

**The Old Appalachian Trail in the New River Valley
1931 - 1955**

**A Presentation for the 2017 New River Symposium
May 16, 2017**

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I. Introduction

This presentation is an overview and summary of the results of my studies and field investigation of the former routes of the Appalachian Trail in southern Virginia. For the purposes of this presentation to the 2017 New River Symposium, my primary focus will be on Old AT routes in the New River Valley of southwestern Virginia during the period 1931 through 1955.

From its inception in the early 1930's until the mid-1950's, the Appalachian Trail route south of the Roanoke/Salem area in Virginia followed a route along the Virginia Blue Ridge to Fisher Peak, on the North Carolina line, then turned north through Galax and then followed alongside the New River to Byllesby where it turned west along the Iron Mountains ridge toward Damascus, Virginia. That AT route was relocated in 1955 to a more northerly route through the Jefferson National Forest.

My interest in the “Old AT” in Virginia extends back to 1962 when, as a 15-year-old on an extended AT hike through the Southern Appalachian region, I learned of the existence of that former AT route in Southern Virginia. From that initial introduction to the subject of a “lost Appalachian Trail,” I’ve continued to “poke and prod” at Old AT research and field studies in Virginia (as well as through the Southern Appalachians) as time and resources were available over the decades. In 2011, I finally put together the results of my Old AT studies in an article (unpublished, but circulated on-line) that presented information about the Old AT in southern and central Virginia by reference to the 1948 AT hike of Earl Shaffer and, to a lesser extent, the 1951 AT hike of Eugene Espy. In 2016 I published, on-line, a research article that included my 2011 article as well as extensive research materials relating to Old AT routes in Virginia.

For an on-line site to host the research article, I chose the “Hiking” topic tab of the “crazyguyonabike” website. That article can therefore currently be found at www.crazyguyonabike.com in the “Hiking” Topic, under the “Articles” tab of that Topic, under the title “Earl Shaffer's 1948 Appalachian Trail Hike: Report And Research Resources” with the subtitle “A report on the actual route of Earl Shaffer's 1948 AT Hike with supplemental research resource materials.”

The direct on-line link to the research article is

<http://hiking.topicwise.com/doc/Shaffer48ATHikeReport>

This presentation is an introduction to and overview/summary of the materials available in that research article. As such, it will not include extensive specific citations to sources. Anyone interested in more information on the subject of the “Old AT” is encouraged to make reference to that research article as well as other materials available on the history of the Appalachian Trail.

The 1955 relocation abandoned the former AT route from a point on Catawba Mt., west of Salem, to the Va. 16 (formerly US 58) crossing of Iron Mt., between Sugar Grove and Troutdale, a distance of more than 200 miles. Coupled with the abandonment of the 117 miles of AT route between Rockfish Gap and Cloverdale in another relocation finalized in 1951, more than 300 miles of the former AT route in Central and Southern Virginia was abandoned by relocations finalized in the 1950's. An important distinction between the two relocations is that while the old AT route through southern Virginia remained in place, maintained and documented by contemporary trail guides during the process of development of the new AT route, the 1930's era Rockfish Gap - Cloverdale AT route was officially abandoned with publication of the 1941 Guide, which did not include trail data for that section of the AT. It was not until July 1951, after a non-continuous period of about ten years, that the AT again became a continuous trail from Maine to Georgia with the completion of the last link in the “new” AT in July 1951¹ and an official “silver nail” ceremony held atop The Priest on November 1, 1951, to mark what was then hailed as the “second completion of the entire Appalachian Trail.”

As a result of that very different treatment of the two AT sections pending relocation, research as to the Old AT through Southern Virginia has the use of trail data from the 1941 and 1950 Guides while research as to the Rockfish Gap - Cloverdale section has available only the 1930's era Guides. It is, in fact, the availability of the 1950 Guide detailing the route of the AT through southern Virginia by reference to modern-era road names and numbers and features identification that substantially facilitates research into that AT route.

This presentation therefore describes the AT route through southern Virginia from Catawba

¹ Eugene Espy was the first AT “thru-hiker” to hike the newly continuous AT as he reached and traveled the completed final link (in the vicinity of The Priest) on July 16, 1951, just a couple of weeks after its completion, on his northbound AT hike.

Mt. (northwest of Salem, Virginia) to the current crossing of Va. 16 on Iron Mt. (near Sugar Grove, Virginia) that was abandoned in that 1955 AT relocation, with a particular focus on that former AT route in the New River watershed.

There are three maps included with this presentation that display selected former routes of the Appalachian Trail in southern Virginia. The “baseline” historic AT route for this presentation is that described in the 4th Edition of the “Guide To Paths in the Blue Ridge,” the AT Guide to the region published by the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC). Earlier editions of that Guide were published by the PATC in 1931 (1st Edition), 1934 (2nd Edition), 1938 (Supplement to the 2nd Edition), and 1941 (3rd Edition). The fact that the PATC published the Guides, rather than the Appalachian Trail Conference (now Conservancy) (ATC) suggests that the AT in southern Virginia was very much a project of that organization. It should also be noted that Trail Data for the AT through southern Virginia in all those guides was prepared only in a North - South direction, which meant that northbound AT hikers had to read the data in reverse.

Maps 2 and 3 display the 1950 Guide AT route in the New River watershed as well as one older route – the “Norvale Craggs” route (Map 3) between Fisher Peak and Galax from the ‘34 and ‘38 AT Guides. Map 1 is included to display both the original (from the 1931 Guide) and the 1950 AT routes through the Roanoke River watershed.

Appendix 1 to this Presentation is a Legend for the added features and symbols appearing on those maps.

Appendix 2 to this Presentation includes copies of the three maps discussed above.

The route of the original (1931 Guide) AT through the Roanoke Valley displayed on Map 1 is one that has been identified through AT Guide, map and field research. Although at a scale of 1:200,000 Map 1 is at too small a scale to show details of the route, the study route used to develop that route was one using 1:24,000 USGS topographical maps. The route as displayed is therefore the product of detailed route study. However, because the description of the AT route in the 1931 Guide was brief and since many of the landscape features described have been substantially modified, renamed, or have disappeared in the intervening decades, it was found to be sometimes difficult to exactly identify the route in the modern landscape. Further complicating field research of the Old AT route in that area is that most of the off-road ‘31 AT route was, and remains, on private property. In addition, the mileage stated in the 1931 Guide were found to be difficult to match against known

modern features. The route displayed on Map 1 should therefore be generally considered only in the approximate location of the '31 AT. It is displayed only for general historical interest and as a study guide for anyone interested in doing further research to more exactly locate that historic AT route.

The other AT routes displayed on the maps were similarly developed on large-scale USGS topographical maps and transferred to the medium-scale maps included with this Presentation.

The baseline 1950 AT route was documented as of 1949, and was presented in that Guide in considerable detail. Fortunately, by the time of preparation of the 1950 Guide the modern-era identification system of names and numbers had been adopted in Virginia. The detail of that Guide as well as the use therein of modern references for identities of roads and other features makes the 1950 Guide an outstanding, and readily readable, guide to the AT route of that era in a modern landscape.

While the 1950 AT route was often in the same general, or the same, location as earlier AT routes, the route through southern Virginia did change, and sometimes substantially change, its location over the nearly quarter-century the AT was in that area. Some of those changes will be discussed later in this Presentation as to certain areas of particular interest. But locating the Old AT from those earlier guides is often more of a challenge than with the 1950 Guide. The 1941 Guide shared some of the same modern references as the 1950 Guide, but the earlier Guides (1931, '34, '38) become increasingly obscure with increased age as to identifiable references. Part of that problem is a result, however, of lack of access to the extensive private land sites for older AT routes to conduct detailed field studies to locate old roads and trails referenced in the older AT Guides.

Other sources of information about the Old AT in southern Virginia may be found in the reports of hikers who traveled that trail. The two books I am familiar with that include descriptions of that section of the AT before it was abandoned are "Walking With Spring" by Earl V. Shaffer, which describes his 1948 AT hike through the region, and "The Trail Of My Life" by Eugene Espy, which describes his 1951 AT hike through the area. There well may be other books or articles that describe that section of the AT of which I am not aware.

Other potential sources of information are any reports submitted to the Appalachian Trail Conference by Shaffer, Espy or other AT hikers of the era. Also now available is the digitized field notebook journal of Shaffer (his "Little Black Notebook"), a copy of which is available for download in my research article, There may also still be in existence newspaper articles, personal letters, or

photographs in private hands that document the Old AT in southern Virginia. A search for such items in that region would be a worthwhile subject for further research.

Before beginning our Old AT travelog , some general discussion of the nature of that Old AT through Virginia might be useful.

While most AT sections have assigned maintenance clubs, the AT south of Sweet Annie Hollow was, in 1950, noted in ATC literature as largely “unassigned” for maintenance purposes.² “Unassigned” did not, however, mean “unmaintained,” To the contrary, the 1950 Guide makes reference to a blaze remarking program in 1947 as well as the “cutting” of the off-road trail section in the Fisher Peak area, all apparently conducted by PATC or ATC members in ad hoc organizational efforts. Since much of the AT through that area was on maintained local roads, “maintenance” would require nothing more than driving down the roads checking and renewing, as needed, AT white paint blazes or diamond-shaped AT metal markers on trees, fence posts and utility poles.³ Any off-road trail sections would be either maintained by the Blue Ridge Parkway (in Smart View and Rocky Knob Recreation Areas) or easily accessible from nearby roads. So the 1949 AT, as documented by the 1950 Guide, through southern Virginia would likely have been well-marked and maintained after suffering neglect during the WW II years. It is likely, however, that little or no maintenance was performed after 1949 outside the Dan River area.

The general relationship between the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Appalachian Trail in Virginia is worthy of a brief note.

First off, the Old Appalachian Trail did not follow the Blue Ridge Parkway except for short sections made necessary by topography or connecting to local road/trail networks. While the Old AT route through southern Virginia frequently paralleled the Parkway and often crossed it, the motor highway and the hiking route were not co-located except where for short sections where Parkway construction had interrupted the continuity of local roads and made travel on the Parkway necessary to link the disjointed sections of that local road.

² With the exception of the personal maintenance activities of John R. Barnard of the Dan River section, which we shall discuss later,

³ Some of those AT markers can still be found attached to old trees along the Old AT route.

The Appalachian Trail pre-dated the Blue Ridge Parkway, and that the original route of the AT along the crest of the Blue Ridge in Virginia was, in general, the same route chosen for the Blue Ridge Parkway. But while it is a common belief that construction of the Parkway “obliterated” the original AT route, that is not actually the case. In fact, Parkway construction techniques and policies tended to leave the AT route relatively undisturbed.

While the early AT was primarily a ridgetop trail in mountainous areas, Parkway construction techniques tended to make the Parkway a “sideridge” road, swinging around mountain ridges and crossing through gaps. As a result, the existing AT route was directly impacted by Parkway construction only in such Parkway “crossing gaps” in the ridge or in relatively infrequent instances in which the Parkway was located along the ridgecrest. So while the ATC declared the original AT route between Rockfish Gap and Cloverdale “obliterated” by Parkway construction, that was primarily for the purpose of causing the federal government to build a new AT route to mitigate for the original AT’s purported destruction by Parkway construction. That was the case north of Roanoke, Virginia, where the “new” AT route finally completed in 1951 was constructed by the federal government to replace the existing AT route purportedly “obliterated” by Parkway construction.

In fact, substantial sections of historically pristine sections of 1930's era AT route still exist along the Parkway corridor between Rockfish Gap and Cloverdale, and can still be followed using the 1931, '34 and '38 Guides. In any area in which there has been no development or other ground disturbance since AT route abandonment in the 1930's or 40's (such as in or near the Parkway corridor), any old trail or roadbed formerly used by the AT likely still exists, undisturbed. In addition, the expansion of both National Forest and NPS land ownership in that area over the intervening decades since the 1930's has resulted in substantial portions of what was private land AT routes in the 1930's now being on public land.

Parkway construction policies as to local roads also tended to have the effect of avoiding impacts to the existing AT route in agricultural areas, including the Blue Ridge south of Roanoke. In such areas, the old AT tended to follow either public secondary roads or privately maintained, but open to public travel, “community roads.” In fact, a common routing for the early AT along the Virginia Blue Ridge was the old “ridge road,” a pre-Parkway road generally located along the crest of the Blue Ridge. Since the Parkway prohibits commercial traffic, its construction policies were

intended to preserve local roads, such as the old ridge road, in the Parkway corridor in order to maintain non-Parkway access to private lands adjoining the Parkway. As a result of that policy, such local roads were commonly avoided or relocated during Parkway construction and Parkway travelers, particularly along the Virginia Blue Ridge, are commonly not aware that such local roads frequently discretely parallel the Parkway. Since the AT route commonly followed such roads, Parkway construction policies to preserve such local roads had the effect of generally avoided impact to the AT route as it followed such roads.

Because of such policies, Parkway construction directly impacted less than a mile of the Old AT route south of Roanoke. In fact, because of that minimal impact the federal government refused to construct a “new” AT south of Roanoke as it had agreed to do north of Roanoke. In my research article, I develop a case to suggest that federal decision to not construct a new AT south of Roanoke played an important role in the 1940's ATC decision to relocate that part of the AT into the Jefferson National Forest where federal assistance was available for AT construction.

Another consequence of the presence of the Parkway on the Old AT route through southern Virginia was the relative lack of modernization of many of the roads formerly followed by the AT. Whether from land use restrictions, a low volume of vehicle use, or other governmental policy, the local roads near the Parkway have not commonly been subject to the degree of widening and paving seen on other local roads in the area. As a consequence, travel on the Old AT roads frequently has a much more “1950-ish” feel than that experienced on other local roads. Since the 1950 AT Guide remains generally strikingly accurate in following the Old AT route through the modern landscape⁴, the less developed state of many of those roads adds much to the 1950 “feel” of following the 1950 AT in the modern era on foot, by bicycle, or by motor vehicle.

II. The Old AT in Southern Virginia

We will begin our travel through the New River Basin on the Old AT through southern Virginia just north of the New River watershed, at Sweet Annie Hollow,⁵ at Milepost 138.6 on the

⁴ The primary impact on secondary roads over the decades has been the closure and/or relocation of a number of secondary road intersections with the Parkway.

⁵ While the AT Guides referred to the location as “Sweet Anne Hollow,” its locally accepted name is apparently “Sweet Annie Hollow”.

Blue Ridge Parkway. That is an appropriate start point because it was, in 1950, the southern limit of the AT maintenance activities of the Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club (RATC). North of that point is displayed, on Map 1, the route of both the 1931 AT along the Blue Ridge, east of Roanoke, and the 1950 AT route connecting to the current ANST on Catawba Mt., east of Salem, Virginia.

Sweet Annie Hollow is also an appropriate place to begin a journey along the Old AT because of the interesting history of its name. William G. Lord, long-time Parkway Ranger, related in his Blue Ridge Parkway Guide (1969) that Annie, “a widow by fate and a friendly sort by nature” lived in that hollow during the American Revolution. Lord relates, at page 6_B that soldiers were “frequent visitors” and that Annie reportedly “entertained them in a most irreligious manner.” Since the neighbors took “a dim view” of her activities, Lord writes that Annie left the area but that “. . . the troopers landmarked her homesite as “Sweet Annie’s Hollow.”

1. AT Section 4: Sweet Annie Hollow to VA 8 (Tuggle Gap)

Beginning, therefore, our travel south on the Old AT from Sweet Annie Hollow (AT MP 4-1.72⁶), the 1950 AT followed roads parallel to the Parkway to an intersection with the Blue Ridge Parkway just south of the Pine Spur Overlook (Parkway MP 144.8: AT MP 4-8.58), an AT distance of 6.86 miles. Earlier AT routes had continued along the ridge in what is now the Parkway corridor from Sweet Annie Hollow, and the old trailway used by the early AT is still apparent (and apparently in use) in that area. The AT was relocated to an all road route by 1950, perhaps because of a lack of maintenance resources for off-road AT sections.

It is in the Old AT approach to Pine Spur that the 1950 AT Route could be said to enter the New River watershed, with the headwaters of Little River draining the northerly and westerly slopes of the Blue Ridge as the Old AT route left the Roanoke River watershed. .

What is now the Pine Spur Overlook on the Parkway was a noted viewpoint in the 1934 AT Guide. By 1950, the relocated followed roads parallel to the Parkway from Sweet Annie Hollow to the Parkway corridor just south of Pine Spur Overlook. At that point the AT followed a foot trail than ran parallel to and within the Parkway corridor for about 1.5 miles (AT MP 4-10.0). That location of the AT within the Parkway corridor (which was also seen south of Sweet Annie Hollow

⁶ AT Mile Point from Chapter VII, Southern Virginia, in the 1950 Guide, referencing Section Number and MP, southbound.

in pre-1950 Guides) suggested the potential future of the AT as a trail within an ever-widening Parkway and National Trails Act corridor in that area if the AT had not been relocated as it was.

From MP 10.0, the AT followed secondary roads to the crossroads at Graysville (AT MP 10.21) where the 1950 AT guide noted the presence of an abandoned store (the building is still there) and that lodging was available at this point. The 1950 AT then continued beyond Graysville, again on secondary roads, to AT MP 4-11.72 where it followed a now-abandoned secondary road (then VSR 651) to an intersection with current VSR 651 (Stuart Rd.) at MP 4- 12.01. It then followed secondary roads to cross the Parkway at AT MP 4-12.79, with the presence of the former Kelley School noted in the 1950 AT Guide as then being a store (the building is still there). Beyond that crossing of the Parkway, the AT continued to follow secondary roads toward Thompson Store (AT MP 4-16.05), a store noted in the 1931 AT Guide as being the “. . . first store on the Trail since the 55.6 miles since leaving Vinton.” That store building still exists, apparently used for private storage.

Just north of Thompson’s Store, at AT MP 4-15.8, the 1950 AT Guide notes a .55 mile side route to “Pumpkin Stem Knob,” with the view from that point noted as “Extraordinary view; should not be missed.” That reference is one to that same named summit on the original, 1931 AT, with the AT later moved to road locations most likely as a result of lack of maintenance resources.

South from Thompson’s Store, the 1950 AT continued on secondary roads to AT MP 4-19.23 where it entered the Smart View Recreation Area of the Blue Ridge Parkway. Through Smart View (from AT MP 4-19.23 to 4-21.13), the 1950 AT followed a trail through that recreation area developed by the NPS in the early 1940's. That trail still exists as part of the Smart View trail system, extending from the Smart View Overlook to VSR 793 (Runnet Bog Rd), with the linkage trail from the existing Smart View loop trail to VSR 793 now abandoned and overgrown.

VSR 793 was followed into Cannaday Gap. South of Cannaday Gap on the 1950 AT, the Trail followed secondary roads alongside or in the vicinity of the Blue Ridge Parkway, passing a store at AT MP 4-22.32 (building still there and used as an artisan studio), then crossing the Parkway and reaching County Line Church at MP 4-23.69. Moving east of and more remote from the Parkway, the AT continued on secondary roads to cross the “Low Gap” near a double summit called “The Haycocks” at MP 4-27.15 and reached the community of Haycock at MP 4-27.75. The 1950 AT Guide includes data for a side trail from Haycock to the summit of Rakes Knob. That side trail included part of the original 1931 AT route.

South of Haycock on the 1950 AT, the Trail followed secondary roads paralleling the Parkway to Tuggle Gap (Va. 8) at MP 4-32.05 and the beginning of Section 5 of the 1950 AT Guide. The 1950 Guide noted the presence of a “store and filling station” in Tuggle Gap where it noted “. . . accommodations are available.”

2. AT Section 5: VA 8 (Tuggle Gap) to U.S. 58

South of Tuggle Gap on the 1950 AT, the Trail entered the Rocky Knob area. The original 1931 AT followed an apparently indistinct route more-or-less along the crest of the ridge to the summit of Rocky Knob and beyond. The AT was shifted to a route following roads along the east side of the ridge in the ‘34 and ‘38 Guides because of the difficulty in marking, and following, the crestline trail. By the publication of the 1941 Guide, however, the NPS had developed a trail for the AT through the Rocky Knob Recreation Area (and constructed a shelter on the summit of Rocky Knob) that was followed in the ‘41 and ‘50 Guides.

Beginning with the 1934 Guide, all AT routes through the Rocky Knob area utilized VSR 716 (Tuggle Gap Rd) south of Tuggle Gap (with that road having since been relocated in the Tuggle Gap area to intersect Va. 8 west of the Parkway). The ‘34 and ‘38 routes continued on VSR 716 around the Rocky Knob area and reached the ridge crest by a now-abandoned upper portion of VSR 723 (Patrick Rd SW). That abandoned road and former AT route is now part of the NPS Black Ridge Trail. The ‘41 and ‘50 routes left VSR 716 at MP 5-1.67 to follow a farm road uphill and reach the crest of a ridge in what is now the Rocky Knob Campground. It then continued to follow a farm road up the ridge (now part of the NPS Rock Castle Gorge Loop Trail) to a Parkway Overlook at MP 5-3.02 where it joined an NPS trail to the summit of Rocky Knob, where there was a three-sided NPS lean-to, with no bunks or water. (AT MP 5-3.33). That shelter is still a feature of the summit of Rocky Knob, and the old AT route east of the Parkway is now incorporated into the Rocky Knob trail system.

Rocky Knob, at 3572' elevation, is one of the three prominent Blue Ridge peaks associated with the Old AT route through southern Virginia. The other two are Buffalo Mountain (3971') and Fisher Peak (3565'), both of which will be discussed later. The outstanding characteristic of Rocky Knob, as well as other peaks of the Blue Ridge, is their towering height and resultant sight distances over the Piedmont area to the east and south as well as impressive sight distances to other prominent Blue Ridge peaks up and down the Blue Ridge. It was the views from those peaks, along with the

Dan River Gorge and Pinnacles of Dan (also to be discussed later) , that made the AT through southern Virginia a remarkable, if not uniquely outstanding, feature of the early Appalachian Trail.

Beyond Rocky Knob, the 1950 AT continued to follow an NPS trail (now part of the NPS Rock Castle Gorge Loop Trail) through the recreation area and beyond through fields, leaving the Rocky Knob Recreation Area, to reach VSR 720 (Rock Castle Gorge Rd.) at AT MP 5-5.83.

In pre-Parkway times, VSR 720 was part of a continuous road extending across the ridge and down to what is now VSR 716. In fact, that portion west of the Parkway appears to have been the '34 and '38 AT route. But Parkway constriction and abandonment of the portion of the road west of the Parkway cut off and substantially isolated a winding section of VSR 720 that laid east of the Parkway. As a result of that isolation and limited use, VSR 720 continues to be the same narrow, unpaved road it was when it was the route for the AT from the 1931 Guide to the 1950 Guide, and AT route abandonment. But while VSR 720 has been largely forgotten as part of the original AT route, it is now well-known regionally as the access road to the “FloydFest” Festival site.

Headed south on the 1950 AT from Rocky Knob Recreation Area on VSR 720, the AT wound it way along that secondary road, passing what is now the FloydFest entrance road at approximately MP 5-6.07 and noting a store (no longer in existence) to the left at MP 5-6.17. It then crossed and recrossed the Parkway and then followed a secondary road (since rebuilt to eliminate a “hairpin” curve) to pass, at MP 5-9.22 what was noted as a “. . . rock church on a hill.” That church is the Slate Mountain Presbyterian Church, one of 6 rock churches along the Blue Ridge constructed at the direction and by the inspiration of Presbyterian Minister Robert Childress during the first half of the 20th Century.

The 1950 AT then reached, at MP 5-9.27, what was noted as a “gasoline filling station and crossroad at the headwaters of Rock Castle River.” That point, with filling station no longer present, is now a parking area for access to the Rock Castle Gorge area of the Rocky Knob Recreation Area.

The 1950 AT Guide side trail to Buffalo Mt. left the AT at this point, and its route is displayed on Map 2.. Data for that 6.5 mile trail was presented in the AT Guide in a separate “Side Trails” section.

While Buffalo Mt. (often referred to as “The Buffalo:” because of the buffalo-like shape that is visible from great distances along the Blue Ridge) was privately owned, but publicly accessible, during the AT period, it came into public ownership in 1992 and is now protected as within the

Buffalo Mountain Natural Area Preserve and recognized as one of the most significant natural areas in Virginia. In addition to the rare plant and animal occurrences as well as significant natural communities, the exposed high-elevation (3,971') summit offers extraordinarily wide-ranging views in all directions. The description of Buffalo Mt. in the 1950 AT Guide(at page 14-361) reads:

This isolated peak (3,971 ft.) is one of the most conspicuous features of this section of the Appalachian Trail. Rising abruptly from the Blue Ridge plateau, it affords a widespread view. It is a landmark for many miles, the focal point around which the main Trail route leads along the curving rim of the Blue Ridge.

Continuing on the Old AT south from the head of Rock Castle River, and entering the Dan River watershed,⁷ the 1950 AT followed secondary roads bearing east, following and paralleling the crest of the Blue Ridge with the Parkway route distant to the west, to reach US 58 and the end of AT Section 5 at 5-17.02. The 1950 Guide noted that accommodations were available at this point.

3. AT Sections 6 and 7: U.S. 58 to Groundhog Mt.

It was at U.S. 58, and extending for 11.67 miles south through the Dan River Gorge section of the AT, that the Old AT entered the assigned maintenance area of John R. Barnard, one of the few individuals listed in 1950 ATC literature as a “Trail Maintaining Organization.” Barnard’s section of the 1950 AT followed what was then a primitive secondary road to the eastern rim of the Dan River Gorge (AT MP 6-8.06), then plunged 0.6 miles down the steep side of that 1,000' deep gorge on a well-blazed, but primitive, trail, forded the Dan River (MP 6-8.6), then climbed precipitously up the 1,000' + face of the Pinnacles of Dan to reach its summit at MP 9.31 (2655') before finally reaching the western rim and resuming travel on secondary roads at MP 6-9.91. Barnard, whose home was 0.6 miles from the AT (at MP 10.98), offered lodging to AT hikers.

The Pinnacles of Dan section of the Old AT was in its time on the AT was known as perhaps one of the most scenic, and the most difficult, section of the AT along the Blue Ridge — or, for that matter, along the entire AT. The Pinnacles of Dan emerge in a spectacular fashion from the Dan

⁷ Although the Old AT strayed far out of the New River and into the Dan River Watershed in AT Section 6, the geological history of the Dan River indicates that it “captured” the the upper basin of Reed Island Creek from the New River (see “Physiographic Divisions and Differential Uplift in the Piedmont and Blue Ridge,” Geological Survey Professional Paper 1265 (1982) by John T. Hack and published by the U. S. Department of the Interior). One might therefore say that the Old AT continued in the “former” New River Watershed in its travel through the Dan River area.

River Gorge, and the AT was apparently a very difficult journey through that area. As noted in the 1950 AT Guide (at page 14-339), “The 1.8 m. from the east rim to the west rim of the Canyon is perhaps, for the distance, the most difficult section of The Appalachian Trail.”

The Pinnacles of Dan section of the Old AT remains a topic of occasional discussion even in the modern AT community. One common impression is that the original routing of the AT was the Pinnacles of Dan route. In fact, that route was a 1939 relocation caused by the original AT route being disrupted by construction of two hydroelectric dams in the Dan River Gorge. The original AT route followed Cockram’s Ridge to the Dan River, crossed the river at the mouth of Round Meadow Creek (at or near the current location of Townes Dam), and then traveled alongside the Dan River before ascending to Low Gap, west of the summit of (and not ascending) The Pinnacles of Dan.

Another well-circulated report is that the route over the Pinnacles was chosen as a more-or-less joke by trail markers working under the direction of ATC Chairman Myron Avery, and that Avery nevertheless accepted the route for the AT. That story may have begun with Earl Shaffer, who stated in “Walking With Spring,” at page 57, that “Charlie Thomas,” a longtime ATC member, told him that he (Thomas) was scouting Trail in the Dan River area and was involved in “playing a joke” on Avery by pretending to route the AT over the Pinnacles. Shaffer reported that Thomas told him that Avery climbed the Pinnacles, “was impressed with the view, and approved the route.” Eugene Espy repeats Shaffer’s story in “The Trail Of My Life,” at page 91.

Although a good story, and perhaps true, it is more likely somewhat of an AT legend. As noted above, any scouting for the original AT route would not have involved the Pinnacles (except for development of the side trail to the peak from Low Gap, to the west). Since the Pinnacles were accessible by a side trail from the original 1931 AT route, Avery would have already been familiar with the peak and its view, so any suggestion he would have been first introduced to that peak in the late 1930's by a “joke” trail would be incorrect.

What is much more likely is that when it became necessary to relocate the AT in the late 1930's, Avery relied on John H. Barnard, the local expert on the Dan River area and the AT maintainer for the section, to select the “next best route” after the initial Cockram Ridge Route was closed by Dan River dam construction. It is also likely, and a review of old AT Guides suggests, that the AT routes in the Dan River area were not constructed as new trail but instead followed existing foot trails used by local residents to access or cross the Dan River. And for all its difficulty, the

Pinnacles route did offer a ridgecrest route on the western rim of the gorge that avoided the cliffs encountered in any direct ascent/descent of the gorge wall, and that route allowed the existing Pinnacles side trail to be incorporate into the new AT route. Moreover, the topographical problem with suggesting the Pinnacles route was a “joke” is that in order to support that story one must identify a more suitable, “non-joke,” route across the Dan River Gorge that would have been easier ---- and map study as well as my actual experience in exploring the Dan River Gorge area leads me to the conclusion that with the original AT route unavailable, no better route across the Dan River Gorge than the Pinnacles route was available to the AT in the late 1930's. So it is likely that Shaffer's oft-repeated story of the Pinnacles route being a “joke taken seriously” doesn't fit the actual reality of the late 30's relocation of the AT across the Pinnacles of Dan.

Beyond the Dan River Gorge section of the 1950 AT, and leaving John Barnard's maintenance section (and resuming the “Unassigned” category for maintenance), the 1950 AT returned to the secondary road network and reached the end of Section 6 at a crossing of the Blue Ridge Parkway at AT MP 6-11.67. Beyond that point the 1950 AT traveled secondary roads parallel to the Parkway to the Groundhog Mt. Recreation Area, and the end of Section 7, at AT MP 7-5.87.

4. AT Section 8: Groundhog Mt. To Fancy Gap (U.S. 52)

The 1950 AT route from Groundhog Mt. To Fancy Gap (Section 8) reflects AT relocation to gain distance from the Parkway. While the original AT route followed the old “Ridge Road” south of Groundhog Mt., and while that old road still existed as a secondary road parallel to the Parkway (bearing VSR 608), the AT route was relocated west onto secondary roads away from the Parkway corridor from Groundhog Mt. to the vicinity of Ward's Gap (MP 8-8.04). Regaining the old “Ridge Road” (VSR 608), the 1950 AT reached US 52 and the end of AT Section 8 at Fancy Gap.

5. AT Sections 9, 10 and 11: Fancy Gap to Galax

It is not difficult to find the Old AT route south of Fancy Gap, since the old “Ridge Road” followed by the 1950 AT is still numbered VSR 608 ---- and bears the name “Old Appalachian Trail.” At MP 9-1.33, VSR 608 (which had ben somewhat relocated by Parkway and I-77 construction), the Old AT route passes what was the privately owned “Devil Den” cave on a private farm in 1950 but is now the 250 acre Devil's Den Nature Preserve. Beyond that point, the Old AT route crosses over I-77 (obviously not a 1950 feature) and crossed the Parkway at MP 9-3.01 to continue on VSR 608 (now absent its Old Appalachian Trail name) to the west of, and parallel with, the Parkway.

Continuing on VSR 608, and with a 0.8 mile stretch on the Parkway as a result of Parkway disruption of the continuity of VSR 608, the Old AT reached Pipers Gap at AT MP 9-6.96 (leaving the Parkway as it approached Pipers Gap on a now abandoned section of VSR 608 that then intersected the Parkway north of the Pipers Gap overpass on the Parkway).

South of Pipers Gap, the 1950 AT again crossed the Parkway, passed Mt. Carroll Church on the left at MP 9-7.87, recrossed the Parkway and then reached the community of Max (MP 9-9.54), where a post office at formerly served AT hikers. Beyond Max, the 1950 AT traveled a now abandoned section of VSR 608 to reach current VSR 608 at its intersection with VSR 715 at MP 9-10.4. This point was the end of AT Section 9 and the beginning of Section 10, the Fisher Peak section of the 1950 AT.

The route of the 1950 AT through the Fisher Peak area was fairly straightforward. The route followed VSR 715 (current name End of the Line Rd.) for 2.2 miles, then left secondary road travel to follow a woods road to the summit of Rich Mt. (MP 10-3.17) and beyond to near the summit of Horse Knob (MP 10-3.92) before reaching an intersection with a blue-blazed trail that turned left to access the summit of Fisher Peak while the AT route turned right to descend the mountain (MP 10-4.49). In 1950, the summit of Fisher Peak (3565') featured a fire tower (erected in 1948) and the large rock slabs on the south side of the summit offering views to the south.

At Fisher Peak began the bold move to the north of the 1950 AT to transition from a westerly direction of travel along the Blue Ridge to a westerly direction of travel along the Iron Mt. ridges. The end of the Iron Mt. Ridges at the New River was Farmer Mt., about 17 air miles (and 25.55 AT miles) to the north on the other side of the New River. So as the 1950 AT turned north at Fisher Peak, its destination was Farmer Mt. in that northerly “offset” of the AT route.

From Fisher Peak, the 1950 AT followed what was then a relatively new fire-road (now Fisher Peak Rd.) that had replaced the former woods road descending the mountain. Briefly entering North Carolina in the course of the descent (Fisher Peak is on the NC/VA line), the 1950 AT route passed at MP 10-5.18 the 1934/'38 AT Norvale Crag route that was abandoned in 1940. Beyond that point, the 1950 AT continued to follow the fire road down the north side of Fisher Peak to reach an intersection with the Blue Ridge Parkway, and the end of Section 10, at MP 10-7.34, with VSR 609 intersecting the Parkway directly across from the fire road intersection. That Old AT route along the ridge leading to Fisher Peak (although not making a public lands connection with VSR 715)

and descending north to the Parkway is now on the property of the Blue Ridge Music Center, which is indicated by “BRMC” on Map 3.

Beyond that intersection with the Parkway the 1950 AT entered AT Section 11, following VSR 609 (Peaks Mountain Rd.) north to join VSR 608 (Coal Creek Rd.) At MP 11-5.53 and then following VSR 608 to an intersection with Va. 97 at MP 11-7.51 and then turning left on that highway to reach Va. 89, and Galax, at MP 8.65. Beyond that point the 1950 AT followed Va. 89 (South, then North Main Street) into downtown Galax and to the end of Section 11 at the intersection of N. Main Street and W. Center Street where the 1950 AT Guide noted the presence of the Hotel Blumont and the Galax Post Office.

While the 1950 AT Route in the Fisher Peak area is not complex, the history of the AT in the Fisher Peak area is one of complexity. From a review of the 1931 AT Guide description of that Trail, it is apparent that the 1931 AT did not cross over Fisher Peak. That 1931 Guide details a 2.4 mile side trail to that peak. Instead, the 1931 AT turned north at some point, toward Galax, after passing through Pipers Gap, and followed Coal Creek toward Galax. It was apparently a convoluted route, seemingly bound southwest toward Fisher Peak before reversing itself back to the northeast before moving toward Galax. That route does not appear on Map 3 because of both the difficulty in determining an accurate location from the 1931 description and the confusion in other routes that would result from its inclusion on the map.

What is most interesting about the 1931 Guide is the mention therein (at page 100) that the side trail to Fisher Peak was, in fact, intended to become a side trail to Grandfather Mountain and that it was then complete as far as Norvale Crag (noted as being 5.9 miles beyond Fisher Peak), which was a pre-Parkway private recreational development on the crest of the Blue Ridge just south of Low Gap (north of present-day Va/NC 89). The ‘31 Guide noted that hikers using that side trail could extend it into a longer route to Galax by use of Va, 117 (now Va. 89) from Norvale Crag to Galax. This suggests that as of 1931, there was serious consideration of a Grandfather Mt. route.

There was no further mention of a Grandfather Mt. route in the AT Guides, but the 1934 AT was rerouted to follow the 1931 Fisher Peak/Norvale Crag side trail, and to then turn north to Galax on then VA 96 (now VA 89 in a substantially rerouted location) (see Map 3). That route continued in the ‘38 Guide, but the Norvale Crag section was abandoned with the 1941 Guide and the AT routed directly from Fisher Peak to Galax via VSR 609 and VSR 608. It was that route that the 1950

AT followed and was the final AT route through that area. The Norvale Crags route, and the 1931 AT Guide mention of an intended side trail to Grandfather Mt., nevertheless present interesting subjects for additional research.

6. AT Section 12: Galax to Dixons Ferry

From downtown Galax, the 1950 AT followed a series of city streets, then rural secondary roads, 5.5 miles to the AT crossing of the New River at Dixons Ferry and the end of AT Section 12 as well as Chapter VII, “Southern Virginia,” of the 1950 AT Guide. By the 1950 AT Guide, that ferry had ceased to operate, but the Guide listed a local resident who would take hikers across the New River at the former ferry crossing.⁸

7. Wythe/Holston District, Jefferson National Forest, Section 1: Dixons Ferry to Byllesby

At Dixons Ferry, the 1950 AT entered Section 1 of Chapter VIII, “Wythe and Holston District of the Jefferson National Forest,” of the 1950 AT Guide.

Beyond the New River crossing, the 1950 AT followed a farm lane to the tracks of the Norfolk and Western Railroad, then turned right (downstream) along the left (west) bank of the New River (MP 1-0.1). For the first mile or so the 1950 AT followed the railroad tracks, or a path beside the tracks (the remains of a former road paralleling the railroad that had been washed out by flooding in the 1940's and abandoned). The 1950 AT then followed a road parallel to the tracks, first to the west side of the railroad, then crossing to the east side at Fries Junction (MP 1-3.45), which was then a small railroad station. Continuing on that road, the 1950 AT crossed a bridge over Brush Creek (MP 1-4.0), then crossed to the west side of the tracks and continued on that road (now above and to the west of the railroad) to the community of Byllesby where the Guide reported the presence of a train station and post office.⁹

⁸ In his book “The Trail of My Life,” Espy reported the New River hiker ferry arrangement was available when he crossed the New River on his 1951 AT hike. Shaffer missed the turn on the AT route to the ferry when he passed that point during his 1948 AT hike, followed the railroad into Fries, and then traveled by automobile from Fries to Galax to rejoin the AT.

⁹ The community of Byllesby was located near the site of the Byllesby Hydroelectric Dam on the New River, and provided housing for power company employees who operated and maintained Byllesby Dam and Buck Dam, located downstream on the New River. It no longer has any residents or services, but power company activity continues and it is a public access point to the New River and for the New River Trail State Park.

The former N & W railroad bed, with branches from Fries Junction into Fries and Galax, is now a recreation rail-trail of the New River Trail State Park.

8. Wythe/Holston Section 2: Byllesby to US 21 (Dry Run Gap)

The 1950 AT left Byllesby by a secondary road that crossed the N & W tracks, then followed the left bank of the New River, downstream. At MP 2-0.12, the AT turned left from that road, away from the river, and followed a road (now gated and posted) that again crossed the railroad, passed through what was then a number of summer cottages (none of which now exist), and then ascended to the crest of the Farmer Mt. ridge (MP 2-1.05). At that point the 1950 AT completed its “northerly offset” from the western end of the Blue Ridge route at Fisher Peak, and turned west toward Damascus, Virginia, following a route along the ridges of the Iron Mountains¹⁰ through the Jefferson National Forest.

From the crest of Farmers Mt., overlooking Byllesby, the dam, and the New River, the AT followed the ridge of Farmer Mt. (MP 2-1.05) to VSR 602 (Byllesby Rd.) (MP 2-2.33). That trail still exists on the crest of that ridge, although its intersection with VSR 602 has been disturbed by subsequent road construction creating a steep embankment between the road and the old trail.

After turning right on VSR 602, the 1950 AT followed that road to VA 94, then VA 94 to VSR 602 (Brush Creek Rd.), and followed VSR 602 to a right turn on a private drive (which was the Old Brush Creek Rd.) at MP 2-7.47.¹¹ The 1950 AT then passed through a private farm to reach a Forest Service trail (MP 2-7.93),¹² which it followed over a ridge to Bournes Branch (MP 2-9.11). From that point, the Trail followed a “wood road” up Bournes Branch and ascended to the summit of Jones Knob (3833'), where there was then a fire tower offering wide-ranging views (MP 2-11.5). The 1950 AT route is an early predecessor of current Forest Service trails in that area, with the

¹⁰ The Iron Mountains is a ridge complex extending from the New River in Virginia to the Doe River near Hampton, TN. While a single ridge in some areas bearing the name “Iron Mountain,” in other areas it consists of multiple ridges bearing different names. That is the case along the section of the Iron Mountains traveled by the 1950 AT between Farmer Mt. and VA 16, with Farmer Mt. being the first of the Iron Mountains ridges traveled by the 1950 AT.

¹¹ Often confusing the tracing of Old AT routes is the relocation/reconstruction of the old roads and trails followed by Old AT routes. That is the case with Brush Creek road, since the former Brush Creek Road was the route for the 1930's AT routes.

¹² Now part of the Mount Rodgers National Recreation Area.

current trails frequently in different locations than the Old AT route.

Beyond Jones Knob, the 1950 AT continued to follow the crest of the Iron Mountains on a Forest Service trail in a generally westerly direction and reached Dry Run Gap and US 52 at MP 2-18.12. Like in the case of Byllesby Road, highway reconstruction had created a deep cut in the ridge that disrupted the older AT route (first noted in the 1938 Guide) through that gap.

The route of the western portion of the 1950 AT between Jones Knob and Dry Run Gap is now part of the Forest Service Iron Mountain Trail, with the eastern portion still in existence but now inaccessible on private land. While the FS trail has been relocated just east of Dry Run Gap to avoid the steep descent at the highway embankment, the Old AT route is still apparent and can be traveled.

9. Wythe/Holston Section 3: US 21 (Dry Run Gap) to Houndshell Gap

The history of the Old AT route west of Dry Run Gap is an all-too-common account of a 1930's Forest Service Trail being converted to, or replaced by, a fire road. The 1934 AT Guide describes a Forest Service Trail along the crest of the ridge leading 3.95 miles to the summit of Comers Rock (4035'), where there was a fire tower¹³ (MP 3-3.95). The 1938 Guide notes that the former graded trail had been replaced by a road built by the CCC, with only a short section of trail remaining to access the Comers Rock summit. The 1941 Guide notes the appearance of the Forest Service Comers Rock Camp at MP 3-3.7, but also notes that the AT was by then on a fire road through the entire area. That was essentially the situation described in the 1950 AT Guide, with the AT following automobile roads for the first 6.5 miles of the section. That kind of conversion of early-era trails followed by the Old AT to fire roads was a common result of CCC and Forest Service construction activity.¹⁴ Following, therefore, both automobile and woods roads from Dry Run Gap, the 1950 AT reached VSR 601 (Flat Ridge Rd.) just north of Houndshell Gap at MP 3-13.56.

10. Wythe/Holston Section 4: Houndshell Gap to Va. 16

From Houndshell Gap, the 1950 AT followed woods roads and a steep trail section to reach the crest of Straight Mt. (of the Iron Mountains range) at MP 4-1.27. From that point the 1950 AT

¹³ The 1950 AT guide indicated that the view from Comers Rock included the summit of Buffalo Mt., some 41 air miles away.

¹⁴ More recent decades have seen, encouragingly, the development of a more extensive Forest Service trail network, including in the Comers Rock/Iron Mt. area.

traveled west along the extensively clear crest of that mountain and reached the highway across Iron Mt. (MP 4-6.35) that is now Va. 16. It was, according to the 1950 AT Guide, then U. S. 58. And, just as in the case of Dry Run Gap, highway construction had created a deep cut in the crest of the ridge that had disrupted the former AT route. The AT Guide noted the presence of a filling station in the gap where “Lunches and canned goods” could be purchased.

This point was the southern end of the 1955 relocation, with the relocated AT reaching that same gap by a road walk up the highway from Dickies Gap. The ANST has been subsequently relocated and no longer passes through that gap.

III. Conclusion

What I have described in this Presentation is that “lost” Appalachian Trail through southern Virginia, and particularly the New River watershed, that I heard about as a youth while on that 1962 AT hike on the then “new” Appalachian Trail through southwestern Virginia. This Presentation has therefore been both an opportunity for me to travel, in some “virtual” fashion, the length of that Old AT route while introducing Symposium participants to some general impression of its location, history and features. If for no other reason than to give recognition to the quality of that Old AT route and to the many dedicated individuals who labored to bring that Trail into existence and maintain it for nearly a quarter-century as The Appalachian Trail, it is a Trail worthy of description.

I note that on the agenda of this Symposium my Presentation is included in the “Partnerships” Session. Although that may well have been because it is hard to categorize a presentation about a long-ago abandoned Appalachian Trail route when what seems more current, and perhaps more relevant, topics demand our attention. But I suggest that inclusion in this “Partnerships” session is, in fact, right on the mark as to my intent and goals for this Presentation.

In fact, I suggest that an introduction to and description of the Old AT through southern Virginia is about development of a potentially useful partnership ---- a partnership of what the Old AT was in southern Virginia from 1931 through 1955 and what that AT history and that Old AT route as it exists in the modern era can contribute to the recreational, cultural and economic development of the New River Valley of Southwestern Virginia today. For while the organizations managing the Appalachian Trail could “abandon” that Appalachian Trail route, such an action could not deprive the region of the existence of the Old AT route, its features and its history.

That layer of Appalachian Trail history in southern Virginia from 1931 to 1955 rightfully belongs to that region and its people. It therefore ought to be more researched, better understood, and more extensively documented so as to be effectively incorporated into the recreational and cultural life, and the economy, of the region.

Examples that come to mind as to how the Old AT might fit into current activities in the region include designated bicycle routes on secondary roads that were once the Old AT route, markers or maps identifying existing or new hiking trails or routes that were once part of the AT, and development of new or enhancement of existing motor vehicle tour routes by features of Old AT history. Communities along the current ANST certainly incorporate that Trail, with its strong cultural identity in our society, in their community development activities. Southern Virginia could similarly adopt and promote its own, and unique, history of the Old AT along the Virginia Blue Ridge to support its community development goals.

I hope by this Presentation to facilitate and encourage both recognition of the importance of Old AT history in the New River Valley and throughout southern Virginia, and consideration of incorporation of that history and the Old AT route into the recreational and cultural life, and the economy, of that region.

I would welcome any comments or questions, with communication by USPS or email preferred, about this Presentation.

I appreciate the opportunity to make this Presentation to the 2017 New River Symposium.

Thank you.

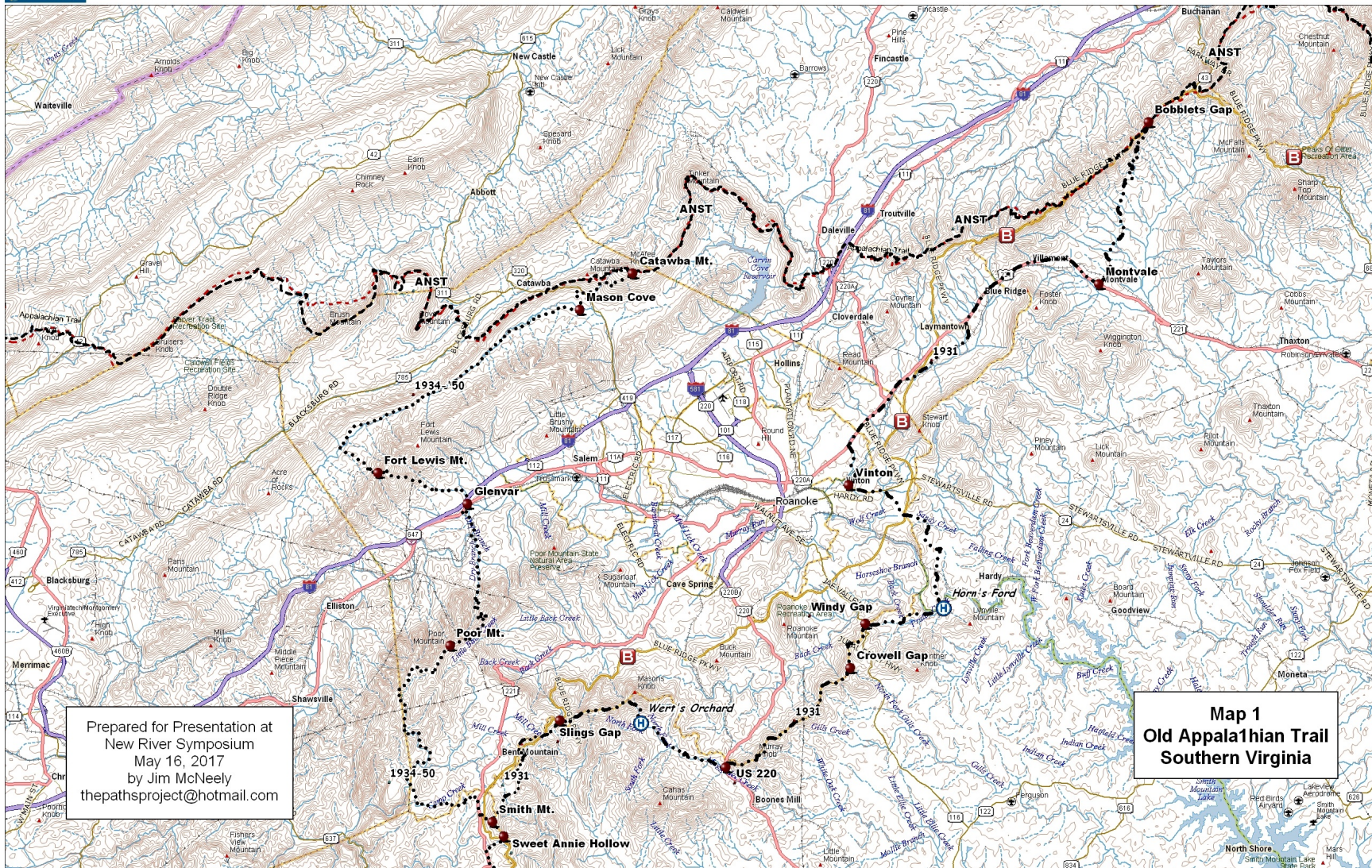
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May 16, 2017

Appendix 1: Map Legend

The locations of various trails and other features of interest are indicated on the three Presentation maps as follows:

1950 AT	• • • • • • • •
Featured other AT routes	• • — • • — • •
Current Appalachian National Scenic Trail route (ANST)	— — — — — —
Other noted recreation trails	
New River Trail State Park (NRT)	• — • — •
Blue Ridge Parkway	Block B
Selected currently existing point of interest	●
Selected historic point of interest	Circled H

Appendix 2: Maps 1 - 3



Prepared for Presentation at
New River Symposium
May 16, 2017
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Map 1
Old Appalachian Trail
Southern Virginia

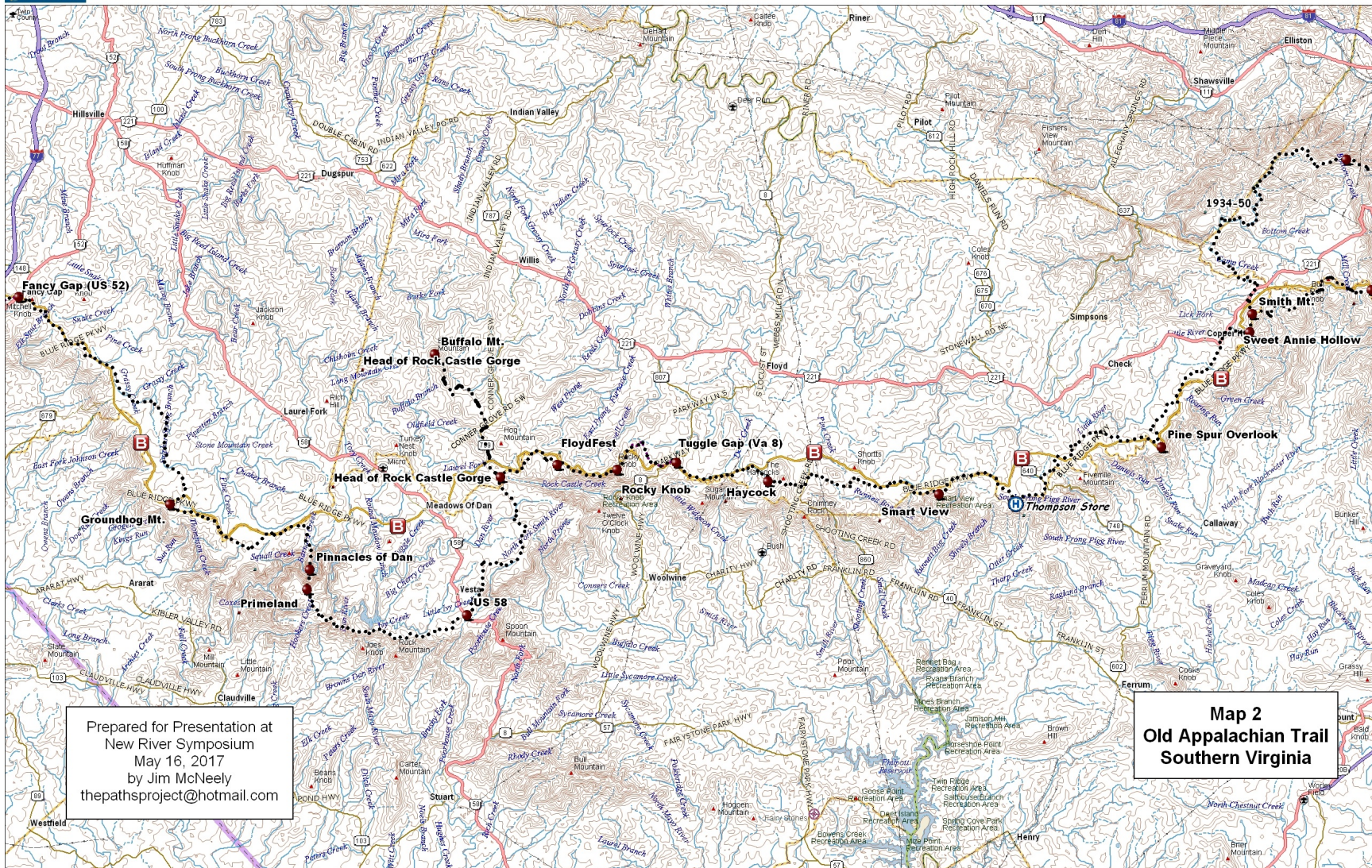
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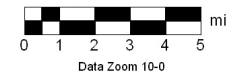
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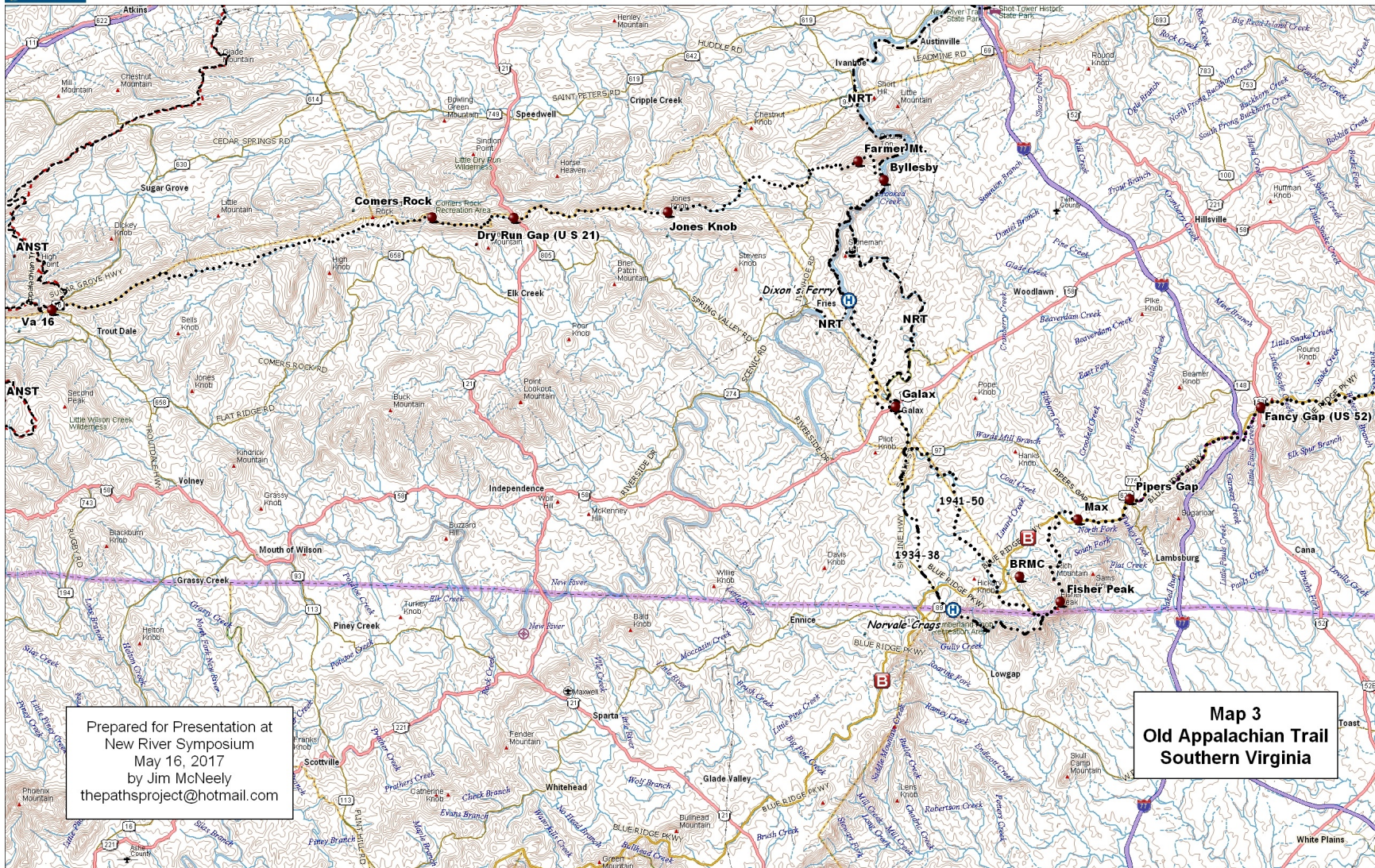


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