

Appalachian Trail History and Bear Mountain

New York and Bear Mountain can claim a central role in the early development and building of the Appalachian Trail, the world's most famous long-distance hiking trail. Without the efforts of New Yorkers, the A.T. project might never have gotten off of the ground.

Why did New York play such a critical role in the success of the A.T. and why ultimately was it so successful?

A confluence of factors accounts for the success but most important was the efforts of a handful of energetic and dedicated trail figures. Most prominent were Benton MacKaye, Major William A. Welch and Raymond H. Torrey.

Earlier proposals for long distance trails, except perhaps for the Long Trail in Vermont, had not taken off before Benton MacKaye announced his idea at a meeting in July, 1921 at the Hudson Guild Farm near Netcong, N.J. The two other people at the meeting, Clarence Stein and Charles Whitaker took an early role in publicizing MacKaye's idea.

The setting symbolized MacKaye's overarching idea. He wanted the A.T. to be a linear park where residents of bustling cities could get a respite and reconnect with nature. The farm was then owned by a cooperative in the Chelsea section of Manhattan for that very purpose.

After being encouraged at that meeting, MacKaye wrote an article which appeared in the Journal of the American Institute of Architects, edited by Whitaker, in October, 1921. The three men began circulating reprints of the article and MacKaye traveled around the eastern U.S. speaking to leaders of hiking groups, landscape architects, regional planners and others.

In the spring of 1922 MacKaye spoke to members of the recently formed Palisades Interstate Park Trail Conference. Inspired by MacKaye, the group took on the A.T. as their big project and began the first trail-building specifically for the A.T. This also established the principle of the A.T. being primarily the work of volunteers.

Raymond Torrey, at the behest of Major Welch, personally took on the task of scouting the 16-mile section from Bear Mountain to Ramapo that became the first section of the entire Appalachian Trail to be completed. Torrey, who wrote a hiking column or New York newspapers for more than thirty years, also wrote the first newspaper article about the A.T. Torrey, along with Frank Place, also authored the first New York Walk Book in 1923, which has become the definitive guide for hiking in the New York area.

MacKaye, who had many friends in New York, continued to spend a lot of time in the area, both at the Hudson Guild and a friend's farm as well as in Manhattan. He also attended a meeting in April, 1922, at which Welch became the first head of the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference. At a series of meetings in the spring of 1922, MacKaye got these leaders of the New York hiking community excited about the A.T. project.

Welch, who was the long-time General Manager and chief engineer of the Palisades Park Commission, had begun the development of Harriman and Bear Mountain parks over the previous ten years. The initial donation of land from the Harriman family had taken place in 1910. Welch encouraged the hiking community and had initiated the building of the park's first long-distance trail, the Ramapo-Dunderberg Trail, in 1920.

On Oct. 7, 1923 the first stretch of the A.T. across Bear Mountain and Harriman was dedicated at Bear Mountain. Later that month, at Bear Mountain Inn there was a three-day conference on the new A.T. project gathering hiking leaders from the northeast. This was the first large meeting promoting the new trail project.

In 1925 the Appalachian Trail Conference was formed in Washington, D.C. with Welch as first chairman and Torrey as treasurer. The two also served on the commission which designated Great Smoky and Shenandoah as the first two national parks in the east. Welch also designed the diamond marker, which was used to mark the A.T.

In short the success of the trail project in its early years can be attributed to the remarkable energy and vision of MacKaye, Welch and Torrey. New York had had an active hiking community for years. New Yorkers especially needed a place where they could connect with nature. With the start of Harriman and Bear Mountain parks and the Palisades and New York-New Jersey trail conferences, Welch and Torrey and others galvanized this community into an organized force for trail building. MacKaye supplied the goal with his powerful vision of a trail covering a large sweep of the eastern United States.

Sources:

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6. "Palisades: 100,000 Acres in 100 Years," by Robert O. Binnewies, (Fordham University Press, New York, 2001.)