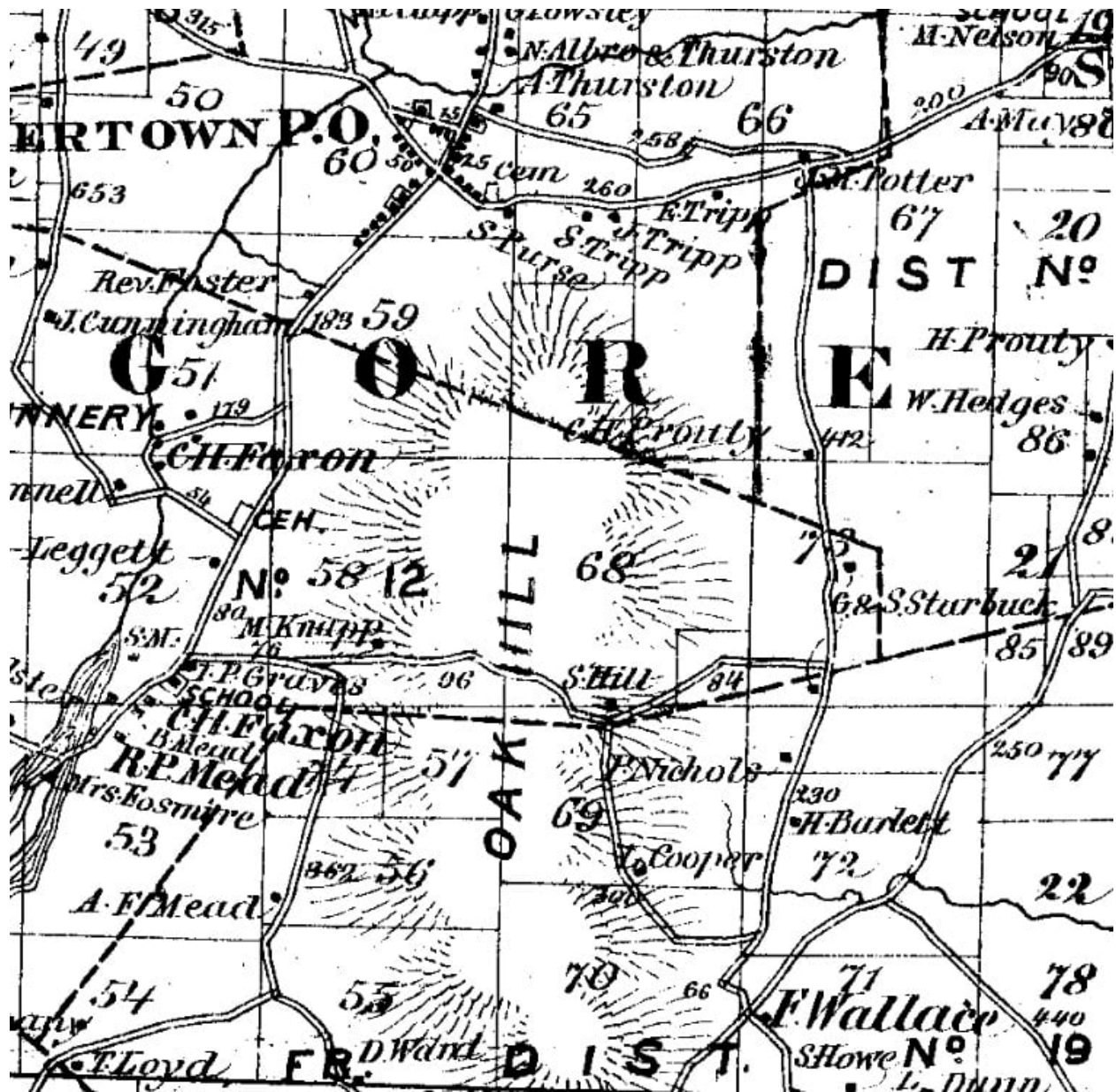


View from a lookout on the northwest sub-summit of Panther Mountain, looking to the south. Crane and Eleventh Mountains can be seen. (Credit: John Sasso)

Before the name “Panther Mountain” was officially established by the US Board on Geographic Names around 1958, Panther went by other names. It was referred to as Oak Mountain or Oak Hill, as shown in F. W. Beers & Company’s 1876 *County Atlas of Warren, New York* and in a few newspaper articles as late as 1896. The USGS decided to name it Prospect Mountain, as shown on their 1895 North Creek quadrangle map, despite there being a much more prominent peak by the same name in southern Lake George - the one many people hike and drive up today. It should be noted that there are fifteen peaks in New York State with “Panther” in their official name, eleven of which are in the Adirondack Park.



USGS topographic map showing the location of Panther Mountain and the hamlet of Chestertown. (Source: caltopo.com)



Portion of the 1876 *County Atlas of Warren, New York*, with Panther Mountain denoted as “Oak Hill.”

(Source: Warren County, <https://warrencountyny.gov/records/maps/1876atlas/chester>)

But the name that holds today goes back as early as 1878. According to a letter written by “Alpha,” dated July 23, 1878 and published in the July 26, 1878 edition of the *Daily Saratogian*, “Panther Mountain” received its name several years earlier “from the circumstance of a large panther having been there tracked to its lair and shot by Mr. Downs, who, after despatching[sic] the animal, returned in triumph to the village bearing as trophies two of her kittens - one under each arm.” Mr. Downs is likely Marcus H. Downs, the proprietor of a hotel called the Chester House, located about a half mile from Panther. I have been unable to determine the veracity of

Alpha's claim, but his letter is the earliest reference to the name I found as well as the only explanation given for the origin of the peak's name.

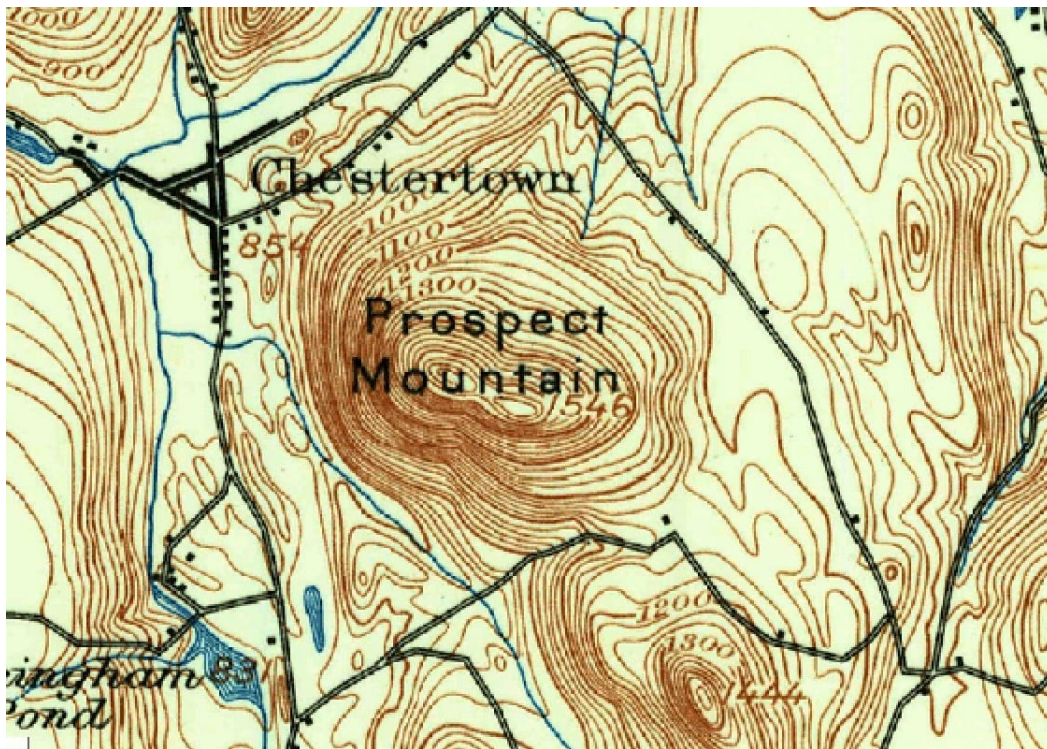
When I hiked Panther Mountain, I found several brass markers from the 1942 US Coast and Geodetic Survey which were stamped "CHESTERTOWN." Why not "PANTHER" or "PANTHER MTN"? The answer may be related to what I uncovered when researching the history of Ashokan High Point of the Catskill Mountains, whose survey markers are stamped "SAMSON." According to the section "Naming Stations" in the 1941 *Manual of Reconnaissance for Triangulation* of the US Coast and Geodetic Survey, the names of survey stations are normally assigned by the reconnaissance party in order to identify them; let's be clear that the manual is referring to the names of their survey stations and not the names of the peaks they are on (in the case of peaks). The triangulation party of the survey is authorized to change the name but seldom do. The manual recommends that the name of the geographical feature be used, but it elaborates further:

*"If the station is on the summit of some well-known mountain or hill of recognized name, it may be given that name. If it is on a bluff overlooking a river it may be given the name of the river. Similarly, it may be given the name of some nearby town, church, or school, or of the township or county in which it is located. Duplicate names must not be used within a county and preferable not within a State. [...] The best name is one which instantly associate the station with a well known feature in its vicinity ..."*

At the time of the Coast's survey in 1942, Panther Mountain was officially named Prospect Mountain. However, Black Spruce Mountain in Lake George (which is about 1.15 miles west of Prospect Mountain in Lake George) had its triangulation station designated as "PROSPECT." Since, as per the Survey's manual, two stations in the same county cannot have the same name, the surveyor decided to give the station on Panther the name of the hamlet it overlooks: Chestertown.



Triangulation marker (left) and azimuth marker (right) from the 1942 U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey on Panther Mountain, with "CHESTERTOWN" stamped on it. (Credit: John Sasso)



Portion of the 1895 USGS North Creek quadrangle map, where Panther Mountain is denoted Prospect Mountain. (Source: USGS topoView, <https://ngmdb.usgs.gov/topoview>)

But there is more to the history of Panther Mountain than its name. According to the current landowner of Panther, whose parents purchased the land back in 1964, the land originally belonged to James Starbuck (1759-1837). James acquired the land in 1800. The land is designated as being in a much larger tract called the South Gore of Township 24 of the Totten and Crossfield Purchase. Around 1850, the land was acquired by Stephen Starbuck, James's grandson. The Starbuck farmhouse was on the land acquired by the current landowner's father and was remodeled.

A brief note regarding James. James was born on September 27, 1759 on Nantucket Island in Mass. to Benjamin and Hepsabeth (Bunker) Starbuck. Census records show he was a resident of the Town of Chester in 1800, and his occupation was a coppersmith. He and his family resided on a farm on the east side of today's Starbuck Hill Road. He married Content Cornell of Schaghticoke in 1782 and had the following children: Daniel (b. 1782), Hepsibah (b. 1784), Charles J. (b. 1786), Isaac (b. 1787), Elizabeth (b. 1789), Gilbert (b. 1794), and Rebecca (b. 1798). James died on December 23, 1837, and is interred at the Chester Rural Cemetery. James's grandson, Stephen, was the son of Daniel and Martha Cole Starbuck.

Several publications claim the hamlet of Starbuckville, located just to the north near the Schroon River and near the western boundary of the Town of Horicon, is named for James Starbuck. However, according to the late archeologist and author, David R. Starbuck, who is a descendant, as well as Henry P. Smith in his 1885 work, *History of Warren County*, Starbuckville derived its name from Isaac Starbuck, the son of Charles J. and Lydia Meade Starbuck, and the grandson of James. Isaac started a tannery along the Schroon River in 1846, which he operated with his brothers, Edward and George. From this tannery, Starbuckville grew into a thriving community.

The locals did make use of Panther Mountain for recreation. Several late-19<sup>th</sup> century and early-20<sup>th</sup> century newspaper accounts report people making climbs to the summit and having picnics at the top.

At the base of Panther stood two historic hotels. The first was the Chester House. The Chester House started out as Chestertown's first tavern in 1810. By the 1860s, the tavern was upgraded to a small, two-story hostelry which was owned and operated by John L. Weatherhead of Port Henry. In 1869, Weatherhead sold the property to Marcus H. Downs, who called it the Down's Hotel. In 1871, Marcus had the hotel enlarged to be three stories, among other structural upgrades. It was renamed the Chester Hotel, and then the Chester House; it accommodated 120 to 140 guests. Marcus advertised that guests could enjoy fresh spring water which flowed from Panther Mountain to the Chester House. From 1885 to 1887, the hotel was owned briefly by George W. and Charles Ferris, before being handed over to Marcus's son, Harry S. Downs. In February 1955, the hotel was razed by the new owners to make way for a business enterprise.





**CHESTER HOUSE.**

Photo of the Chester House, taken around 1909. (Source: *A Summer Paradise*, originally published by the Delaware and Hudson Company in 1909; Google, Inc.)

The second historic hotel was the Panther Mountain House, which is today's Panther Mountain Inn (located on the corner of Route 9 and Riverside Drive). The hotel was originally called the Leggett House, which was established in 1830 by Thomas Leggett, a county judge and State assemblyman. Around 1866, Charles Faxon bought the Leggett House and built an addition to it. In 1923, Walter H. Wertime, an attorney in Cohoes, purchased the property from Charles Faxon's daughter. Wertime renovated the Faxon home and operated it as a hotel, the Panther Mountain House, which opened in May 1924. It could accommodate up to 50 people, and later expanded to 100. Wertime's daughter and son-in-law continued operation of the hotel. The hotel was destroyed by fire on March 22, 1941, then rebuilt and continued operation until 1956. The hotel was sold to the Suprenaut family, who shortly thereafter sold it to Thomas Carroll and his wife, Margaret (Markie), in 1957. The Carrolls operated it as the Panther Mountain Inn. In December 2010, the Carroll's sold the inn to Don and Darlene Butler and Keith Wilkinson.

## As Fire Destroyed Panther Mt. House



A blazing inferno, the West wing of the Panther Mountain House at Chestertown is shown here at the height of Saturday's fire which destroyed the structure with a loss of \$70,000. Firemen from Chestertown, Glens Falls, Schroon Lake, North Creek, Lake George and Warrensburg fought the flames, believed to have originated in the boiler room of the hotel. These photographs, taken by Frank L. Bisbee, district state highway engineer, of Warrensburg, show the fury of the blaze.



Huge clouds of black smoke roll skyward in this view of the Panther Mountain House fire at Chestertown. When this picture was taken the West wing of the big wooden hotel was a mass of flames but the fire had not broken through the roof of the main building, the entrance to which is shown here.

Photos of the fire which devastated the Panther Mountain House in March 1941.  
(Source: *NYS Historic Newspapers*, <https://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn84031319/1941-03-24/ed-1/seq-2/>)



The author on the northwest sub-summit of Panther Mountain. (Credit: John Sasso)

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