

The Falling Waters Trail

Location : Franconia Notch; trail begins at Lafayette Place parking lots.

Hiking Data

Distance, parking area to:

Stairs Falls 0.8 mile

Swiftwater Falls 1.0 mile

Cloudland Falls 1.4 miles

Altitude Gain: 1100 feet to Cloudland Falls (altitude 2900 feet).

Difficulty: MODERATE.

To summit baggers, Falling Waters Trail is the southern leg of a grueling but popular 8-mile loop traversing the craggy alpine ridge that runs across Mounts Lafayette, Lincoln, and Little Haystack.

Even hikers preoccupied with thoughts of the spectacular summit ridge are captivated, however, by the beautiful waterfalls they encounter in Dry Brook ravine. They may pause at the falls only briefly on their long hike—time enough for a breather and a snack—but the spell of the waterfalls beckons them to return.

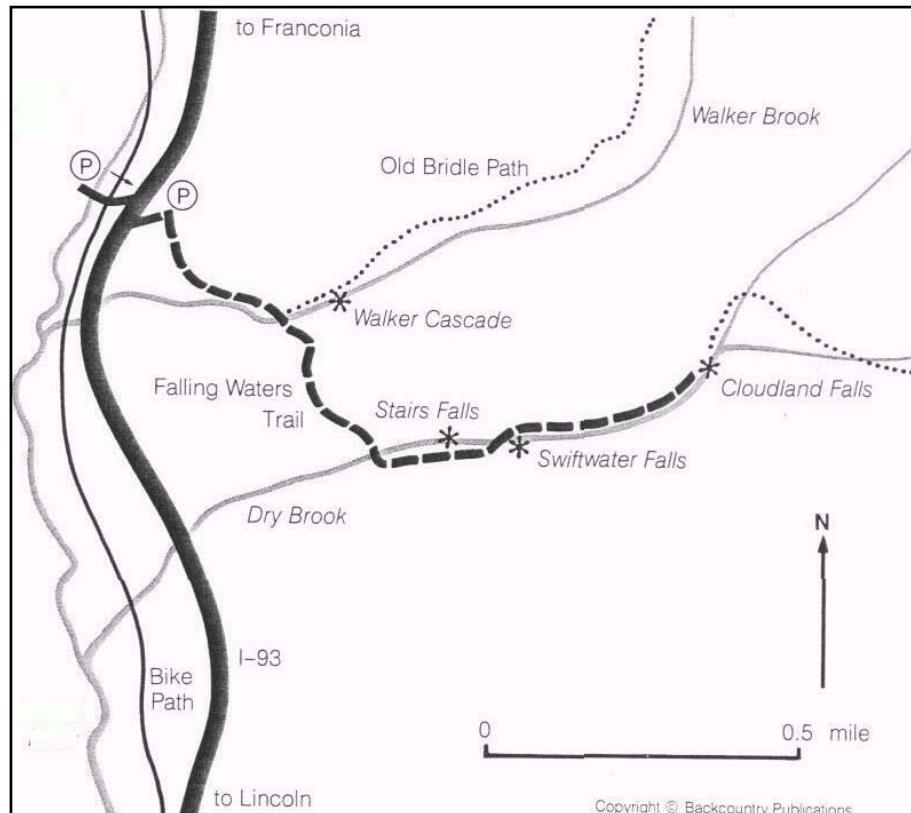
To travelers through Franconia Notch, Falling Waters Trail provides easy access to mountain forests, frolicking streams, and a string of fine falls and cascades, including Cloudland Falls, the highest in the vicinity. The hike could hardly be more convenient, with trailhead parking right off the Notch Parkway (1-93). Since we pass through the notch quite often, the convenience and beauty of Falling Waters has made it our most frequented trail. We have been drawn back over and over again to visit our pet falls in all their moods.

The Trail and the falls

Traveling south, pull off the Notch Parkway at the sign for Lafayette Place, just under 2 miles past the Old Man viewing points. Swing to the right and park near the footpath tunnel that crosses under the Parkway to reach the trailhead. Heading north, watch for the Trailhead Parking sign about 1.5 miles beyond the Basin. There are picnicking facilities on both sides of the highway.

The Falling Waters Trail and the Old Bridle Path Trail (up Mount Lafayette) start together behind the hiker-information booth at the northbound parking area.

At 0.2 mile the Falling Waters Trail splits off to the right from the Old Bridle Path across a footbridge over Walker Brook. Even if you intend to go no farther, it is worth a



trip to the bridge just to spend a few moments listening to the brook's lilting music and watching its crystal-clear waters swirl over smooth boulders to small, sparkling pools. By bushwhacking 100 yards up the north side of the brook you can reach Walker Cascades. Here, clear brook waters slide 50 yards down sloping

banks of burnished granite ledge, where a wide part in the forest canopy admits the noonday sun. The highest cascade is a 10-foot drop over a block midway up the ledge. Though not as grand as the well-known waterfalls along the Falling Waters Trail, Walker Cascades has better pools and fewer visitors. You might even find that you have the spot to yourself for a picnic or a cold swim. Past the footbridge the Falling Waters Trail turns left and climbs parallel to Walker Brook for a short distance. Just off the trail near the top of this first hump, you can catch sight of silvery cascades below, but the descent to the brook from this point is rough. The trail then veers to the southeast, traversing a forest of slender hard-wood trees



with an abundance of yellow birch and white birch. Apart from some muddy spots here, the trail is in fine condition all the way to the top of the falls. Dry Brook is reached at 0.7 mile.

Unless the brook is low some deft rock-hopping is needed to get across the series of small cascades and pools. The boulders here invite passers-by to pause and enjoy the woodland atmosphere. Across the brook the trail climbs above the south bank, turns left, and ascends a short distance to the foot of Stairs Falls. This is the smallest of the three main waterfalls along the trail—not quite 20 feet high—but it is by far the prettiest.

Here the brook spreads out and drapes a broad curtain of white ribbons over a tier of angular granite steps. An open patch of stony ground by the trail is a good place sit and meditate on the mantra of the falling waters. Another good rest spot is a rock perch on the smooth ledge at the top of the falls. Above Stairs Falls the trail skirts a jagged rock wall known as the Sawteeth Ledges.

Very quickly then you reach Swiftwater Falls, which churns down 60 feet of weathered bedrock chutes to a rippling pool that cuts directly across your path. To get to the granite ramp on the other side of the stream, you can either do another rock-hop or balance across on a birch log that spans the stream—if it hasn't yet washed away. Once across, be careful going up the rock slab; it is treacherous when slicked with spray, drizzle, or ice. During dry weather Swiftwater Falls snakes down a long curved channel above the crossing, while in high water the brook splits to form a frothing white necklace around a large outcrop of rock at the top of the falls. Though Swiftwater Falls can be impressive at times it is less graceful than its neighbors above and below. Also, there is little room for scrambling around to explore the steep and confined ravine.

The trail next climbs steeply along the north side of Swiftwater Falls, providing an opportunity to clamber to a cluster of boulders midway up the falls. Some ledges at the top of the falls can also be reached with a bit of climbing. Above this steep pitch the trail steadily ascends the flank of a deep V-shaped ravine. Dry Brook



tumbles down a long series of leaps and slides, usually well below the trail.

At a few points the trail edges closer to the stream, providing access to fine "sitting rocks" with views up and down the ravine. One stretch of trail follows an old logging road, confirming that even the walls of the notch were invaded by the loggers around the turn of the century. Because of the trail's steady grade, the hike above Swiftwater Falls seems longer than the indicated mileage. Just as you begin to doubt your guidebook, however, the trail crosses a rough outcrop of rock and descends to the climax of your waterfall hunt. In front of you Cloudland Falls tumbles over a fractured cliff, fanning into an endlessly animated white cone 80 feet tall. It is easy to scramble down the rocky bank to the streambed for a neck-stretching view from the bottom. When the water is high the cold draft of spray rushing down the narrow ravine and the echoing roar of the falls will chase you back onto the trail long before you tire of the view. Although

Cloudland Falls is the climax of the trip, don't stop at the bottom. The scene just above the falls is not to be missed. The trail again becomes quite steep as it works its way up the left side of the falls beneath high overhanging ledges that sprout gigantic icicles from autumn until spring. The climb here makes it easy to appreciate the full stature of the falls, which may not look so tall when seen from below. At the top of the climb you will reach flat ledges that run out to the edge of the vertiginous lip of the waterfall ledge. This high terrace also provides an excellent view across

Franconia Notch to the Kinsman ridge and the broad crest of Mount Moosilauke looming in the west. As a delightful bonus, a side stream gushes from the dark forest on the far side ledge and spills over a 15-foot-high wall to join the cascades and waterslides in the main channel. The picturesque terrace above Cloudland Falls is a logical terminus for your waterfall trip. Beyond, the trail climbs alongside the north branch of Dry Brook and then crosses to a series of tedious, increasingly rugged switchbacks through dense evergreen forest. Until one reaches the stunted balsams just below the summit of Little Haystack, there is little more to see along the remaining 1.8 miles of the trail.

The only exception is about 0.5 mile below the summit ridge, where a spur trail leads down to the base of a vast, exfoliated slab of bare granite, called Shining Rock. A trip to the summits would be incomplete without spending a few minutes investigating this impressive formation. Last but not least, the ridge across to the Lincoln and Lafayette summits is one of the most splendid walks in the White Mountains.

From the north end of the ridge traverse you can descend by way of the AMC Greenleaf Hut (hot chocolate!) and the Old Bridle Path, arriving right back at your car.

In the winter the Falling Waters Trail usually has enough snowshoe traffic to permit anyone with warm, lined boots to hike in as far as Stairs Falls. Before being blanketed by deep snow, the molded green and blue ice formations of Walker Cascades and Stairs Falls are also fascinating to visit—carefully. Beyond Stairs Falls the steeper sections of trail generally require proper winter hiking equipment.

