

A journey through woods and time

A new museum commemorates the history of the Appalachian Trail and the people who have made the legendary hike.

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BY MARCUS SCHNECK

The hiking community will gather in Pine Grove Furnace State Park in southern Cumberland County on Saturday for the opening of the Appalachian Trail Museum.

Hikes, trail work outings and other activities will surround the opening, which caps more than a decade of planning and effort by volunteers and marks National Trails Day.

The new museum, housed in the historic gristmill at the state park in Gardners, "will open as the only museum in the United States dedicated to hiking," said Larry Luxenberg, the founder and president of the Appalachian Trail Museum Society.

While the 12 years that have passed since the idea for a museum surfaced might have been longer than anticipated, "I believe that it's good that it took us so long," said Luxenberg, who hiked the whole length of the trail in 1980 and then was inspired to research and write the book "Walking the Appalachian Trail." "It helped us to crystallize our ideas, and it got us into a great location."

The museum sits among several similar structures built in the late 1700s and early 1800s, including the ironmaster's mansion, which operated as a hostel visited by many Appalachian Trail hikers until it was closed for renovations on May 1. The Central Pennsylvania Conservancy and the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, which manages the park, hope to reopen the building next year.

The entire complex, which was entered into the National Register of Historical Places in 1977, is about two miles east of the midway point of the Appalachian Trail in Michaux State Forest. In addition, a part of the trail that passes through the park is within an easy walk of the new museum and the nearby park store, with its "half-gallon club" ice cream tradition among hikers making their way from end to end.

Restoration of the 200-year-old gristmill has been done by volunteers, led by the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club's North Chapter "Yankee Clippers" crew. Seventy-five to 100 volunteers have worked on the restoration or put their names on the list to work in other aspects of the museum, such as serving as docents for visitors, volunteer coordinator Margi Schmidt said.

"The response we've had has been just amazing," she said. "Every time we think of a need, someone steps forward. ... There's this whole culture of the trail. This is a way to contribute and give back, like all the people who have gone before us."

Museum exhibits will tell the stories of the founding, construction, preservation, maintenance, protection and enjoyment of the trail, which stretches 2,178 miles from Maine to Georgia. The trail was proposed in 1921 and completed in 1937.

LSC Design of York oversaw the look of the museum's interior space. Bonnie Ralston of New York City designed the exhibits to portray not only the history of the trail but also the essence of the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual human experience of the Appalachian environment and the culture of hiking.

Hardcore hikers aside, "the average person who hikes the trail doesn't know how the trail is thought of and the actual work that goes into creating and maintaining the trail," Schmidt said.

Several trail pioneers will be featured in the exhibits, including Earl Shaffer of York County, who was the first to hike the entire trail; Gene Espy, the second person to hike the from end to end; Emma Rowena "Grandma" Gatewood, who in 1955 at the age of 67 became the first woman to hike the entire trail solo; Benton MacKaye, who proposed the trail; Myron Avery, who spearheaded the trail's construction; and Ed Garvey of Falls Church, Va., who helped popularize long-distance backpacking in the 1970s.

A trail shelter built by Shaffer in 1959 on Peters Mountain north of Harrisburg was dismantled two years ago and stored until earlier this year, when it was reassembled as an exhibit at the museum.

The museum's hiker center will display thousands of photos of the trail's hikers and house a registration and message center for them.