

Walking a few miles in the footsteps of legend on Central Pennsylvania's part of the Appalachian Trail

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Nearly every one of the 5 million footsteps along the 2,178-mile Appalachian Trail is a footfall on hiking history, shaped by the more than 10,000 hikers who have claimed to traverse the entire trail.

However, some parts of the trail hold even more of that rich history. One such spot is the site of the Peters Mountain Shelter – one of a half-dozen primitive log shelters built along the AT by Earl Shaffer, the first man to hike the entire trail – atop Peters Mountain, north of Dauphin.

Shaffer built the tiny, three-sided, floorless, lean-to shelter in 1959. It carried his name until 1983, when he asked his name be removed following improvements that included a floor he felt did not fit with the rugged backcountry experience. From that point, it was known as the Peters Mountain Shelter, as has a newer shelter built in 1994.

On Aug. 5, 2008, nearly 60 years to the day when Shaffer completed his first thru-hike, a group of volunteers ceremoniously dismantled Shaffer's shelter and carried it away for storage until it could be reassembled in an Appalachian Trail Museum, which it was recently at the Pine Grove Furnace State Park site.

Shaffer hiked the entire trail twice more after his initial thru-hike, in 1965 and 1998 (at age 79). Born in 1918 in York County, Shaffer grew up on a small farm in Shiloh, a village just northwest of York. He completed the first thru-hike of the AT in 1948, a time when the hiking world thought the feat to be impossible, and subsequently worked on maintenance and improvements on several sections of the trail in Central Pennsylvania off and on for a half-century. He died in May 2002.

To explore the site of the shelter that Shaffer built, start from a parking lot off the east side of Rt. 225 atop Peters Mountain, about 2.25 miles north of Dauphin (more like 4.5 road miles by Rt. 225 north from Dauphin), and proceed east along the AT about three miles.

It's a bit of an uphill hike, and spots are rather rocky, but for Pennsylvania – known among AT hikers as an exceptionally rocky and hilly part of the Maine-to-Georgia trail – it's not an overly challenging hike. It's also an area inhabited by rattlesnakes and copperheads.

Several overlooks await along that route, including a power line cut about .7 of a mile east of the parking lot; the Zeager Overlook at 1.6 miles (site of a shelter that was removed in 1994); Fumitory Rocks at 1.9 miles (named for the climbing vine also known as mountain fringe), and Table Rock at 2.1 miles.

The current Peters Mountain AT Shelter – one of the modern, two-story shelters known as "Hiker Hiltons" – stands 3.1 miles from Rt. 225, and the site of the shelter that Shaffer built is nearby.

Shaffer included a poem about the solitude he found along this part of the trail in the book "Walking With Spring" that he wrote about his 1948 hike.