
Who Identified the Highest Summit in the Eastern United States?

The Clingman-Mitchell Controversy of the 1850s

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In 1986 the mountaineering world was fascinated – or bored – by the revival of the 200-year-old controversy about who was the first to step on the highest summit in Europe: Balmat the shepherd-guide or Paccard the scholar-doctor? On this side of the Atlantic little is known of another mountaineering controversy, rather later, in the 1850s, involving not a White Mountain but a Black Mountain, believed to be the highest summit in North America east of the Mississippi River, and one in which the antagonists were a professor and his former pupil, a Senator. Doubtless many like myself have long believed Mount Washington (6288ft), in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, to qualify for the distinction of the highest point in the eastern United States. A journey along the Blue Ridge Parkway brought the discovery that this point lay not in the cold windswept north but in the sunny southern state of North Carolina, where the 2000-mile long Appalachian chain comes to its climax in thickly forested mountains of over 6000ft. Even here neither the spectacular crags and rocky summit of the better-known Grandfather Mountain (5964ft), nor the highest point of the extensive Great Smoky Mountains (6642ft), is in fact the highest summit in the east. Between these two lies the 15-mile long and unspectacular Black Mountain range, in the form of a fish-hook or the letter J, which marks the boundary between Yancey County to the north (with its centre at Burnsville) and Buncombe County to the south, centred on Asheville. The string of summits on the ridge from Celo Knob all the way round to Yeates Knob (see sketch map) vary only slightly in elevation. With the inadequate barometric equipment of the early 19th century, it was no easy task to ascertain which, among these various knobs of almost equal elevation, was the highest. In this article all heights are given in feet, as this is the unit of measurement in which they were first calculated (it is still in general use in the USA); conversion to metres would obscure some of the controversial issues. These were: which is the highest point? What is the precise height? Who first identified it? Who first ascended it?

For Europeans, the interest in the exploration of these North Carolina mountains is enhanced by the fact that the French botanist André Michaux (1746–1802) made botanical collections in the Black Mountains, his son François (1770–1855), known as the ‘Father of American forestry’, exuberantly sang the Marseillaise on Grandfather Mountain in 1794, while the Swiss Arnold Guyot (1807–1884) – a follower of the great Swiss geologist Louis Agassiz who himself came to the USA in 1848 – completed the most meticulous survey of the whole Appalachian chain up to modern times. Guyot is

commemorated by a summit named after him in the Great Smoky Mountains.

We are more closely concerned with the assiduous local explorer of the Black Mountains – Elisha Mitchell (1793–1857) – who came to the University of Chapel Hill (North Carolina) in 1818. He first held the Chair of Natural Philosophy, which later included Chemistry and Geology, but his major work was to take charge of the geological survey of North Carolina. This led him to attempt to determine the heights of the principal mountains in the State. When in 1828 he climbed Grandfather Mountain, he expressed the view that: ‘There can be no doubt that the country around the base of the Grandfather is higher than any other tract along these elevations, but I suspect the Black and Roan to be higher peaks.’ The following year he went on record as saying that the Black Mountains probably contained the highest land between the Gulf of Mexico and the White Mountains of New Hampshire. It was not until 1835 that he found time to explore the mountains, spending over a week in the Black Mountains, approaching from the N or Burnsville side. For his altitude calculations he took as a base the barometric height of Morganton, reading it as 968ft above sea-level, whereas modern reckoning puts it at 1182ft. Thus all Mitchell’s subsequent calculations were too low by 214ft.

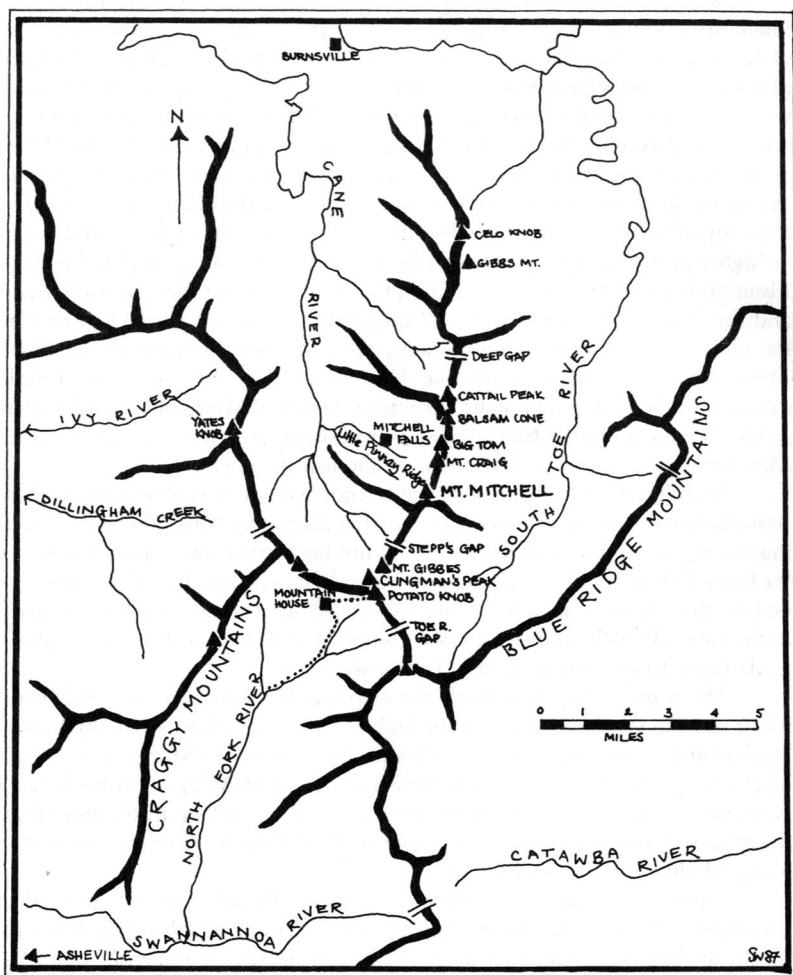
At that time Celo Knob and Yeates Knob were reckoned to be the highest summits in the vicinity of Burnsville, but after ascending both, Mitchell realized that the highest point of the Black Mountains lay further south. Looking across the Cane Valley, in clear weather, he reckoned that one or other of two summits on the opposite ridge must be the highest. Deciding to go for the more northerly of the two, Mitchell set out with two guides (Wm Wilson and Allen) to follow Little Piney Ridge directly to the ‘Top of the Black’.

The route led up bear trails through tangled rhododendron and dense forest to what was believed to be the highest point, though it was in thick mist. His barometer reading gave him a height of 5508ft above Morganton, a total height of 6476ft for the summit. Had his reading at Morganton been more accurate, this would have made the height of this point 6690ft, 6ft more than the modern reckoning of 6684ft (though given Mitchell’s errors elsewhere, this was probably only a coincidence).

Three years later, in 1838, Professor Mitchell made two further excursions into the Black Mountains, this time approaching the range from the south, or Asheville, side, by way of the N fork of the Swannanoa River. He ascended the complex of three peaks close together – now known as Potato Knob, Clingman’s Peak and Mount Gibbes. These last two are virtually equal in height. Mitchell determined one of them, probably Mt Gibbes, as being 6581ft, which is about 40ft out from the modern reckoning. Nonetheless, the middle of the three was held to be the highest, and thus the goal of tourists, becoming known for a time as ‘Mount Mitchell’.

The conscientious Elisha Mitchell was still not satisfied that he had reached the highest summit in 1835. In 1844 he determined to ‘try the Black once more, to which mountain I was well satisfied that the highest points are to be found, *as I was, also, that I had never yet been upon the highest*’ (my italics). He was also anxious to test a new type of barometer acquired in Paris. This time he set off from the Cane Valley on the N side of the range with a guide named

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William Riddle. His route, described as 'the hardest day's work I ever performed', involved crawling through laurel and rhododendron bush and finding, prophetically, a 'shelving rock which might be a comfortable place to die'. The description of this route, both by Mitchell and later by Riddle, shows that instead of following Piney Ridge up to the highest point, as Mitchell had almost certainly done in 1835, they took a traverse which emerged three miles S of the highest peak, into the Mt Gibbs complex. Here Mitchell took a measurement with his new barometer, and calculated the height of Mt Gibbs at 6672ft, about 125ft higher than its actual elevation. He considered this to be

'Top of the Black'. He and Riddle then returned to Cane Valley after an exhausting 20 mile round trip.

American journalism, even more heady and exuberant in the early days of the Frontier than nowadays, had already accepted Mitchell's cautious claim of 1835, when the *Raleigh Register* loudly crowed that 'North Carolina now had it in its power to LOOK DOWN upon such of our arrogant sisters of the Confederacy as may insolently venture to taunt us with inferiority'. (It should be remembered that no State had by 1835 been formally constituted W of the Mississippi.) Tourism was beginning to catch on, bringing with it a made trail up the S approach from Asheville and a couple of primitive hostleries, one, known as 'Patton's Mountain House', only two miles from the S group of summits. In the early 1850s this brought a stream of tourists anxious to stand on the top of the USA, and in the early years they were content to reach what is now known as 'Clingman's Peak', virtually identical in height with neighbouring Mt Gibbes, ascended by Mitchell in 1844 and reckoned to be 'Top of the Black'. This tourist summit now became known as 'Mt Mitchell'. In due course a small observatory allowed the view to be seen without having to climb a balsam fir. Perhaps as a result the belief began to form in 1855 that this was not after all the highest point, and that the present Mt Mitchell, three miles to the N across Stepp's Gap was higher. The trail was extended over Mt Gibbes, down to the Gap and up to Mt Mitchell, meeting another trail blazed a little later up from Cane Valley to the NW.

Plenty of material here for controversy, one might say. So far no controversial personality had appeared to challenge Mitchell. It is time to introduce Thomas L Clingman (1812-1897), Senator and Congressman for North Carolina, who resigned in 1861 to become a Confederate leader in the Civil War. Clingman, 19 years Mitchell's junior, studied geology and geography under Mitchell at Chapel Hill; although a lawyer-politician, he encouraged mining in North Carolina and took a close interest in the mountain topography of his native State. For 20 years after Clingman's graduation in 1832, he and Mitchell remained on friendly terms as professor and former student. As a lawyer, however, Clingman was inclined to be controversial, while Mitchell was retiring and avoided controversy.

The seeds of controversy were there. After 20 years of visiting the mountains, Clingman had become interested in determining the highest point, since he considered Mitchell had never satisfactorily resolved this problem. On 8 September 1855 he set off with a barometer from the S side up the N Fork trail to what was then generally known as 'Mt Mitchell' (now Clingman's Peak). Having taken a barometric measurement, he continued N along the ridge to the present Mt Mitchell, there taking a further measurement which showed the pressure to be 0.19 inches lower than on the first summit, thereby indicating that the more northerly summit was higher. Clingman's rough calculations showed the S and N tops as 6732ft and 6941ft respectively, but he did not claim that his calculation of these absolute heights was accurate. Clingman did, however, write a lengthy article, submitted to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and subsequently published, identifying the exact location of the highest point E of the Mississippi. The Secretary went further and introduced

the paper with the statement that 'The highest point of the Black Mountain now known by the name of "Clingman's Peak" is probably the most elevated point east of the Rocky Mountains.'

So now we have the element of muddle as well as controversy. As a result of Clingman's ascent of the highest point, the present-day Mt Mitchell became (temporarily) known as 'Clingman's Peak' or 'Mt Clingman', while the present Clingman's Peak remained known as 'Mt Mitchell', at least for a couple of years. Clingman next cast doubt on Mitchell's claim to have reached the highest point, suggesting that he might have been misled because the area was then much more thickly forested. Mitchell reacted by sending the Secretary of the Smithsonian a copy of his notes of his 1835 expedition, concluding that although he had identified the highest point from Yeates Knob, his guides had misled him and he had returned 'knowing very well that I had *not* set foot upon the highest point'. But he did claim that with his 1844 ascent (of Mt Gibbs) he thought he had reached the 'Highest Peak of the Black'. Was his memory at fault? Did his guides (whose names he oddly enough could not recall) really mislead him in 1835? Were his measurements accurate? As well he might after 20 years, Mitchell began to have his own doubts. Clingman kindly suggested that controversy should cease until Mitchell could make another ascent.

In 1856 the dispute became public when rival Asheville newspapers published articles from the two antagonists, with the inevitable increase in personal animosity. Mitchell maintained that Clingman had made a 'total mistake' in suggesting that he (Mitchell) had 'failed to discover and ascend the highest peak'. If Clingman's errors in measurement are allowed to stand, Mitchell claimed, this would throw all the other heights into 'inextricable confusion' and may 'bring all the measurements made by me into discredit'.

The controversy was no longer about which was the highest peak but rather whether Mitchell had identified, ascended and measured the highest peak in the Black Mountains before Clingman's 1855 ascent. Who had measured the highest point first? This was compounded by Mitchell's confused recollections which gave Clingman plenty of material with which to pursue his side of the controversy, claiming errors of measurement by Mitchell who retorted, in August 1856, with an ill-considered attack on the Congressman. He threatened to 'expose the untruth, the weakness and the wickedness' of Clingman's pamphlet, and castigated his friendship as 'hollow and pretended'. Clingman retaliated with evidence he had obtained from Riddle, who had accompanied Mitchell as guide in 1844. Riddle described the route taken in some detail, pointing out that if they had decided to reach the present Mt Mitchell – a summit Riddle claimed to know well – they would have continued up Little Piney Ridge, which they had followed from Cane Valley. Instead they bore right-handed, southwards, to the peak since called Mt Gibbs.

The controversy then took a new turn to reach a sudden and dramatic conclusion. Mitchell, thrown on the defensive by Clingman's last devastating attack, went silent; but he made preparations for a visit to the Black Mountains in the summer of 1857, with a view to checking his earlier barometric measurements by the then new method of levelling. In mid-June he left Asheville with his son and daughter and spent a week or more levelling up to Patton's

Mountain House, the refuge not far below and to the west of the Potato Knob-Clingman's Peak-Mt Gibbes complex. On 27 June he sent his son to join his sister lower down the mountain and set off alone. He failed to return, as agreed, two days later to Mountain House. His son waited a further two days before raising the alarm. Search parties began combing the mountain from both sides. The Buncombe men abandoned the S side after three days, but the Yancey party, under the well-known guide Big Tom Wilson, persisted, picking up nailed boot tracks on the ridge leading NW from Mt Mitchell. It was consequently thought that Mitchell was attempting to retrace the route taken in 1835. The tracks led down off the N side of the ridge to a small waterfall, and in the deep pool at its foot Mitchell's body was found. It was evident that he had slipped in the dark on the evening of 27 June (his watch had stopped at 8.19), had knocked his head and then been held under water by a fallen tree. Now known as 'Mitchell's Falls', this spot is only a mile or so from the point of which he had said 13 years earlier: 'What a comfortable place it would be to die in'.

The Yancey party felt that the most appropriate spot in which to bury the body would be on the highest summit, so, taking turns, the men carried the body up 2300ft of thickly forested slope. On the top they found a group of Asheville men who wanted to bring the body down on their side. The two parties nearly came to blows, but in deference to the wishes of Mitchell's daughter, the Yancey men carried the body down to North Fork for onward transport to Asheville where it was interred on 10 July 1857.

Nevertheless, public opinion in North Carolina considered the body should rest on the highest point, and in 1858 it was taken back to the summit. The grave was first marked by a large cairn, then in 1888 by a bronze obelisk which was destroyed, partly by souvenir-hunters, and eventually by wind in 1915. The present tomb-like structure was erected in 1926, overshadowed by a stone observation tower, rebuilt and modernized in 1960.

It might be thought that Mitchell's death would provide a fitting if tragic end to the controversy, but Mitchell's supporters pursued their friend's view with even greater zeal, asserting that he had ascended and measured the highest peak in 1835 and 1844, long before Clingman's ascent in 1855. They based this claim on the testimony of William Wilson, the guide who had accompanied Mitchell in 1835, but whose name he could not remember. In 1858 and 1859 the Swiss Arnold Guyot, who mapped the whole Appalachian chain, had established with remarkable accuracy the very even heights of the various summits of the Black Mountains, but had refrained from controversy by giving the highest summit the name of 'Black Dôme' (complete with circumflex accent, doubtless in memory of his home mountains). Nonetheless, it was evident that the highest peak would acquire the name of Mount Mitchell, more as a result of the Professor's death than of any resolution of the controversy, and the name was (literally) consecrated by Bishop Otey on the re-interment in 1858. Meanwhile, Clingman had been surveying in the Great Smoky Mountains and had identified as another candidate for the highest point in the east a point of 6642ft (42ft lower than the modern estimate of Mt Mitchell) and this is now known as 'Clingman's Dome'. Ironically, the 'Mount Mitchell' of the southern complex of tops on the Black Mountains, which Clingman had demonstrated to

be lower than the highest point, was, in the 1890s, given the permanent name of 'Clingman's Peak'.

To sum up, in 1835 Mitchell certainly identified the highest point of the Black Mountains as the northerly summit seen from Yeates Knob; and he probably reached it (in mist) the same year. In 1844 he climbed the southerly summit which for 11 years was considered the highest, until Clingman demonstrated otherwise in 1855. Mitchell's confused memories over 20 years led to his making an attempt to justify himself in 1857, which resulted in his tragic death. Mitchell's name is now permanently attached to the highest point in North America east of the Mississippi, while Clingman had to be satisfied with two eponymous peaks, lower by a fraction or so.

The subsequent history of the Black Mountains is rather sad. Logging companies devastated the fine stands of forest. They constructed a little puffing railway to the gap between Clingman's Peak and Mt Mitchell, later used by tourists. The balsam woolly aphid attacked the balsam fir (or Fraser's fir) which only flourishes over 6000ft in this southerly latitude. The railway was superseded by a tourist road, and finally a State Park was declared with a modern road linking the summit with the Blue Ridge Parkway. Today the highest point in the Eastern United States is effortlessly reached by thousands of tourists, but the view over the deep forested valleys and the ridges still awakens admiration for the early pioneers of this wild area.

NOTE

In writing this article I am greatly indebted to S Kent Schwarzkopf: *A History of Mt Mitchell and the Black Mountains, Exploration, Development and Preservation* (North Carolina Division of Archives and History 1985), and also to Michael Frome: *Strangers in High Places: The Story of the Great Smoky Mountains* (University of Tennessee 1980), and to *Appalachia*, Vol 1, No 1, p141, for George Dimmock's account of an ascent of Mt Mitchell in 1877.