

## Mason A. Walton: The “Hermit of Ravenswood”

In 1885 Mason A. Walton came to Cape Ann. He lived in Ravenswood Park, located on Western Avenue, for thirty-three years and was dubbed the “Hermit of Ravenswood.” A rock with a plaque now stands at the site where his small cottage was once situated.



Willowbank was once the home of Colonel William Nelson. It was frequented by Presidents Taft and Roosevelt.

## MAGNOLIA

On it are the words:

*In the cabin near this spot  
Mason Walton  
"Hermit of Gloucester"  
Lover of Nature, Lived for thirty-three years  
This tablet placed by the Gloucester Women's Club  
1933*

Mason Walton was born on July 31, 1838, to Samuel and Sarah Walton of Old Towne, Maine. Mason had five siblings: Alfred, George, Brainard, Isabella and Angela. He was the quiet but intelligent member of the family. He grew up loving the Maine woods and enjoyed hiking, canoeing, fishing, hunting and camping. A leg injury as a child left him with a slight limp.

Mason was sent to a private four-year prep school at the encouragement of his teacher Helen Hunt. At the academy, he studied botany and ornithology. During the Civil War, Mason lost two of his brothers. One was killed at the Battle of Fair Oakes and the other was lost while serving in the navy.

In 1868, Mason became an enthusiastic editor for *The Greenbacker*, a newsletter for the Greenback Party, which promoted the expansion of paper money issued by the government to finance the Civil War.

In 1870, he married his sister's friend Olive Bradford. Unfortunately, Olive passed away during childbirth in their seventh year of marriage. The baby, a girl, only lived a few hours.

Eventually, Mason became the accountant for a Bangor, Maine pharmaceutical company and was transferred from Maine to Boston in 1880. From living in the city of Boston, Mason developed a severe respiratory infection, chronic allergies and dyspepsia. His doctor advised him to leave the city and go into the woods to try to get rid of his problem. He followed his doctor's orders and spent fifty cents to board the *City of Gloucester* steamer. He arrived at Steamboat Wharf at the bottom of Duncan Street in Gloucester in 1885.

The future hermit arrived with only fruit and a tent. He set up camp at the top of a hill and named it "Bond Hill" (now known as Bond Street). It was here that he naturally nursed himself back to health. Unfortunately, a cold winter storm destroyed Mason's tent and he decided he needed better shelter. He was granted permission from Walter Cressy to build a cabin near Fuller Brook along Old Salem Road. It was then that he decided to dedicate his life to the study of flora, fauna and ornithology. Mason kept a daily journal of his findings and studies of "vernal ponds, vegetative growth, footprints and feathers". Eventually, he made friends with some of the animals and gave them names: Triplefoot, a three-footed fox; Wabbles, a male sparrow; and Bismarck, a red squirrel.

Each day Mason would walk from his home into town to do his errands, collect his mail and get the local newspaper, the *Gloucester Daily News*. He also subscribed to *Field and Stream* magazine. In the late 1880s, Mason became a contributor to the magazine using the name "The Hermit." Letters from all over the world began to fill his mailbox.



Mason Walton, “the Hermit of Ravenswood,” was a botanist and ornithologist who lived for thirty-three years in the woods of Magnolia. *Magnolia Historical Society*.

He conducted field trips for high school students and visitors, and before long, postcards emerged of “The **Hermitage**,” Gloucester, Massachusetts.

In order to make some money, he lectured throughout New England. He traveled to Boston to address the Hale Natural History Club on **Annisquam** during the ice age. He also made hockey sticks for local ice skaters, sold flowers from his garden and wild magnolias from the swamp. In 1903, Mason wrote a book about his woodland friends called *A Hermit's Wild Friends*. At the end of the day, he always returned to his cabin in the woods.

When the land was named Ravenswood Park, from the gift of Samuel Sawyer, Mason was allowed to remain as the only resident of the park. Thus, he became the “Hermit of Ravenswood.” His cabin, which was located on Old Salem Road, made Mason grow in popularity. He offered a wooden bench and a guest book, and for the next twenty years visitors included famous artists, writers, teachers, foreign ministers and wealthy tourists, an average of four thousand people a year. John Hays Hammond Jr. was known to Mason as “that clever young lad who invents such wonderful things.”

By 1917, Mason’s home was a log cabin, more than twice the size of his first hut. He had a large living room with concrete floors, a stove Hammond had given to him, a cot and a chest of drawers.

After a thirty-three-year Ravenswood residency, Mason became ill at age seventy-nine. His friends, the Homan family, went to check on him one afternoon to find him dazed and confused. A horse-drawn ambulance took Mason to the city hospital, officially called the Alms House. His diagnosis was pneumonia, lung fever and congestion. He died peacefully in his sleep four days later on May 21, 1917. Mayor John Stoddard eulogized the hermit at his funeral. It was then that a plaque was placed on a rock nearby his home as a tribute to his memory. His family arranged for his burial in Alton, Maine, where Mason Augustus Walton lies next to his wife Olive and their baby girl.

In 1948, the hermit’s log cabin was destroyed by fire. The plaque that marks the location of his home, along with the memories still remains.