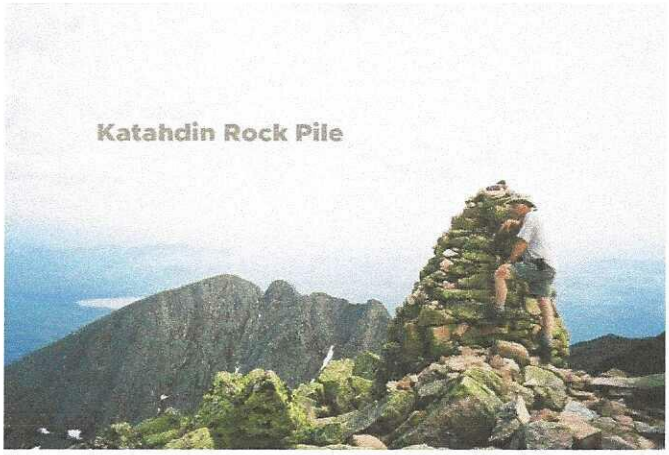
Coming to an End

by Ron Hamlin

It's October, and we're nearing the time of year when hikes up Katahdin will not be possible until next year. Most northbound thru-hikers are done by now, while southbounders will continue to trickle in to Georgia and reach Springer through the winter. How about a look at the history of the two ends of the Appalachian Trail? The A.T.'s ends have shifted several times over the life of the trail. In 1921, when Benton MacKaye first proposed the A.T., he envisioned the trail connecting the highest point east of the Mississippi River, Mount Mitchell in North Carolina, and the tallest point in New England, Mount Washington in New Hampshire's White Mountains.

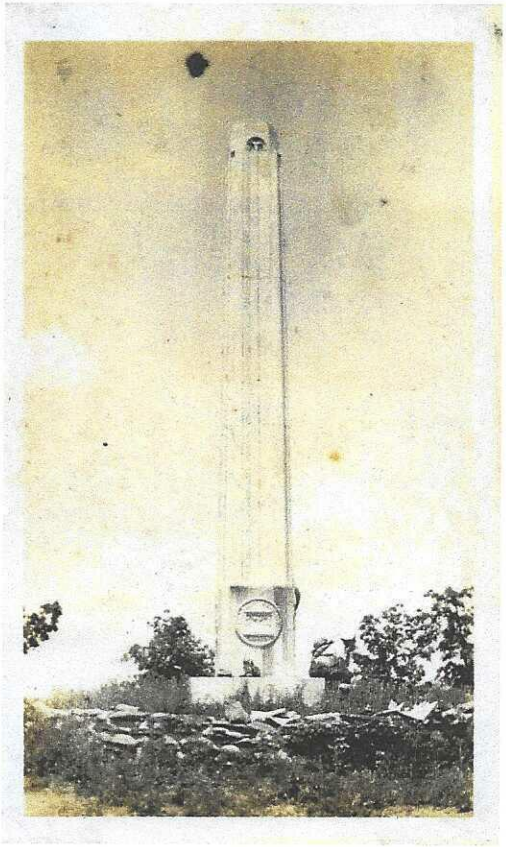
By the time the first trail conference met in 1925 in Washington, the northern terminus, probably influenced by the Appalachian Mountain Club, was established as Katahdin. Though the planned route and then the actual route to it has changed over the last 100 years, it has been the goal for NOBOs ever since. An interesting point about Katahdin is that its elevation was measured several times since European-Americans have been on this continent and finally determined to be 13 feet under one mile in elevation, so a pile of stones has collected there that is said to be 13 feet tall, bringing it to the one mile mark.



The southern terminus has a much shiftier history. The southern Appalachians divide in southwestern Virginia, with one arm heading nearly due south, passing over, among others, Mount Mitchell and Grandfather Mountain, then wrapping east and south of Asheville before crossing into northeast Georgia. The other chain runs southwest along the state line dividing North Carolina and Tennessee before crossing into northwest Georgia and on into Alabama. The two chains were each a potential route for trail planners to consider.

At that first trail conference in 1925, the only southern club represented was the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club of Knoxville. They easily convinced their northern colleagues of their preference for the westernmost range. So at that conference, the southern terminus was picked from a map: Cohutta Mountain in northwest Georgia, following a direct line along that western chain of mountains.

Over the next several years, trail construction went slowly, carried out mainly by volunteers and foresters, and mostly in the northern half of the country. A little work went on in the southern half, but it was precious little. To help jump-start the project in the south, a Georgian working as a forester in Tennessee, Roy Ozmer, was asked by the A.T. Conference leadership if he would cobble together a trail from Georgia into Virginia to meet up with the work that was being undertaken by the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club from Rockfish Gap northward.



Ozmer traveled back to his homeland of Georgia, where he met the state's enthusiastic assistant forester, Everett B. (Eddie) Stone. Stone, his assistant Charlie Elliott, and Ozmer were not impressed with the idea of a trail northbound from the Cohuttas. The area was difficult to access, didn't make for very exciting hiking before entering Tennessee, and probably most important, was being dictated by out-of-staters. A more impressive end point with easier access was Mount Oglethorpe near Jasper. A popular author of the time who visited Oglethorpe, Horace Kephart, wrote to Arthur Perkins, the ATC chairman, about their choice. Kephart had been invited by Perkins to join the ATC's Board of Managers in 1929, so he was highly regarded in the ATC circle. Kephart wrote, "I am thoroughly convinced that Mt. Oglethorpe is the natural and most fitting southern terminus of the A.T... Cohutta Mountain is isolated and gets one nowhere. Neither is it the true southern end of the Appalachian Mountain system, which Oglethorpe really is." So Oglethorpe replaced Cohutta as the southern terminus.

The trail departing Oglethorpe passed across private land and roadway until entering the national forest and Amicalola Falls State Park north of Georgia Highway 52. Hiking through that section became increasingly challenging in the 1950s as post-war development spread and maintenance efforts carried out by the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club waned. Hiker complaints about the stench emitted from the nearby chicken houses and trash that accumulated along the trail became overwhelming. Suggestions were made to move the southern terminus out of Georgia and up to North Carolina. Responding to the problem, in 1957 GATC leadership organized a committee to determine what to do, recommend a

course of action to the club's membership, and eventually propose a plan to the ATC Board of Managers.

The committee considered several options for a new southern terminus: Fort Mountain (too much trail to build), the top of Amicalola Falls and Frosty Mountain (too easily accessed), and Springer Mountain. Ultimately, they chose Springer as the preferred option. It was somewhat remote, in a manner similar to Katahdin, and it was somewhat poetic – it's the point at which those two mountain chains that divide in southwestern Virginia come back together.



Springer Mountain sign displayed at the Appalachian Trail Museum. This is a duplicate of the sign that stood at the summit in the early years of the designation of Springer as the southern terminus of the A.T. but was never used.

So since 1958, the southern end of the A.T. has been on Springer Mountain.