



Contacts: Nancy Dalton/Linda Caldwell at 423-263-7232/877-510-5765

ndalton@tennesseeoverhill.com

lcaldwell@tennesseeoverhill.com

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Benton MacKaye: A Man, a Vision, a National Trail.

The skyline along the top of the main divides and ridges of the Appalachians would overlook a mighty part of the nation's activities. The rugged lands of this skyline would form a camping base strategic in the country's work and play.

Benton MacKaye, "An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning."

Benton MacKaye (1879-1975), namesake for the Benton MacKaye Trail, was the first person to propose the Appalachian Trail. He grew up in Shirley Center, Massachusetts, reading the work of American naturalists and poets and exploring the mountains of Massachusetts and Vermont. MacKaye claimed that the idea for the Appalachian Trail was born one day when he was sitting in a tree on top of Stratton Mountain in Vermont.

MacKaye enrolled at Harvard as a 17 year old in 1896. He was enamored with earth science courses and his professors provided him with theories and perspectives that likely shaped his career and life long philosophy. During his time at Harvard, John Muir and Gifford Pinchot visited the university. Muir was a writer, mountaineer, and founder of the Sierra Club. Pinchot was Chief of the US Division of Forestry, which later became the USDA Forest Service. Both men spoke passionately about the challenges facing American forests and MacKaye was moved by their views.

After graduating from Harvard, MacKaye taught in New York City for a time, but he returned to Harvard in 1903 as the first student to pursue a graduate degree in forestry. He eventually worked for several federal agencies but joined the Forest Service in 1911. There, he began carving out a niche as a creative thinker and an advocate for wilderness. By 1919, what were viewed by some as "radical" ideas led to him being edged out of the Forest Service. He turned his attention to creating a new discipline that later came to be called "regional planning." His initial 1921 "project in regional planning" was a proposal for a network of work camps and communities in the mountains, all linked by a trail that ran from the highest point in New England to the highest point in the South. He called it the Appalachian Trail (AT).

MacKaye was responsible for convening and organizing the first Appalachian Trail Conference in Washington, D.C. in 1925. That gathering of hikers, foresters, and public officials embraced the goal of building a long distance trail from Maine to Georgia. They established the Appalachian Trail Conference, and appointed MacKaye as its "field organizer."

MacKaye was viewed as more of an inspirational abstract thinker than a practical organizer, and it soon became apparent that someone else was going to have to take the lead for the trail to actually get built. Myron Avery, a Washington, DC lawyer was recruited by D.C. Perkins, who appointed himself as acting chairman of the Appalachian Trail Conference, to lead the efforts in and around Washington. Both men devoted countless hours to recruiting volunteers, establishing hiking clubs, and promoting the trail concept.

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As Perkins' health failed in the early 1930s, Avery took over the work of establishing a network of volunteers, developing support organizations, working with the government. Avery remained chairman until 1952. MacKaye and Avery were cordial at first, but, by the mid-1930s, as Avery took charge of the project, they quarreled over fundamental issues and visions of what the trail should be. Avery was more interested in hiking and in connecting the sections of the trail, while MacKaye was more interested in the trail's role in promoting wilderness and conservation. MacKaye disassociated himself from the organization in 1935 to found the Wilderness Society and was not closely involved with the trail again until after Avery's death in 1952.

MacKaye's original concept for the Appalachian Trail (AT) included a more westerly route along the western crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains for the southern section. Today's hikers can experience MacKaye's original vision for this part of the southern mountains on the Benton MacKaye Trail, the nation's newest long distance trail. The Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA) organized in 1979 to build and maintain this new trail. Driving the BMTA effort was a desire to see MacKaye's chosen route for his Appalachian mountain trail opened to the public for hiking. The Benton MacKaye Trail officially opened on July 16, 2005, fulfilling MacKaye's dream. Running from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Davenport Gap on the northern edge of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park the Benton MacKaye Trail passes through some of the most remote backcountry in Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina, including eight federally designated Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas.

Sources: Benton MacKaye, "An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning." Journal of the American Institute of Architects 9 (Oct. 1921): 325-330.

www.appalachiantrail.org/site/c.jkLXJ8MQKtH/b.786749/k.D5F9/History.htm

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