

Tar Heel Pride

North Carolinians build the Mountains-to-Sea Trail

John Manuel



SHELTON WILDER LEANED INTO HIS PRY BAR AND DISLODGED THE granite boulder from the side of the mountain. He slid the boulder against the log cribbing and paused to take a breath. Below, on the Blue Ridge Parkway, a motorcycle passed, its throaty rumble fading into the distance. A wood thrush called out from the top of a white pine. Wilder zipped his jacket against the cold.

Three hundred miles to the east, John Jaskolka slapped a twelve-foot piece of treated lumber across a blackwater slough, step one in the construction of a boardwalk. He glanced at the cypress knees clustered like gnomes at the water's edge, wiped the sweat from his brow. A sea breeze whispered through the loblolly pines, holding the mosquitoes at bay.

Both of these men, volunteers at or near retirement, labored at a single task—the construction of North Carolina's Mountains-to-Sea Trail. Neither may live to see the trail completed, but the dream that their children or grandchildren may one day walk the path was more than enough to get them out on a Saturday morning.

It's a remarkable effort being repeated by countless individuals, young and old, men and women, across the Tar Heel state. When complete, the MST will run approximately 950 miles from its eastern terminus at Jockey's Ridge on the Outer Banks to the western terminus atop Clingmans Dome in the Smoky Mountains. The trail will briefly overlap with the Appalachian Trail, cross through three national parks, three national forests, more than half-a-dozen state parks, two wilderness areas, and numerous city and county parks. It will traverse virtually every ecosystem found in the eastern United States, including beach, dune, saltwater and freshwater marsh, pocosin, longleaf pine savannah, deciduous and spruce-fir forest. It will cross (by ferry) 33 miles of ocean inlet and sound, pass through dozens of towns, and share a right of way with as much as 450 miles of *asphaltus horribilis*, also known as the two-lane highway. This makes the MST an altogether different animal from the AT (2,178 miles from Georgia to Maine), the Long Trail (270 miles through the Green Mountains of Vermont), or any number of other "wilderness" trails for which the sport of hiking gained its popularity. Despite and some say because of its varied experience, the MST is already gaining converts.

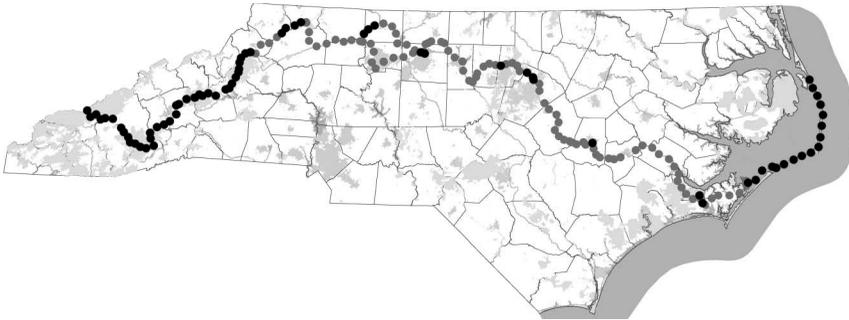
Hiking on the boardwalk that crosses the swampy coastal plain on the Neusiok Trail, part of the new Mountains-to-Sea Trail. REBECCA WALLING

Faltering Start

The idea for a cross-state trail in North Carolina dates to 1977, when state officials urged the creation of a hiking trail running from the mountains to the sea. (This announcement coincided with the North Carolina Department of Transportation's plans for a cross-state bike trail with which the MST now overlaps.) Officials called on the North Carolina Trails Committee, a seven-member group appointed by the state, to plan such a trail using rights of way that could be secured from the national, state, city, and county parks, as well as from private citizens.

Along with the trails committee, the North Carolina Trails Association comprising outdoor recreation enthusiasts launched into planning for the MST and sponsored a cross-state trek to promote awareness. Over the coming years, local volunteer task forces, mostly in the mountains, constructed sections of trail designated as part of the MST. The state signed a memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service agreeing to cooperate and share resources to complete the MST. The future looked bright.

However, private landowners proved reluctant to give easements on their properties. The state legislature failed to allocate any money for the project. Following the death of its leader, Louise Chatfield, the North Carolina Trails Association disbanded, and enthusiasm of state officials and staff began to wane. In 1995, state officials met with the mountain task forces and suggested



When complete, the MST will run approximately 950 miles from its eastern terminus at Jockey's Ridge on the Outer Banks to the western terminus atop Clingmans Dome in the Great Smoky Mountains. The darker dots indicate completed trail sections.

FRIENDS OF THE MOUNTAINS-TO-SEA TRAIL

dropping the Mountains-to-Sea Trail moniker in favor of local trail designations. MST supporters objected.

“I said we have maps, we have dreams, we have trail already completed,” recalled Allen de Hart. “We aren’t going to let you give this up.” De Hart, author of *North Carolina Hiking Trails* (Appalachian Mountain Club Books, fourth edition, 2005), is a lifelong champion of hiking in the Appalachians. As a boy, he carried water to members of the Civilian Conservation Corps building the AT in the hills above his family’s Virginia dairy farm. Seeing the lack of conviction by the committee and the state, de Hart decided to form an umbrella organization that was entirely focused on the defense and promotion of the MST. Thus was born the Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail.

Founded in 1997, the Friends set about restoring the original task forces and adding new ones to enlist volunteers in the construction of the MST. By 1999, 26 new task forces had been added across the state. The Friends worked with the North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation to detail the exact routing of the trail. The group sought and received grants from state and local governments and private foundations for trail construction. In 2000, the North Carolina General Assembly gave the effort a major boost by passing a bill including the MST into the state parks system. Division staff provided a concrete vision of where the trail should go and began working with local governments to secure rights of way.

In 2008, support for the MST grew by leaps and bounds. The state allocated \$8.5 million for land acquisition. The Friends hired an executive director to oversee promotion and fundraising, and to encourage more acquisition of land and easements. Volunteers contributed more than 18,000 hours of labor, building 15 new miles of trail.

A Volunteer Army

De Hart rose at first light and drove to an overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway to meet his fellow workers for the day. The air was cool, pale green leaves of poplar and ash shimmering in the breeze that rose from the valley. John Lanman, a retired tax consultant and leader of the Watauga Task Force, was already at the overlook, putting out a sign identifying this as an MST work site. His recruits included Jim and Sue Taylor, a retired professor and nurse respectively; Wilder, a high school teacher; and Alex Hardee, a senior at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Also working on the trail that day was a crew of Mexicans hired through a local landscaping service. Volunteers complete most trail work across the state, but digging on this steep, root-bound slope is beyond the abilities of volunteers, most of whom are retirees. The work crew was paid through a \$10,000 grant provided by the Watauga County Tourism Development Authority.

“The MST fits perfectly into our mission of developing and improving outdoor recreation opportunities in the county,” said Eric Woolridge, senior outdoor recreation planner for the Development Authority. “We see this as simultaneously helping to further a statewide initiative, to complete the final section of the mountain portion of the trail, and to bring visitors in to support our local economy.

“This initial grant will show us how much work can be done on this difficult section of trail,” Woolridge said. “If need be, we will provide additional grants to get the job done.”

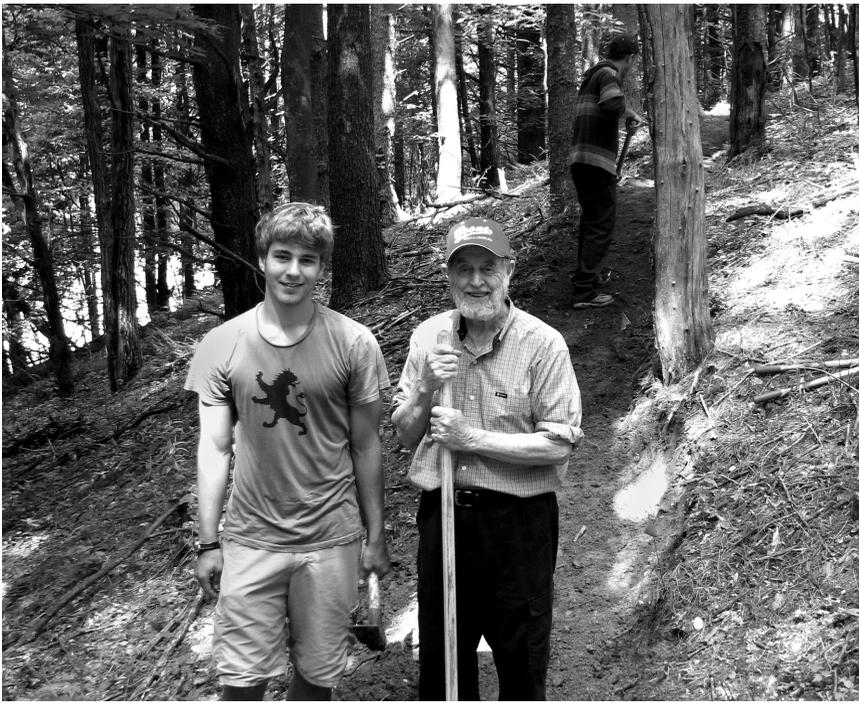
Lanman handed out rakes and pick axes, then turned to de Hart for an explanation of the construction techniques. “We’re going to be digging the trail on the slope above us,” de Hart explained. “It’s quite steep, and we don’t want any boulders rolling down to the parkway, so we’re going to have to cut logs and use them as cribbing on the downhill side of the trail.”

The crew grabbed tools and water bottles and headed into the forest. The trail route was marked by a line of orange surveyor flags planted every few yards among the nettles and ferns. The workers spread out along the slope and set to work. De Hart, Lanman, and the Taylors raked away the mat of leaves and pine needles. Hardee and the Mexicans (Hardee speaks Spanish and relayed instructions) dug into the loam with pick axes. Wilder cut a fallen locust log with a chainsaw and wedged the log into place on the downhill side of the trail.

Yard by yard, the trail took shape. A two-foot-wide portion of slope was leveled. Workers set treated wood posts in place on the steeper portions and connected them with railing. If they were lucky, the crew would complete a quarter-mile of trail that day.

De Hart, 82, stopped for frequent breaks. “I’m not as strong as I used to be, but I do love this work,” he said. “I say to my friends, if there’s not an Appalachian Trail in heaven, I’m going to start one.”

Hardee, 20, nodded in agreement. “I think it will be amazing to some day tell my kids that I worked on this trail,” he said. “I believe there is a connection between the time you spend outdoors and the ways we interact



Sixty years apart in age, Alex Hardee and Allen de Hart share the same mission of completing the MST. JOHN MANUEL

with the earth. This trail is going to build on that connection for generations to come.”

For all the work that has been accomplished in the mountains, recruitment of able-bodied volunteers remains a challenge in this region because of the relatively low population density and the preponderance of retirees. Not so the urbanized Piedmont. Jeff Brewer is president of the Friends and leader of the work crew cutting trail along Falls Lake Reservoir north of the Raleigh-Durham metropolitan area. Over the past year, more than one hundred people have shown up for many of the advertised work days.

“We’re attracting an amazing number and variety of people,” Brewer said. “We’ve got senior citizens, Boy Scouts, school groups, church groups Local corporations have used this as a team-building exercise for their employees. We’ve even got unemployed people who see this as a way to network for a job.”

Brewer said websites like meetup.com have been valuable recruiting tools. “It’s a way for people with similar interests to find each other and come together on an activity they enjoy.”

The relatively easy terrain lends itself well to volunteer labor. Falls Lake is bordered by gently rolling hills covered with second-growth forest. The trail

requires minimal grading and is easily routed around trees. The numerous stream crossings do require bridging, but this and the construction of trail kiosks have proven to be favored projects for aspiring Eagle Scouts.

“There’s really nothing related to trail construction that our volunteers aren’t able to do,” Brewer said.

The MST Experience

Though the MST is only about half complete, its route is fairly well established. Already, it’s attracting hikers, including a handful of thru-hikers. One of these is Scot “Taba” Ward.

Ward, 34, has thru-hiked the AT, the Long Trail in Vermont, and the Colorado Trail. He undertook his four-month journey on the MST in 2008 to document the resources along the way, including potable water, shelter, and possible camping locations. He assembled and published this information in his *Thru-Hiker’s Manual for the Mountains-to-Sea Trail of North Carolina* (available on request through Thru_hiker@msn.com). Detailed information on the MST is also published in de Hart’s *Hiking North Carolina’s Mountains-to-Sea Trail* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

Ward found the roughly 300-mile journey through the mountains similar to the AT and other Appalachian trails in its arduous ups and downs and long stretches bounded by forest. His favorite section (Section 12) runs through the Harper Creek and Lost Cove wilderness areas south of Grandfather Mountain.

“If you like fording creeks and camping out beside rushing water, this is the place,” Ward said.

From Grandfather north to Stone Mountain, the trail largely parallels the Blue Ridge Parkway, providing hikers with magnificent ridge-top views and a protected (albeit narrow) band of forest and meadow. The downside is that hikers are never far from the noise of passing cars and motorcycles. And legal campsites are located some distance off the parkway.

“It’s illegal to camp anywhere along the parkway and I got arrested and fined,” Ward said. “I’m advocating for a thru-hikers’ permit that would allow people to camp out of sight from the road.”

Descending into the Piedmont, the MST follows paved roads, interspersed with mostly short trails through various state, city and county parks. High-

lights for Ward include Pilot Mountain and Hanging Rock state parks, and the long forested section along Falls Lake. Ward also enjoyed passing through the numerous small towns.

“When you walk into a town with a backpack, you immediately attract attention,” Ward said. “People want to learn about you. I was invited into so many homes. I’ve sat on front porches in rocking chairs.”

At present, the MST’s path through North Carolina’s Coastal Plain runs almost entirely along paved roads. The absence of public land in this part of the state and the need to stick to high ground (roads are frequently the only way over swamp and marsh) leave little alternative. Ward cautions against hiking this section in summer as temperatures close to the pavement can approach 120 degrees.

In the sparsely populated Coastal Plain, Ward relied heavily on churches for water and a place to camp. (He lists 108 churches along the MST that offer potential respite for the weary hiker.) “Most of these churches have an outside spigot,” Ward said. “And if you ask the preacher, he’s more than likely to let you camp out back.”

South of New Bern, the MST joins the 20-mile-long Neusiok Trail through the Croatan National Forest. Hikers pass through a mix of deciduous, loblolly pine, and longleaf pine forest, opening onto bluffs overlooking the Neuse River where it merges into Pamlico Sound. The trail crosses many swampy areas, which volunteer work crews are busy improving with boardwalks.

East of the Croatan, the MST follows paved roads 45 miles over marsh and inlet to the ferry landing at Cedar Point. Crossing these inlets, hikers will get their first smell of salt breeze and glimpse the vastness of the ocean (actually Core Sound). They will then board a state ferry to be transported to the final leg of the trail on the Outer Banks.

The wind-swept Outer Banks offer yet another experience, beach hiking bounded by dunes on one side and the Atlantic Ocean on the other. Ward says hiking on the beach can be surprisingly tough, especially at high tide when one is forced to walk on the soft sand. Portions along the Cape Hatteras National Sea Shore are relatively wild, while others through areas like Nags Head are developed with wall-to-wall houses. The highlights for Ward were crossing the two-and-a-half-mile-long Bonner Bridge over Oregon Inlet and passing through the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge. Even hiking along busy Highway 12 had its charms.

“I found a broken boogie board along the beach and was carrying it with me on the road,” Ward said. “People blew their horns and waved as they drove by. ‘Hang tight, bro!’”

In the end, Ward said he prefers the MST to the many wilderness trails he’s hiked. “I’ve seen the woods,” he said. “On the MST, you see everything North Carolina has to offer. You visit towns. You get to meet the locals. I love this trail.”

A Challenge for the Future

Currently, few people in North Carolina know about the MST, and fewer still have hiked it. Much work remains to be done on securing easements through public and private land. On routes that have been secured, many miles of trail remain to be constructed. But Kate Dixon, the Friends executive director, expects the enthusiasm on all sides will grow as workers finish trail portions and realization of its potential gets out.

“I’ve seen a real change of heart on the part of county commissioners about including the trail in their plans,” Dixon said. “And it amazes me how many task force leaders we have who are taking charge of groups on their own.”

The challenge for the Friends will be what happens when they run out of public land on which to build the trail. “Within the next four to five years, our mission with respect to building the trail through the national forests, the national, state, city and county parks will end,” de Hart said. “So what’s left? Where are we going to have the property to run the trail? We will need to follow more bike routes. Where are we going to find the money to procure land and maintain the trail? We’ll need a strategy equal to that for the AT just to deal with maintenance. That’s a big job.”

De Hart cast a worried look toward the hazy landscape below the Blue Ridge. But as he has done all his life, he turned back to the task at hand. He lifted his rake to clear the matting of leaves. Another yard of trail appeared.

JOHN MANUEL is a writer and editor from North Carolina who specializes in energy, the environment, and international health. He is the author of two books, *The Natural Traveler Along North Carolina’s Coast* (John Blair, 2003) and *The Canoeist: A Memoir* (Jefferson Press, 2006).