A Brief History and Future of the Appalachian Trail

First Appearance of the Trail

In October of 1921, an article titled "An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning" was published in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* by Benton MacKaye. As a former forester turned regional planner, he was very interested in the development of the unused forest in the Northeastern United States. He stressed the need to create a middle ground between America's growing cities and the empty wilderness surrounding them; he called for the construction of a recreational environment that "escapes the hecticness of the one, and the loneliness of the other."[1]

Benton MacKaye

The Original Plan

MacKaye did not outline an exact route of the proposed trail, but he did provide the basic components necessary for its construction and continued use:[1]

- The Trail: MacKaye believed that numerous local groups should be charged with the construction and maintenance of small sections of the trail until it was completed. This model was already fairly successful with trails in his area, and there were already hiking groups scattered across the eastern U.S.
- Shelter Camps: Using locally tested methods once again, MacKaye proposed the creation of shelters "a comfortable day's walk" from one another to provide sleeping and meal accommodations along the trail. He stresses that these shelters should all be built by the

volunteers in charge of blazing the path, and that they should be well attended to ensure that the "equipment is used and not abused."

- Community Groups: As the trail grew in popularity, MacKaye was under the impression that small communities would sprout up along the trail. They would live on land bought as part of the trail; nothing would be privately owned. The small communities would be strategically planned so that in well-populated areas, greater numbers of people living on the trail would be "accommodated by *more* communities, not *larger* ones." They would be non-industrial and as a result not generate profit, and instead be made available to the public solely for recreational, recuperation, or scholarly purposes.

Spreading the Word

With the help of Raymond Torrey, a newspaper columnist and avid hiker from New York, and Major William A. Welch, director of the Palisades Interstate Park Commission, MacKaye was able to gain the attention of trail enthusiasts throughout the Appalachian region. Welsh, a major supporter of woodland development in the Northeast, was responsible for the well-known A.T. logo and "Maine to Georgia" goal.[2]

Appalachian Trail Logo

Appalachian Trail Conference

By 1925 MacKaye had the support he needed to call for the first Appalachian Trail Conference in Washington D.C., of which Welsh presided over as the chair. With the assistance of foresters, regional planners, and hikers from all walks of life, a rough outline was planned out on a map, with a section from New Hampshire to northern Georgia clearly defined. Despite this progress, actual construction of the trail didn't truly begin until Arthur Perkins, a retired judge, and Myron Avery, a young Harvard Law School graduate, became involved a year later.[3] Perkins revitalized the Appalachian Trail movement, eventually becoming the new chairman of the Appalachian Trail Conference. Avery organized the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club, which focused on the construction of the trail from Pennsylvania to Georgia. He became involved in just about every aspect of the creation of the trail, from procuring land to blazing the trail and publishing maps. There were no paid positions involved with the construction of the trail; every mile blazed was done so by a volunteer.[2]

Arthur Perkins

Avery vs. MacKaye

When Perkins died in 1932, approximately 1,300 miles of the trail was nearly complete and Avery had assumed his duties as chairman of the Appalachian Trail Conference (ATC). MacKaye, still involved with the northern end of the trail, watched as the focus of the trail shifted away from the wilderness community he originally envisioned it to become. Avery was content with constructing the trail and maintaining it as a means for

Myron Avery

everyone to experience the outdoors, but MacKaye wanted more- he believed that finishing the trail was only a fraction of the project.[1] However, by that point Avery's plans were the only ones that truly mattered; construction of the trail would end with the last mile-marker. MacKaye's involvement with the development of the A.T. diminished as Avery's plans were finalized, and he even grew to dislike the new chairman of the ATC enough to completely end communication with him. MacKaye criticized Avery's policies, but was still very proud of everything accomplished on the trail.

Completion of the Trail

Avery planned to complete the trail in 1936, but awful weather delayed the official opening of the nearly 2,000 mile Appalachian Trail to the summer of 1937. It spanned from Mt. Oglethorpe, GA., to Mt. Katahdin in central Maine.[3] Those in charge of creating the trail were asked to construct shelters along the trail (although not nearly as large as MacKaye intended), and Avery recognized that the trail would never truly be complete; there would always be something to improve along the A.T. Improvement and minor extensions continued for the next fifteen years while he was chair of the ATC until his death in 1952.[2]

Trail Use and Popularity

The trail's popularity grew slowly at first due to the Depression and World War II, but it boomed shortly after the war ended. Earl Shaffer, a veteran from York, Pennsylvania, completed one of the first "thru-hikes" in 1948, hiking the entirety of the trail in just under five months.[2] News of his journey caught the attention of the public and prompted numerous others to set out

hoping to accomplish the same feat. The widespread recognition of the trail and all that it had to offer would be helpful in gaining future government support.[3]

Federal Protection

After the end of World War II, a new wave of of housing and highway development began across the United States, which threatened to destroy or alter the trail greatly. The trail went through areas that were desirable to the general public, so it was difficult to prevent people from setting up houses or roads along the way. However, in an effort to protect this important new path, Appalachian Trail Conservancy chair Stanley A. Murray, from Kingsport, Tennessee created a small group of trail veterans from Maine and Washington D.C. to campaign for federal protection from potentially harmful developments[2]. Though the journey was not easy, the fight to get Washington to aid their efforts to protect the A.T. was not in vain.

National Trails System Act

After more than half of a decade, Murray and his following found success and on October 2, 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the National Trails System Act (NTSA)[4]. This Act created a new series of public and nationally owned lands, first for the A.T., but the bill was also written with other trails in mind. The federal government pushed for states to purchase the lands that the A.T. spread across so that they would keep up the responsibility of maintaining the trail. However, it turned out that federal encouragement wasn't

President Johnson at the signing of NTSA

enough to convince some states of the importance that purchasing the land was. While some states jumped at the idea of statewide protection of the A.T.'s lands, others shied away from the responsibility.

NTSA Amendments

For the next decade, the federal government struggled to enforce states to buy into - both literally and figuratively - the concept of trail protection. Therefore, in 1978, President Jimmy Carter signed the amendment to the NTSA that not just encouraged states to purchase and protect the lands, but *directed* them to, using millions of dollars from the Land and Water Conservation fund to aid states in the acquisitions[2]. This led to one of the most complicated land purchasing programs in the countries history, as the A.T. spread across a number of states and jurisdictions. For this very reason, specific offices - the A.T. Project Office and the A.T. Land Acquisition Office - had to be created to manage the purchase so it occurred in an effective manner. As efficient as these programs have been, to this day, more than forty years later, 100% of the trail still hasn't been claimed on a federal level (though acquiring 99% is still impressive)[2].

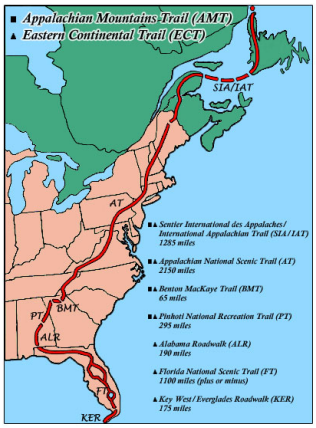
New Challenges

Ensuring the longevity of the trail takes more than simply having federal protection. After securing federal aid came a new challenge: managing and maintaining a quarter of a million acres of public land, along with the new, huge staff that the new land required. The ATC was charged by the Department of the Interior to design and create a more durable trail that could last through the growing and advancing world. New skills were required, such as scientists and

workers to monitor the biological and physical changes of the wildlife along the long, beaten path.

International Appalachian Trail

Proposed by Richard Anderson in 1994, the International Appalachian Trail (IAT) is a way to increase the journey and experience that people can have while taking this trek. The trail was extended into New Brunswick and Quebec after Anderson gathered enough support to have the route selected and constructed throughout the late 1990s. In addition to this, the A.T. is still growing, as another extension is currently being put into place through Newfoundland and Labrador. Proposed in 2003, the first trail section was opened in Newfoundland in 2006, and, upon completion, the full addition will amount to about 745 miles[5].



IAT into Canada

As remarkable as it may seem, the Appalachian Trail may continue to grow with further extensions across the Atlantic Ocean. Geological studies have show that this vast mountain range has an ancient relationship with certain mountains of Western Europe and North Africa, as they were all once part of the Pangean Mountains. Millions of years ago, Earth consisted not of many relatively small continents, but instead one supercontinent, Pangea[5]. This was when the Appalachian Mountains were connected to mountains in Europe and Africa, and is why efforts are currently being made to expand the A.T. into Western Europe and North Africa.

Appalachian Mountains: Present day vs Pangea

So far, Greenland has been added to the IAT in April of 2010, and was soon followed by Scotland with the addition of the West Highland Way, the first IAT trail in Europe. October the same year proved to be a major one in the advancement of the trail into Europe, as nine new chapters, or divisions based on location, of the IAT were added, including Iceland, the Netherlands, Denmark, England, Wales, Norway, Sweden, Ireland, and the Faroe Islands[5]. The new additions have given avid hikers a reason to be excited and will prompt many generations of hikers, new and old, to once again take to the trail and experience these powerful journeys.

Works Cited

[1]Benton MacKaye, “An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning.” Journal of the American Institute of Architects 9 (Oct. 1921): 325-330.

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[3]King, Brian. "A History of the Appalachian Trail Conference." TRAIL YEARS 75 (2000): Web.

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