

Appalachian Trail museum work underway

By Joseph Cress, Sentinel Reporter, March 29, 2010

Last updated: Monday, March 29, 2010 10:17 PM EDT

It has been a long hike, but supporters of an Appalachian Trail museum can finally see the end of the path.

Work will begin this Saturday on a project to transform the 200-year-old grist mill at Pine Grove Furnace State Park into what is being billed as the first museum dedicated to hiking in the United States.

Set to open June 5, the museum will tell the story of the founding and construction of the Appalachian Trail along with efforts to preserve, maintain and protect it since its inception in the 1920s. Organizers hope the museum will not only portray the trail experience but celebrate the culture of hiking.

"Years of planning, volunteer hard work and dreaming have gotten us to where we are today," said Larry Luxenberg, president of the Appalachian Trail Museum Society -- the non-profit organization formed in 2002 to establish the museum.

"The museum will be more than a building at the midway point on the trail," he added. "It will be a tribute to the thousands of men, women and families who have hiked and maintained the Appalachian Trail, making it arguably the most famous hiking trail in the world."

Getting a glimpse

Skilled volunteers with the North Chapter of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club start work this weekend on the renovations necessary to bring the mill up to code and make it handicapped accessible. The architectural firm of LSC Design of York has agreed to donate its services to the project.

The mill is part of the Pine Grove Iron Works historic district and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It is located within a two-mile walk of the mid-point of the trail -- at the spot where thru-hikers traditionally celebrate the halfway point by eating a half-gallon of ice cream.

Museum supporters are expecting it to be a large draw. The state park already attracts about 300,000 people annually to its two lakes, primarily from south-central Pennsylvania. The hope is the museum, with its proximity to the highway system, would bring visitors from an even broader area.

The museum would be great for the park, the local economy and the hiking community, Park Manager Jason Zimmerman said.

"By coming to the museum, people can get a glimpse of the Appalachian Trail experience," he said.



Park Manager Jason Zimmerman describes how the volunteers will be renovating the historic 200-year-old grist mill at Pine Grove Furnace park into a museum dedicated to the Appalachian Trail and to hikers.

The museum will offer insight to visitors who may not realize a section of the trail runs through the park, Zimmerman added. The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources has agreed to lease the grist mill to ATMS for 10 years.

One exhibit will focus on Earl Shaffer, who in 1948 became the first person to hike the entire trail in one season. This display will include the only surviving shelter Shaffer had built for hikers. This stood on Peters Mountain for decades before it was dismantled in 2008 to be preserved for future generations.

Other exhibits will feature such noteworthy hikers as Gene Espy, the second thru-hiker; Grandma Gatewood, who, in 1955 at age 67, became the first solo woman thru-hiker; and Ed Garvey of Falls Church, Va., who popularized long-distance backpacking in the 1970s.

There will be an inside and outside Hiker Center where current hikers will be welcome to interact with museum visitors becoming in effect a living exhibit. They will be encouraged to share their stories about the trail experience, Luxenberg said.

The museum will also include a Children's Discovery Area with displays of hiking and camping equipment along with programs to introduce youth to hiking and the trail experience.

"Our hope is to provide an opportunity for children to reconnect with the out-of-doors," Luxenberg said.

Life-changing

Ron Lutz of Lower Frankford Township has maintained two sections of trail for about 17 years and thinks the museum will be good for local tourism.

"There's a lot of history on this trail," Lutz said. "A lot of people have worked hard for this trail."

While once there was opposition to extending the trail through Cumberland County, people have come to appreciate it as a beautiful walking path and as an economic benefit, Lutz said.

"The thru-hikers have money to spend," he said. Lutz has volunteered as a museum guide.

The grand opening is planned for June 5, National Trails Day, and will include programs on the history of both the trail and the park. There will be food and entertainment along with special hikes and activities for children.

"We hope the museum inspires people to look more seriously at outdoor adventures," Luxenberg said. "For many people, getting involving in the Appalachian Trail can be a life-changing experience. We would like to see that be more widespread."

Aside from its Web site at atmuseum.org, ATMS is working to broaden its Web presence through Facebook and Twitter and has been collaborating with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy on the development of a social networking site for hikers.

In 2009, ATMS was awarded a grant from the Quimby Family Foundation to digitize and archive 30 years' worth of Polaroid snapshots of thru-hikers taken as they reached Harpers Ferry, [W.Va.](#) Nearly 13,000 images are being incorporated into a searchable database that will be available to hikers through the ATC Web site.