

Keepers of the Trail: The Appalachian Trail Club

By Nancy Shofner

The world-famous Appalachian Trail (AT) begins at Springer Mountain in Georgia and winds its way for 2,150 miles to Mount Katahdin in Maine. The Georgia portion of the trail extends for 75.6 miles generally in a northeasterly direction, from Springer Mountain to Bly Gap on the North Carolina border. The Georgia portion lies entirely within the Chattahoochee National Forest.



Appalachian Trail photo by Olin Batchelor

The Georgia Appalachian Trail Club (GATC) is one of 33 clubs along the length of the AT which manage and maintain the trail. These clubs are all affiliated with the Appalachian Trail Conference¹ (ATC), based in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. The ATC, through representatives elected by Conference members, has overall responsibility for the general management of AT affairs. In Georgia the management of the AT is a cooperative effort between the GATC, the ATC and the U.S. Forest Service.

The AT began over 70 years ago as a unique plan outline by Benton MacKaye, forester, regional planner and conservationist, for a “long trail over the full length of the Appalachian skyline, from the highest peak in the north to the highest peak in the south.” MacKaye’s article in the Journal of the American Institute of Architects in 1921 presented “a new approach to the problem of living...a sort of retreat or refuge” from a too “mechanized” society. The work on the trail would be done primarily by volunteers.

Other trail enthusiasts used the interest generated by MacKaye to begin the establishment of a trail they too had dreamed of. Several existing trails built by early hiking clubs in New England and New York were used to form the first sections of the AT. Throughout the 1920s the trail expanded southward.

In 1925 the ATC was formed to stimulate interest in the trail and to coordinate the work of maintaining clubs. The final section of the AT was opened in Maine in 1937.

In 1930 the South had few trails and fewer clubs. Little was known of the mountain areas, so a proposed AT route was chosen largely from maps. The establishment of the AT in Georgia was begun in 1929 by assistant state forester, E.B. Stone, his assistant, Charles Elliott, and trail scout and forester, Roy Ozmer.

The trail was still in the planning stages in most states, and Stone was determined to see that it was extended into Georgia and would end at Mount Oglethorpe, rather than the Cohuttas, a terminus which was favored by many in the ATC.

Ozmer scouted the route of the AT beginning in Virginia and moving south, with the help of Stone and Elliott in Georgia. Stone rapidly began to mark and construct the Georgia portion and managed to convince the officials of the ATC that his route should be approved. This done, Stone and Elliott turned their energies toward the organization of the GATC. At the first organizational meeting in Dahlonega in November 1930, Stone was elected the first president, and Elliott was elected secretary.

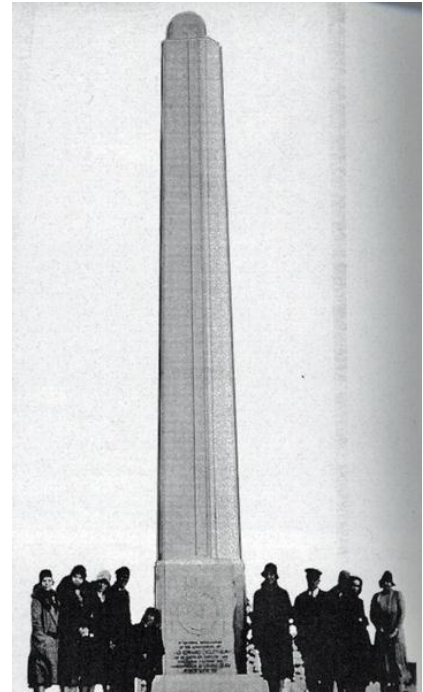
In the early 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), under the direction of GATC member Carter Whittaker, built a number of shelters on the Georgia portion of the trail and built and improved many miles of trails in the forest. Unfortunately for the club and the trail, the CCC also built many miles of roads (unpaved) through the Chattahoochee National Forest, including roads along the route of the AT in some areas. These roads caused major problems for years to come, necessitating rerouting many miles of trail. However, today approximately two-thirds of the AT remains in its original location, one third having been rerouted to within no more than one mile.

The Depression and World War II had a profound effect on the GATC and the AT, curtailing and then halting altogether hikes and work trips. The Forest Service, however, kept the AT essentially open during this time. After the war the club came back stronger than ever and concentrated its efforts on improving and rerouting the trail away from roads.

The portion of the AT between Mount Oglethorpe and Amicalola Falls was mostly on private land and was being subjected to more and more development. This stretch was a problem to maintain, and in the late 1950s, the decision was made to change the terminus of the trail. The end of the trail moved to the more remote Springer Mountain, with an eight-mile approach trail beginning at Amicalola Falls State Park.

During the 1960s the GATC's energies were concentrated on fighting two major highways which threatened to destroy much of the AT. The first, the Richard Russell Scenic Highway, was built. The second, the Blue Ridge Parkway extension into Georgia, was not killed until late in the 1970s. The Parkway would have displaced about 75 percent of the AT in Georgia.

In the late 1970s the GATC strengthened its orientation toward trail maintenance and decided to depend less on the Forest Service for heavy maintenance work. Regular monthly maintenance trips were instituted, and in the wake of the 1978 amendments to the National Trails Systems Act, members agreed to take on total maintenance responsibility for the trail.



Dedication of the monument atop Oglethorpe Mountain, the southern terminus of the AT from 1930-1958.

The GATC not only keeps the AT clear and marked but also tries to keep it from being loved to death. The popularity of the AT is wearing it out. Most maintenance trips are spent rehabilitating the AT—trying to repair and reassess the effects of so many feet. Blood Mountain, the highest point on the AT in Georgia, is the most heavily used section of the AT in the Southeast. The GATC spends many Saturdays on the mountain, installing water diversions and stone or log steps, narrowing the trail and trying to harden it, and sometimes rerouting portions of the trail to more suitable locations. This same sort of repair work is done on the popular southern terminus, Springer Mountain, as well as many other well-trodden trail sections and campsites. Techniques for dealing with worn out trail are constantly being developed by the ATC and its volunteers.



Members of the GATC help keep the AT clear of debris.

Construction and repair of shelters, privies and signs is also a major responsibility of the club members. In addition to the group maintenance trips, over 100 individual members have assumed responsibility for small portions of the AT and agreed to do the lighter work of cutting brush and painting blazes.

Besides trail work and regular weekend hikes, the club is involved in other activities, including education the public in proper use of the AT, organizing outreach programs such as hikes for inner-city children and visually impaired hikers, keeping abreast of conservation issues, and using new mapping techniques to update trail maps.

In approximately 10 years, the club has grown in membership from 250 to 700. It welcomes inquiries concerning membership.

Write to GATC, PO Box 654, Atlanta, GA 30301. Or visit www.georgia-atclub.org

This article was reproduced with permission from Nancy Shofner, who is a member of the GATC history committee. The article was printed in the little book, “The Blue Ridge” published by the Georgia Wildlife Federation in 1997. Additional photos have been added to replace those not available from the original article.

ⁱ At the time Nancy wrote this article, “Appalachian Trail Conference” was the name of the organization. It has since been changed to “Appalachian Trail Conservancy.”