

# THE GEORGIA MOUNTAINEER

QUARTERLY

Spring 2026

AMICALOLA FALLS STATE PARK  
DAWSONVILLE, GA  
APPALACHIAN TRAIL APPROACH  
SPRINGER MTN. 8.5 MILES  
MT KATAHDIN MAINE 2900.9 MILES  
BENTON MACKAYE TRAIL 8.7 MILES

Supporting the Unfolding Season  
*How GATC supports the thru-hiker season in Georgia*

# THE GEORGIA MOUNTAINEER QUARTERLY

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## The GATC Mission

*The Georgia Appalachian Trail Club manages, maintains and protects the Appalachian National Scenic Trail in Georgia with volunteers from its membership and the interested public. The Georgia Appalachian Trail Club promotes the appreciation of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and natural outdoor places through education and recreational activities, with an emphasis on conservation ethics and protection of the forests, their natural resources and wilderness areas.*

The Georgia Appalachian Trail Club is affiliated with  
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Thru-hiker Charlotte starts her journey at the Amicalola arch.

# FROM THE EDITOR

Each spring, the Appalachian Trail in Georgia begins to feel different. It is not just the changing of the seasons as winter gives way to myriad greens, to colorful flowers softly pushing from dormant stalks and into life, to the variations of weather from freezing ice storms to warm breezes, and everything there is in between. Beyond the seasonal changes, you feel a growing sense of excitement as the Thru-Hiker season slowly gathers momentum.

Hikers arrive at Amicalola Falls State Park with plans that stretch far beyond the mountains in front of them. Some will begin their journey here. Others have already started. Still others will follow in the weeks ahead. There is no single starting line—only a steady unfolding.

But for a brief time, that unfolding comes into focus.

At Base Camp, GATC volunteers are already at work—welcoming hikers, offering guidance, and quietly helping to shape the journeys ahead. At A.T. Gateways, that same spirit becomes visible, as preparation, experience, and community gather in one place.

What can be easy to miss in these moments is what makes them possible.

The Appalachian Trail does not maintain itself. It is cared for—day after day, season after season—by GATC volunteers who clear blowdowns, protect fragile landscapes, share knowledge, and welcome those who come to walk it. Much of that work happens out of sight, woven into the experience so seamlessly that it can be taken for granted.

This issue of *The Georgia Mountaineer Quarterly* offers a closer look at the season's unfolding—from the first arrivals at Base

Camp, to the shared learning and connection at A.T. Gateways, to the enduring stories that draw people back to the Trail again and again.

In the pages that follow, you will see the Trail at the edge of the season—through the voices and stories of those who first envisioned it, those preparing to walk it, those returning to it, and those who sustain it. Together, these stories reveal not just the experience of the Trail, but the work and community that make that experience possible.

If you find yourself drawn to it, you are not alone.

And you are welcome to be part of it.

—Nancy LaChance, Editor



Photo courtesy of Dawn Harmon, taken on the Trail to Springer Mountain.

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Mayapples bloom along the A.T.—often prompting hikers to ask if they’re invasive. They’re not. GATC expertise confirms they are native plants that play an important role in the ecosystem. Photo courtesy of Dave Sarge.

# Stewarding the Trail

## Insights from the GATC President

Many of the hikers who set off from A.T. Base Camp on their way to Mount Katahdin in Maine and also those who hike smaller sections of the Appalachian Trail never think about how the A.T., the first National Scenic Trail in America, got there or how it is maintained. They don't see the volunteers who rose before dawn to clear a blowdown, the ones who spent a Saturday pulling invasive plants, or those who hiked miles with heavy tools to build the trail. Hikers can simply walk and experience the wonder of nature.

But behind the scenes in every location the A.T. passes through, a group of dedicated volunteers work collaboratively with the National Forest Service and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy to conserve, maintain, and protect the Trail. The Georgia Appalachian Trail Club is one of those organizations, powered by volunteers whose multi-dimensional efforts support the Trail in a wide variety of ways.

Most visibly, our volunteers maintain more than 130 miles of trail—keeping the path clear, safe, and accessible for everyone who wants to experience the Georgia mountains. They give their time generously and in return gain skills, friendships and the pride of knowing they helped to sustain the trail they love.

But trail work is only part of the story.

GATC volunteers also monitor and combat non-native invasive plants that threaten the native ecosystems our trails pass through.

GATC volunteers participating in our Outreach program guide young people and members of underrepresented communities on overnight trips to the Len Foote Hike Inn, introducing them to wild places, sometimes for the very first time. They visit schools to teach conservation values and connect the next generation to the land.

In our Activities program, GATC volunteers lead hikes that give members opportunities to enjoy spending time with each other and with other hikers, as they hike in Georgia and surrounding areas. On events ranging from backpacking trips to city strolls, volunteer hike leaders share the history of the area or lead various hike series that help members complete the longer trails in Georgia, including the A.T., the Georgia 4,000, the Benton MacKaye Trail, and the Pinhoti Trail. Our Activities team offers hikes to suit every level of hiker, usually during weekends but sometimes during the week.

On the trails themselves, our volunteer Trail Ambassadors hike the A.T. sections in order to meet hikers where they are, answering questions and sharing Leave No Trace principles so that everyone who passes through leaves these places better than they found them.

The volunteer opportunities extend beyond the trail. Volunteers with skills in technology, advocacy, fundraising, journalism, photography and all manner of administration are the unseen backbone of the GATC.

Taken together, the contributions of all volunteers enable us to continue fulfilling the GATC mission to manage, maintain, and protect the Appalachian Trail in Georgia and to promote the appreciation and conservation of natural outdoor places. It is a mission that speaks to each of the members and calls them out to remove blowdowns, lead hikes, communicate the stories of the Trail, or remove invasive plants from the forest.

But none of this happens without volunteers. To all those who love the Trail, you are much needed, no matter what time or resources you have available to contribute. We would love to have you join us.

—Ashley Luke, GATC President



Hiking together—how GATC volunteers deepen their connection to the Trail. Photo courtesy of Jason Bone.

# At the Edge of the Season

A.T. Gateways—bringing hikers, volunteers, and the Trail together



A quiet moment before the event—sunset at Amicalola Falls State Park Lodge. Photo courtesy of Collin Chambers.

*Editor's Note: This article is adapted from pieces by Ron Hamlin, Leon Rubin, and Alex Hinerfield, originally published in GATC's monthly member newsletter, The Georgia Mountaineer. Unless otherwise noted, all photos are courtesy of Tres Indermark.*

Each year, as winter begins to loosen its hold on the North Georgia mountains, the rhythm of the Appalachian Trail shifts. Thru-hikers are already arriving at Amicalola Falls State Park. Some have started. Others will start weeks from now. At Base Camp, the steady work of welcoming hikers is already underway. And then, for a few days, A.T. Gateways gathers it all in one place.

A.T. Gateways is not a starting line, exactly—but rather something closer to a shared threshold. A moment when the season comes into focus for a few days.

## A Gathering at the Edge of the Season

Now in its third year, A.T. Gateways continues to grow beyond its origins as a traditional kickoff. It now draws hundreds of thru-hikers, section hikers, day hikers, and members of the broader outdoor community. What unfolds over the weekend is not a single experience, but many layered together: preparation, storytelling, learning, and connection.

Walk by any of the many tables that line the meeting area at Amicalola State Park's lodge, and members of outdoor organizations, outfitters, and experts will lean in to talk to you about things they know, about things they want to share. They nod as they listen to questions and then spend real time and thought answering and listening more and understanding what you need and how they can help.

Throughout the day, workshops and sessions offer practical guidance—foot care, physical readiness, gear strategy. The audiences lean in to listen, question, respond, interact so that each session is not just a presentation but a conversation that bubbles throughout the lodge as the talk spills out of the workshop doors and into the hallways.

Often the most striking insights come in the form of hard-earned, plainspoken advice:

“That’s not a shoe problem. That’s a decision-making problem... Treat the first eight days as pre-season.” (Rob Gasbarro, “Footwear to Get You There”)

“If you are going to bring an excess of anything, make it socks.” (Former Ridgerunner Collin Chambers, “Take a Hike”)

“The A.T. stands for Aggressive Terrain. It’s all about strategy, strength, and support.” (Andrew “Metro on the Move” Miller, “Tips for a Successful Thru-hike”)

These are not pronouncements so much as perspective—offered at just the moment when it can still shape what lies ahead.





“Metro on the Move” connects with his audience.

## The Trail Before the Journey

A.T. Gateways also creates space to look backward before moving forward. As “history nerd” Ron Hamlin explains, “At past years’ events, our own Gene Espy related his experiences of hiking the Appalachian Trail in the early 1950s, but with his passing, a void as well as an opportunity opened. For those of us who make a hobby of exploring the history of the trail, this year’s A.T. Gateways event brought two new opportunities to learn about that past and some of the lesser-known people whose shoulders we stand on.”

On Friday night, Paul Bonesteel presented a preview of his latest documentary, *George Masa – A Life Reimagined* and introduced Masaharu Iizuka, a Japanese photographer whose photography was an important contribution to establishing the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and to documenting the creation of the Appalachian Trail. In a workshop session, Mills Kelly, archivist for the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club, and podcast producer of *The Green Tunnel*, spoke about his latest A.T.-related book, *A Hiker’s History of the Appalachian Trail*. Using trail shelter logs and hiker accounts provided by club newsletters and newspapers, Kelly tells the story of the Appalachian Trail through the eyes of the millions of hikers who have hiked it.

These glimpses into history remind attendees that the Trail is not simply a route to be followed, but an idea carried forward across generations. From

its earliest days, the Appalachian Trail was shaped by visionaries, advocates, and volunteers who believed in access to wild places and the value of shared outdoor experience. That legacy continues—not abstractly, but through the people who maintain, protect, and walk the Trail today.

For those preparing to head north, it offers a quiet shift in perspective: the journey is personal, but it is never solitary in its meaning.

## Hands on the Work

That idea becomes tangible at the Crosscut Saw Experience, hosted by sawyers from the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club, as sawyer Alex Hinerfield explains it:

Attendees had the chance to pull on antique crosscut saws and quickly learned that these historic tools are more than relics—they’re still essential to maintaining the Appalachian Trail.

When asked why we don’t simply use chainsaws, the answer is straightforward: much of the A.T. passes through designated Wilderness areas, where motorized equipment is prohibited. When storms drop trees across the trail, volunteer sawyers hike in with crosscut saws and axes to clear the way by hand. In non-wilderness areas, chainsaws can be used but some sawyers still prefer to hike in a crosscut saw and leave the chainsaw in the truck.

Participants discovered that crosscut work isn’t about strength—it’s about teamwork and rhythm. Two people, one saw, steady communication. The experience offered a new appreciation for the skill and effort required to keep the trail open.

The Crosscut Saw Station wasn’t just a demonstration. It was a reminder that the Appalachian Trail is maintained not by machines, but by dedicated volunteers carrying forward a tradition of stewardship and hard work.

For many, it is the first moment they see that connection clearly.



Experiences with the wildlife of the Trail underscore the need to protect it.



Foot and footwear experts help hikers understand how to get the most from their feet.

## A Community, Briefly Gathered

By the end of the weekend, another layer has emerged—one that cannot be scheduled or planned.

Connections.

At the Lodge, at Base Camp, in passing conversations and shared sessions, people begin to form the loose community that will carry them into the season. Some will form lasting relationships. Others will cross paths only once. Even the numbers hint at this quiet beginning: more than a hundred aspiring hikers passed through Base Camp during the weekend, each at a different point in their own journey. Around them, volunteers, Trail Ambassadors, and maintainers step into their roles as well, setting the tone for the months ahead. And others enhance their understanding of the Trail, of hiking, of gear, of a life that goes out into the wild and comes back wanting more.

## A Moment That Brings It Into Focus

The thru-hiker season does not begin in a single place or on a single day. It unfolds over weeks—through early arrivals, staggered starts, and countless individual decisions to take that first step north.

But at A.T. Gateways, for a brief time, that unfolding season becomes visible. Preparation meets experience. History meets intention. Strangers begin to feel like part of something shared.

And then, just as quickly, it disperses—back onto the Trail.

# The Journey Begins at Base Camp

A stop before Springer Mountain—where preparation, reassurance, and anticipation come together.

It is the last Wednesday before Base Camp closes for the season. The room is ready—posters showing the Georgia section of the trail, notices about bears and incident reporting, a line of iPads waiting to welcome new thru-hikers who will start their journey today.

Two women enter. Tonya (“Monarch”), the Base Camp coordinator, smiles broadly, extends her hand, and introduces herself—and her tiny dog, Zobie. “We’re also thru-hikers! Welcome to Base Camp. Are you thru-hikers?”

The pair is a thru-hiker and her mother, both from New Hampshire. Tonya is off and running—talking a mile a minute, rattling off places and experiences from New Hampshire, Vermont, Delaware. Charlotte and her mother join in, sharing names and memories like old friends.

**“We don’t want to love the Trail so much we love it to death.”**

Tonya directs Charlotte to the sign-in table and explains what she needs to do to receive her A.T. 2026 hang tag—number 2091. Her mother browses through the hiker box, packed with abandoned clothes, a rather large paperback book, even a metal flask. Eyebrows go up. There are chuckles.

“Are you afraid? Excited?” I ask Charlotte as she finishes her registration.

“Mixed emotions. I’m generally nervous about the unknown—the things I can’t predict. But I’m pretty confident...”

Her mother adds, “I was a bit concerned because she’s doing it alone, but the A.T. is right next to our house, and we know lots of people who have done it. They rave about the ‘family’ on the trail.” She glances at Charlotte. “And she has a very good head on her shoulders. And she has a good read of people from her job as an EMT. And—she’s six feet tall.”

Everyone laughs. Tension eases.

It eases further as Tonya moves into the Start Smart presentation. It feels less like a presentation and more like a conversation—stories, questions, and experience woven together. It is tailored to the hiker in front of her, with one goal: getting Charlotte out of the room and onto the Trail, prepared.

The advice is practical and direct:

The most common injuries are overuse injuries.

You’re going to hurt—but if something hurts consistently in the same place, your body is telling you to get off the trail.

Trail magic is great, but when many hikers handle the same items, they can spread germs—like the dreaded norovirus.

Tonya introduces the network of people who support hikers along the A.T. In Georgia, where hikers are just beginning to acclimate, Trail Ambassadors educate and assist. They are trained in Leave No Trace principles and many in first aid. All along the way, Ridgerunners provide guidance, information, and first aid when needed.

“They are there for you,” she says.

A video—featuring a bear (played by a volunteer in a bear suit) and a “Don’t be that guy” hiker—draws laughter while reinforcing the message. Protecting the Trail is not optional. Thru-hikers become part of that responsibility.



Tonya “Monarch,” Base Camp coordinator, welcomes hikers at Base Camp—where A.T. northbound thru-hikes begin with a conversation.

“That’s how I learned,” Tonya says. “Watching a thru-hiker pick up trash left on the trail.”

“We don’t want to love the Trail so much we love it to death.”

Soon the presentation ends. Charlotte and her mother head outside for the traditional photo under the arch. Tonya turns—without missing a beat—to the next arrivals as a steady stream of hikers enters the room.

Hang tags 2092, 2093, 2094, 2095, 2096 are issued.

One by one, hikers leave Base Camp to join the flow north, becoming part of the thru-hiker bubble moving toward Maine.

What happens in this room is simple, and essential—GATC volunteers quietly helping hikers take their first steps and supporting the journey that follows.

# A Hiker's Perspective

## A View from Base Camp

By John Turner

Every person who arrives at the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club's Base Camp at Amicalola Falls State Park intending to walk from Georgia to Maine brings a desire. For some, the desire is to experience the Appalachian Trail's mystique of adventure and glamor. For many, the desire is to test themselves against the challenge of the miles and the mountains, to enjoy the landmark views and bask in the status of accomplishing a feat not many can achieve. For others, it's a desire for the solitude and the wildness, or at least what passes in our time for wild nature on the East Coast. And for a few, it just seems like a cool thing to do.

This season our Ridgerunners and GATC Trail Ambassadors have welcomed the usual hiker menagerie to Georgia. I spent an hour at Basecamp helping an eighty-year-old lady adjust her new pack and come to grips with the U.S. Forest Service's rule about food storage. I watched a nervous young man with brand new expensive gear sit on the floor with a Triple Crown Trail Ambassador and learn a tiny fraction of the things he should have already known before setting out for Springer Mountain.

I had a fellow insist that the young man and woman he was dropping off at Basecamp didn't need to listen to our orientation for hikers because he had already taught them everything about hiking, and they just needed to collect their Appalachian Trail Conference backpack hangtags and go.

They didn't get those coveted hangtags until they had sat through the our Ridgerunner's ten-minute orientation, and they learned some important details about the Georgia section of the A.T. Which, by the expressions on their young faces, I'm pretty sure they didn't already know.

And I reassured the anxious wife who planned to meet her husband the next day at the parking lot below Springer Mountain — "Don't worry, he'll be fine," I said — which I'm reasonably sure was correct, although the wave of thunderstorms that night might have unsettled the fellow just a bit.

On one gloomy day in February, I handed out seventeen hangtags to arriving hikers, and only one of them actually set off in the downpour for Springer. He had to wade through two inches of muddy water underneath the arch to get the obligatory photo while I scrunched under an umbrella with his phone. "No rain, no Maine," of course, but a cold soaking on day one is a pretty discouraging way to start a journey of five or six months.

They come from every state. I welcomed a lawyer from Anchorage, Alaska, a wildlife biologist from Brunswick, Georgia, and a half dozen or so hikers from New Hampshire and Maine who,

understandably but perhaps falsely, viewed the challenge of the A.T. in Georgia to be an easy introduction to their walk toward home.

What's different this year? Fewer numbers in the beginning of the hiking season but the usual bubble in late March and early April. Starting on January 1 seems to be a thing now. Nine hikers who did couldn't have known that in just a few days the temperatures in North Georgia would drop below zero. And not just for one windy, bitterly cold night. Fewer international hikers. I met a single hiker from Canada. Last year Canadians outnumbered every other nationality. Make of that what you will.

The common denominator every year is the crucial ingredient for any successful long-distance hike, that desire.

To see what's out there from that next peak, around that next bend, over that next state line. To climb that next mountain, arrive at that next shelter and meet new friends. For the majority, that desire will be so sorely tested by the rigors of the Appalachian Trail that it will ebb and fade to an unfulfilled dream. But for those whose desire is so strong they persevere despite everything the trail throws at them, Katahdin awaits.



Hikers complete registration at Base Camp—final preparations before setting out for Springer Mountain. Photo courtesy of Dawn Harmon.

**“No rain, no Maine”**

# A Trail, a Marriage, and the Return

## Sally and Steve Smith Celebrate 30 Years of Marriage and Hiking the A.T.

*At Base Camp, you see it all at once. A young hiker, just beginning, stands at the counter—nervous, excited, unsure of what lies ahead. Nearby, someone who has already walked the length of the Trail talks easily about the miles behind them—about rain, about hardship, even about the small, strange losses along the way.*

*Beginnings and returns share the same space. Anticipation meets experience. People are drawn back to tell their stories—and, for a moment, the whole arc of the Appalachian Trail is visible.*

### By Leon Rubin

When Sally and Steve Smith walked into the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club's A.T. Base Camp at Amicalola Falls State Park on March 4, they had a 30-year-old story to tell.

They were celebrating the 30th anniversary of their marriage at the Park's reflecting pool at the base of the Falls and their memorable thru-hike of the A.T., which began—appropriately enough—on March 4, 1996.

"We marched forth into a new life and onto the Trail," Steve says.

They marked their anniversary by reenacting some of their wedding photos, walking around the park, visiting Base Camp and then driving up to the Springer Mountain Trailhead and hiking back to where it all started. They recalled spending the first night of their honeymoon in their tent pitched near Springer Mountain Shelter.

"We had signs for the tent that said Just Married and Honeymoon Suite," Sally recalls.

On Trail, they were known as The Honeymooners—Ralph and Alice—after the 1950s television sitcom starring Jackie Gleason and Audrey Meadows.

That shelter was the first place that they signed a log book, which they would do faithfully throughout their hike.

### Inspired at Wayah Bald

Sally and Steve had never heard of the Appalachian Trail when they stopped at Wayah Bald in North Carolina on a vacation from Florida one year. They encountered a National Geographic spelunking team whose members were hiking 100 miles of the Trail.

Steve recounted the story. They explained everything, and I said, 'How do you know where you're going?' And he said, 'We follow the markings on the trees.' And I was like, 'What?' And he explained blazing."

After they returned to Florida, they were at a high school football game one night in the pouring rain.

"I looked at Sally. I said, I keep thinking about that hiking trip that those guys were doing. I think I'd like to do that," Steve says.



Thirty years later, Sally and Steve Smith return to Amicalola Falls—where their A.T. journey began.

"I couldn't believe it because that's all I've been thinking about, too," Sally says, "and what a great adventure that might be and how crazy it was. I didn't even want to mention it because I thought he'd think I was nuts."

They were "seriously dating" at that time, Sally says. Not long afterwards, Steve proposed to her during a family visit to Kentucky. "That's when we announced to our families that we were going to both resign from our positions and walk the Appalachian Trail," Steve says.

Since they lived in Sarasota, Florida, at the time, they trained for their hike by climbing stairs in a hospital parking garage. They dehydrated all their food in advance and shipped it ahead to 22 food drops.

Following their wedding ceremony at Amicalola Falls (where everyone wore bib overalls, per their request) their adventures truly began.

### Bamboo and Blizzards

"Within the first four days, we were in temperatures of 11 degrees. It was a little brutal," Steve remembers. "We're trying to cook and as we took it off the stove, the water instantly started freezing. We thought we were going to freeze to death."

Shortly after that, Steve pulled something in his right leg. "That foot didn't touch the ground for a couple of weeks. I just hobbled with my hiking sticks, which were bamboo poles," Steve says, adding, "They were lightweight, hard as a rock, and worked great. They kept me going all the way to the end."

They also were caught in a blizzard around Franklin, North Carolina, that dumped 22 inches of snow on their tent.

**"We marched forth into a new life and onto the Trail."**

“The blizzard caused the snow to stick to all sides of the trees,” Steve remembers. “We had no idea which way to go,” Sally adds. They had to get off the Trail for almost a week.

“We proceeded on,” Steve says. “Once you get out of Georgia, you feel like you accomplished that first state. And then you’re in North Carolina and then Tennessee and then you’re in Virginia. You really feel at that point like you’re making a lot of coverage.”

They backtracked to attend Trail Days in Damascus, Virginia and got a ride back to the Trail in an ambulance.

### Troubles Begin

By the time they reached Harper’s Ferry, though, Sally’s knees and ankles were bothering her. “I literally couldn’t walk on them anymore. They were just killing me. And I didn’t want to admit it, because this was our honeymoon,” Sally recalls.

“We needed to stay together. But if you really want to do something, you’ll find a way to do it.

They decided that Steve would continue hiking and Sally would keep pace in a pickup truck they nicknamed the Red Blaze. “We had a journal in it, and hikers would sign into the journal like they used to in the shelters,” Sally says. She also used the truck for trail magic, sometimes offering water or cold beer to hikers. “One guy had his boots blow out on him, so I drove him 60 miles into town to get a new pair of boots and back out onto the Trail the next day.”

Sally’s knees eventually felt better and she started hiking short distances with Steve. Eventually, she decided she would get back on the Trail with him in the 100 Mile Wilderness in Maine.

Unfortunately, she only made it four miles before she slipped on what Steve called a Volkswagen-sized, moss-covered rock and turned her ankle. They struggled back to a road, then hitchhiked to a hospital.

“The doctor said, nope, you’re not going anywhere. So it was difficult, and we didn’t know what to do,” Sally recalls. “We decided that we would come back the next year at exactly the same date.”

Fast forward to 1997. “We finished the trail together that year. We did the 100 Mile Wilderness and climbed to the top (of Mount Katahdin) and got up to the sign and spent a half hour crying,” Sally says.

“It was awesome,” adds Steve.

### Anniversary Celebration

Sally says Steve suggested going back to the start of the Trail this year as a combined Valentine’s present and 30th anniversary celebration.

“Thirty years seemed like a good time to go back and to spend some time together reminiscing,” Steve says. “Every day, something comes up and we can flash back to the Trail instantly. It’s like, ‘What does this remind you of?’ And both of us would come up with stuff. It’s like, here’s what I think it is. Here’s what I think it is. Or which direction we were in or whatever.”

They enjoyed visiting Base Camp, which they described as very welcoming. Coincidentally, they met another couple who were starting their thru-hike as their honeymoon, Chandler and Zackery Garmoe-Joiner from Bozeman, Mont., who got married last October.

“It put the smiles back on our faces for about three or four days solid,” Steve says, “just to see everything. Just to know you’re back in the element.”

Adds Sally, “I felt a lot younger those three days. It was kind of like going in a time machine.”

Before they started hiking the A.T., Steve worked for Merrill Lynch and Sally was the executive director of a medical research foundation. Now retired, they live in Bardstown, Kentucky, where Sally volunteers at Bernheim Forest and Arboretum and Steve makes furniture. They also volunteer at a food pantry.

“We have lived the life and we’re still living it,” Steve says.

“Inch by inch, life’s a cinch.”



At Mount Katahdin, the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail—where their journey, begun in 1996, was completed.

# In the Beginning

Part One of a series honoring the centennial of the Appalachian Trail Conference

By Ron Hamlin

## Before a Continuous Trail

*Long before today's hikers arrive at Springer Mountain, the idea of the Appalachian Trail began with a vision—one that continues to shape the journey a century later.*

One hundred years ago, the idea of creating a long-distance trail explicitly designed for recreation was not new. Several trail clubs throughout the northeastern United States enjoyed many trails in the eastern mountains from the White Mountains of New England down to the Poconos and the ridges of Pennsylvania. City dwellers would find opportunities for exercise, picnics, and other recreational activities in the nearby hills found at the ends of trolley lines.

Further away from these cities, in the far-off mountains, trails were developed independently for the recreation of well-to-do visitors to the hotels and lodges in the valleys and adjacent notches. In the White Mountains, the Catskills, and the Poconos, trails were built for the recreation of guests that led to some lookout or mountain peak and, over time, became connected. However, these were small-scale projects focused within the geographic area, conducted mainly by the local trail clubs. On several occasions, trail clubs of New England, New York, and Pennsylvania met to discuss linking the various trail networks. Still, those discussions had not been fruitful in developing a regional network. For the time, trails generally remained limited in their scope and purpose, typically serving as a means for hikers to access a viewpoint, waterfall, or other attraction.

## The Green Mountain Vision

James P. Taylor changed things. He was the schoolmaster of the Vermont Academy for Boys in Saxton River in the early 1900s. He believed that no education was complete without plenty of vigorous outdoor exercise. He encouraged his students to explore the mountains that surrounded them and led the boys on many trips into them through the years. But he was disappointed that there were not more trails through the Green Mountains that would allow him and his students to climb. Many of their hikes required bushwhacking.

The average Vermonter viewed the Green Mountains more as an inconvenience than as a destination worth climbing or hiking for recreation. In 1910, Taylor decided to encourage interest in the recreational value of the Vermont mountains and create an organization that would build trails and shelters. He was driven to foster an interest in climbing and hiking, and an appreciation for the surrounding landscape, among average Vermonters.

He called a meeting for March 11, 1910, inviting prominent Vermont citizens to attend. Twenty-four attended, and the Green Mountain Club was formed, with the mission to “make the Vermont Mountains play a larger role in the life of the people.” Thus began the first trail club with a specific purpose of building trails rather than just hiking on trails that were already there. Over the next twenty years, the Long Trail was built, from the Massachusetts state line to the mountains of northern Vermont.

## Benton MacKaye and a Larger Idea

The man instrumental in the creation of the Appalachian Trail, Benton MacKaye, was born in 1879. He was the fourth son of Steele and Mary McKaye in Stamford, Connecticut. Young Benton enjoyed exploring the countryside. He would eventually attend Harvard, following in his brothers' footsteps, and graduate in 1900. During his Harvard years, he enjoyed spending summers in the White Mountains, where he worked as a camp counselor.

At the turn of the twentieth-century, Gifford Pinchot, the Chief of the newly created U.S. Forest Service, was making the circuit of college campuses, encouraging young men to join the new service. Benton attended a recruiting session held at Harvard near the time of his graduation but did not immediately join. Instead, he worked as a tutor during the school year in New York City and continued working as a camp counselor in the White Mountains during his summer breaks. He discussed with his friends how much he disliked tutoring and how much he enjoyed his summer employment in the mountains. His friends eventually convinced him to return to school and follow his dream of working in the outdoors. He applied to the Yale School of Forestry but was turned down. He learned that Harvard was introducing a new forestry curriculum, so he applied there as well and was admitted. He became a member of the first graduating class of the Harvard School of Forestry, with a master's degree in 1904.



James P. Taylor, Headmaster, Vermont Academy for Boys

And so, he became employed with the U.S. Forest Service. Throughout the next decade, he became familiar with the boom-and-bust cycle that employees and towns dependent on the forestry industry experienced, much like that experienced by his family as he was growing up. The money was plentiful during harvests, but once the timber resource was depleted, the economy and population suffered dramatically. His interest in helping people survive beyond the harvest was important to him, so he developed an interest in regional planning, with the hope of using federal resources to achieve a sustained yield, providing people and communities with a steady source of income.

In those early years of his employment with the Forest Service, the federal government's responsibility for forests was solely in the lands it held in the western U.S. It was not until the passage of the Weeks Act, signed into law in 1911, that the federal purchase of forest lands surrounding the headwaters of navigable rivers in the East was authorized. Part of the Act's purpose was to reduce the discharge of silt and debris, a product of timber harvesting, into rivers that were essential means of transporting goods between states. Rivers also served as important sources of energy for mills and power plants, which were damaged by materials that washed downstream after hillsides were clear-cut.

## Public Lands and Possibility

Once national forests began to grow in the East, MacKaye returned from the West to be closer to his aging mother and younger sister, and to continue his career with the federal government. MacKaye, now in his thirties, married Jessie Hardy Stubbs in 1915. She went by the name of Betty and, like him, shared an interest in improving the human condition.

Betty was an active suffragette, working for women's rights and the power to vote. She would play an unlikely role in the future of the Appalachian Trail.

In 1916, Benton wrote an article for the Journal of the New York State Forestry Association titled "Recreational Possibilities of Public Forests," in which he first discusses the recreational opportunities provided by creating links between federal and state lands along the ridgeline of the eastern mountains. He cites the activities of the Appalachian Mountain Club in the White Mountains, the goals of the recently created Green Mountain Club, as well as the possibilities created by the Adirondack Preserve, the Poconos of Pennsylvania, and the mountains of the southern states. He lamented the proliferation of fences and "No Trespassing" signs, calling for expanding recreational opportunities that would be created by public lands. At this moment in time, there was more acreage in the northeast held by the public than there was in the south; however, in a letter written to MacKaye, the state forester of North Carolina recognized that the forests had more financial potential for their recreational value than they did for the timber that could be harvested.

Arriving at adulthood at the dawn of the twentieth century, and the Progressive Era championed by Theodore Roosevelt, both Betty and Benton were social reformers interested in the success and betterment of the downtrodden. During the First World War, Benton and Betty were anti-war advocates and for U.S. isolation. While Benton was inclined to be less demonstrative, Betty participated in many anti-war rallies and speaking engagements related to women's suffrage. Following the war and with women finally winning the right to vote, Betty had no outlet for her energy. She grew increasingly despondent, prompting Benton to arrange for a caretaker while he was away on his frequent business trips. During this period, the MacKaye's lived in New York City. She also required several trips to sanitariums in upstate New York to aid with her mental health.

### Loss and Reflection

In April 1921, Betty was experiencing a period of deep depression. Benton, Betty, and an elderly caretaker were at Grand Central Terminal preparing to travel to the upstate so that Betty could, once again, be cared for at a sanitarium. While Betty and her attendant waited for Benton to purchase tickets, Betty jumped up and ran out of the terminal, leaving her caretaker behind. Shortly thereafter, unable to locate his wife, Benton filed a missing person report with the police. Soon the police knocked on his door and asked him to come to the morgue to identify a body they had found in the East River, but he could not find the strength to do that. He asked a friend, Charles Whittaker, if he would. Whittaker would identify Betty as the deceased person the next morning. The news devastated Benton. He would never remarry.

Charles Harris Whitaker was a well-known architect and urban planner, as well as editor of the Journal of the American Institute of Architects. Shortly after the death of his wife, Benton spent a few weeks with his brother Hal in Yonkers. However, Whitaker invited MacKaye to join him on his small farm in New Jersey in June 1921. While MacKaye never fully recovered emotionally from his wife's suicide, his time in the country did help him to recompose. During this stay, MacKaye was introduced to another planner, Clarence Stein, whose friendship was immediate and lasted throughout the remainder of their lives.

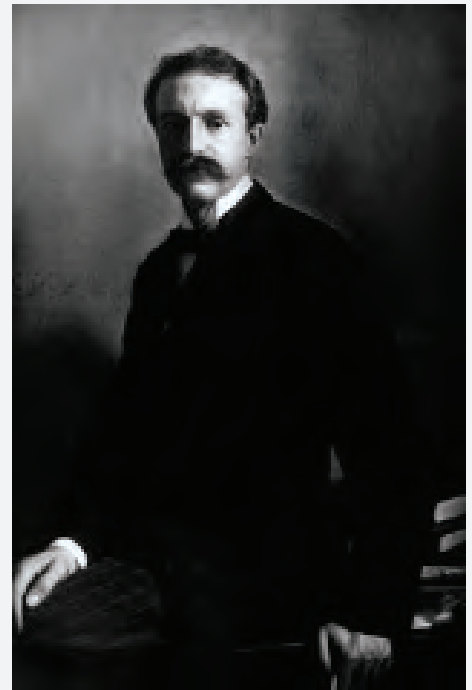
### A Trail Takes Shape

While on Whitaker's farm, MacKaye wrote about large-scale social welfare projects and the transformation of the modern industrial society, one of which was a project he titled "Survey and Plan for an Outdoor Recreation System throughout the Appalachian Mountain Region," expanding and fleshing out the ideas he first broached publicly in his New York State Forestry Journal article. MacKaye, Stein, and Whitaker discussed these ideas at length, encouraging MacKaye to write "An

Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning," which was published in Journal of the American Institute of Architects in October 1921.

This article discussed much more than a trail. MacKaye addressed the possibility of an environment stretching between the tallest mountain east of the Mississippi, Mount Mitchell in North Carolina, and the tallest mountain in New England, Mount Washington. Concerned about the plight of the working family, it was a plan with several elements he envisioned would provide much-needed relief for the city-dwelling working class and the poor mountain-dwelling farmers. He envisioned a series of camps where workers would spend a couple of weeks at a time, finding relief from their stressful world, and where the mountain communities would benefit economically from their presence. These small camps and communities would be connected by a path that stretched along the ridgetop of the eastern range.

Through his youth and while attending Harvard, MacKaye enjoyed venturing into the mountains of New Hampshire and Vermont. But as he matured, his interest in actually being outdoors and in mountain roving faded. He turned to espousing and promoting the social benefit the mountains could provide through their preservation. His work within the government turned toward creating communities within public lands managed by the federal government.



Gifford Pinchot, first Chief of the U.S. Forest Service

He drew on his own experiences in the mountains of New England and built on the knowledge he had of the project in Vermont that James P. Taylor had proposed. He also drew upon the work of regional trail advocacy groups, such as the New England Trail Conference, and their desire to link the trail network of New England into a broader system of trails. But MacKaye envisioned a project on a much larger scale.

Drawing on the experiences of his youth, the struggles of the communities he witnessed as a professional forester, and his desire to create an environment within the Appalachian Mountains that could benefit working-class people, a product, also, of his despondency on losing his wife, the idea that would eventually take shape as the Appalachian Trail was spawned.

This would be the genesis of the great trail that we enjoy and protect today. But how did this idea grow in popularity from the obscure pages of the Journal of the American Institute of Architects to become a project that would be undertaken on a massive scale over the next fifteen years and beyond? Why, also, didn't MacKaye's idea in social engineering, intended to help the working class, not come to pass? Learn more in the next issue of the Georgia Mountaineer Quarterly.

Sources available upon request.

# Find Your Place on the Trail

There are many ways to be part of the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club—on the trail, behind the scenes, or somewhere in between.

## Take a Hike

Try us out.  
Join an  
upcoming  
hike or event.

## Support the Trail

Contribute to our  
work with an  
A.T. license plate  
or donation.

## Become a Member

Get involved.  
Join GATC.

## Volunteer your Skills

Go all in. Help maintain  
and protect the Trail.



Learn more at [georgia-atclub.org](http://georgia-atclub.org)

