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# EQUINOX

## More Than Just A Mountain

There are many legends concerning the name Equinox. One early rendition states that a certain Captain Partridge, the director of the American Literary Scientific and Military Academy, led a troop of cadets from Norwich, Vermont, to what is now Manchester. The group ascended the mountain on September 19, 1823 for the purpose of making barometric observations. Captain Partridge fixed the altitude of the mountain at 3,807 feet above sea level which was surprisingly accurate for the times. The present official altitude is 3,840 feet.



Early aerial photo of Mt. Equinox

The story goes that since the ascent of the mountain was made at approximately the time of the autumnal equinox, the mountain was thereafter referred to as Equinox Mountain. After further research, Equinox was found to be an early Anglicization of a Native American word—either Akwanok or Ekwanok. These words are freely translated to mean the very top or the place where the very top is-- an appropriate name in either case.

Other Anglican legends evolved from surveys chronicled in the late eighteen-century maps of the region such as the map entitled, "A



The Old Sunderland Road near the Hill Farm Inn

Correct Map of the State of Vermont from Actual Survey; exhibiting the County and Town Lines, Rivers, Lakes, Ponds, Mountains, Meeting Houses, Mills, Public Roads, etc., by James Whitelaw, Esq., Surveyor General, 1796." On this map, the mountain is technically positioned accurately, and labeled Equinox Mountain.

Using the 1796 map as the basis for an improved map, Ira Allen, then Surveyor General of the State of Vermont, published a 1798 map entitled, "A Map of the State of Vermont." Equinox Mountain is correctly shown as to position on this map also.

Early European settlers seem to have been unaware of the official name of the mountain and referred to it as West Mountain, in contrast to the Green Mountains to the east. Later on, from approximately 1800 to about the time of Captain Partridge's visit, the mountain was known as Manchester Mountain, and, during one brief interval, as Esquimaux Mountain. Maps, atlases, and gazetteers published after approximately 1840 have consistently referred to the mountain as Equinox Mountain.



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Today the mountain is known as either Mount Equinox or Equinox Mountain, and still towers to the west above Manchester, Vermont. The summit of the mountain is the highest in the Taconic Range. Mount Equinox is also the highest mountain accessible by automobile in this region.

Since Equinox was the highest mountain overlooking the Vermont valley, which extends from Bennington to Rutland, it was naturally the object of much attention on the part of the early settlers. That section of the valley where the towns of Arlington and Manchester are now located was then known as the Seven Mile Swamp. Early roads from Bennington to Rutland traversed the slopes of the foothills to avoid the marshy land and numerous brooks down in the valley. Settlers laid out their pastures and holdings on the mountains—first, to avoid the Indians who rarely ascended the high mountains; second, to avoid malaria which they knew to be associated with swampy lands; finally and perhaps most importantly, it was difficult to cultivate the lower marsh lands. As a result, the slopes of Mount Equinox were fairly well populated and trails were abundant over the entire mountain.

*(Continued on the other side)*



A view south from the toll road  
Dave Kutchukian Photography



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# EQUINOX

## More Than Just A Mountain



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(Continued from the other side)

At a very early date, roads were built through the gaps on the south and north sides of Equinox, known as Southeast Corners and Beartown respectively—names they retain to this day. It was not until sometime towards the middle of the 1800s that a wagon road was built to higher altitudes. Between 1860 and 1870, Frank Orvis and several Manchester residents built a road from Beartown Gap to a rocky clearing called Lookout Rock, directly overlooking Manchester Valley. This road did not start from the bottom of the mountain nor did it reach the top. Yet covering a distance of four miles, this road gained approximately 1600 feet in altitude.

At this time the actual summit could be reached from the end of the road by a trail about 3/4 of a mile long. Because there was a clear view of Manchester Valley from Lookout Rock, and because the view at the summit was then obscured by trees, the road was never extended beyond Lookout Rock. A small structure known as the Mountain House was built near Lookout Rock and used as a shelter for many years. Due to costly maintenance and unsuitability to more modern traffic, this road became obsolete in the early 1900s. This early road has long since fallen into disuse, although its route can still be readily discerned.



Little Equinox and Big Equinox

In 1939, the late Dr. Joseph G. Davidson purchased a large tract of land on the Equinox Mountain and erected a building at Southeast Corners Gap. To make it possible for materials of construction to be brought to the building site, it was necessary to improve the old wagon road. This was done and the structure was built. Some time later, having climbed many times to the top of Equinox by a badly overgrown trail, Davidson became interested in building a toll road to the summit. Construction of a toll road would also provide public access to the unparalleled views from the summit. With these ideas in mind, Davidson built the first link of road in 1941. This link ran from the Southeast Corners Mountain House, at an altitude of 2,016 feet, to the top of Little Equinox, a summit just south of Big Equinox, at an altitude of 3,320 feet.

While work on the road was suspended during World War II, Davidson purchased additional tracts of land, always having in mind a full length road to the top of Big Equinox. The acquisition of land was completed in 1946 and construction of the present day toll road was resumed. Beginning at Route 7 (now 7A) and connecting with the lower portion of the first link, the road ran along the ridge of the mountain from Little Equinox to Big Equinox to reach an altitude of 3,840 feet. Finally in 1953 the entire road from the toll house to the summit was widened and paved. This was one of the most spectacular road paving jobs ever attempted in New England. The finished road is 5.3 miles long. The paved portion averages 20 feet wide, except on curves where the width varies from 25 to 50 feet.

Several paved parking areas overlook many inspiring views from the mountain, but the outstanding feature of the road is Skyline Drive itself. As you drive along the crest of the mountain, you can see the Green Mountains of Vermont and the White Mountains of New Hampshire when looking east.

From this same spot on a clear day, the Adirondacks in New York appear before you when looking west. The Carthusian Monastery can also be seen to the west, directly below Lake Madeleine. Looking north from the parking area at the top of Big Equinox, if you have very sharp eyes, you can see Mount Royal in Montreal dimly visible. On moderately clear days, parts of New York, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts can be seen.

In the interest of safety, two marble restraining walls designed and constructed by Antonio Merlino of Rome, Italy were built around the leveled and paved parking area at the summit. Most of the marble in the walls was quarried on neighboring Dorset Mountain. The remaining marble came from the West Rutland Quarry, with the exception of the drinking fountain. This fountain was specially designed and built by the Vermont Marble Company from the best monument quality, Danby marble.

For the rest of the story, please pick up a copy of "Mount Equinox Past & Present" at the Toll House of Skyline Drive.



Early morning fog in the valley below. Special Thanks to Dave Kutchukian for scenic views from Equinox Sky Line Drive



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