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## In the Mountains

# Book Explores Sugarloaf's Natural Sweetness

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The path up the mountain vanishes in a white mist, and the low sky looks like flannel. On all sides there is gray, gray and more gray.

But the two women climbing step by step to the top of Sugarloaf, a geological oddball hunkered near the border of Frederick and Montgomery counties, find flourishes of color everywhere in the plants, the trees and even the stones.

Especially the stones.

Over here, Tina Thieme Brown, an illustrator, points to where black and mint-colored lichen have done a Jackson Pollock on the face of a boulder. Composed of quartzite, the white stones glow with a faintly rosy hue even in the dimmest light.

"Look at that rock. Isn't that gorgeous?" said Melanie Choukas-Bradley, an author who points out bunches of smartweed, Asiatic dayflower and how the rain has glazed the heavy green leaves.

"I know people think we're a little crazy the way we talk about the rocks—until you see the rocks," Choukas-Bradley said.

For the past 10 years, Choukas-Bradley and Brown have hiked, studied and mused on the slopes of Sugarloaf, documenting its moods, history, plants and wildlife while collaborating on a book about the mountain that was published this spring. It could have been a romance novel, as the two women have grown to love the mountain.

Their book, "Sugarloaf: The Mountain's History, Geology and Natural Lore," pays homage to this popular getaway situated roughly equidistant between Washington and Baltimore. Towering above a patchwork of pastures and fields, the mountain is the centerpiece of an unspoiled vista, and "the only real mountain" in Maryland's Piedmont, Choukas-Bradley writes.

"Even though it's a little mountain, it has dramatic beauty," Choukas-Bradley, 50, said. "I don't want to go overboard. But some places really tend to inspire people, and Sugarloaf is one of them."

The book, published by University of Virginia Press, opens with the mountain's unusual geological history and closes with a chapter on efforts to preserve the area. Choukas-Bradley, a former Capitol Hill staffer and free-



BY ANDREA BRUCE WOODALL—THE WASHINGTON POST

Melanie Choukas-Bradley, left, and Tina Thieme Brown have written and illustrated a book about Sugarloaf Mountain.



At the summit of Sugarloaf Mountain, a cluster of Table Mountain Pines is silhouetted against the mountain mist.

lancer, said she and Brown have a second book in the works, an illustrated guide to 350 specimens of the mountain's wildflowers and trees. Choukas-Bradley, who lives in the Montgomery County hamlet of Comus, and Brown, 50, of Barnesville, met at an Audubon Society class on wildflower identification.

The mountain is classified as a "monadnock," which means that it was left standing after the surrounding countryside was eroded away, the book says. Its distinctive rocks were fused under tremendous heat and pressure from sandstone deposited by ancient seas.

Though not quite 1,300 feet high, the mountain captured the imagination of early European settlers, who christened it in honor of a sugar-crusting treat known as

Pain de Sucre. Visible from the top of the National Cathedral on clear days, Sugarloaf draws nearly 250,000 visitors each year. Some people have been married there. The 3,300-acre, privately owned park surrounding it includes well-marked trails for hiking, horseback riding and mountain biking. Skirting its flanks is a more than 90,000-acre agricultural preserve dotted by small villages such as Comus, Beallsville and Buckeystown.

The book guides readers on a hike that depicts the mountain as a survivor of a violent geological past, an overexploited source of Industrial Age charcoal and the sanctuary of Henry Gordon Strong, a railroad tycoon's son from Chicago who bought most of the mountain and preserved it for posterity. Along the way, the book also tells of the mountain's importance as a lookout and signaling station during the Civil War, and of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's desire to transform Sugarloaf into a presidential retreat. (Shangri-La in the Catskills—later renamed Camp David—was chosen instead after Strong spurned the White House's overtures.)

In the 1920s, the architect Frank Lloyd Wright, at Strong's behest, drew up dramatic plans for a car-friendly mountaintop resort for the Washington-Baltimore masses that included a spiral auto ramp capped with a spire. Wright's envisioned getaway featured fine dining, limited lodging, a theater and even a planetarium. But the spiral auto ramp bugged Strong, and he nixed the idea with an insult to Wright's originality, noting that the spiral thing had been done by the creator of the Tower of Babel.

When Strong died in 1946, his will set up Stronghold Inc., a nonprofit corporation created to preserve the mountain. Choukas-Bradley and Brown's book also makes the case for preserving the mountain and its surrounding open space.

"The future's up for grabs," Choukas-Bradley said.