

Benton MacKaye, The Man

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Benton MacKaye

Benton MacKaye (pron.: /məˈkaɪ/ *mak-KYE*; March 6, 1879 – Dec. 11, 1975) was an [American](#) forester, planner and [conservationist](#). He was born in [Stamford, Connecticut](#); his father was actor and dramatist [Steele MacKaye](#). After studying forestry at [Harvard University](#) (B.A., 1900; M.A. School of Forestry, 1905), Benton later taught there for several years. He joined a number of Federal bureaus and agencies, including the [U.S. Forest Service](#), the [Tennessee Valley Authority](#), and the [U.S. Department of Labor](#); he was also was a member of the [Technical Alliance](#) where he participated in the *Energy Survey of North America*.^[1]

MacKaye helped pioneer the idea of land preservation for recreation and conservation purposes, and was a strong advocate of balancing human needs and those of nature; he coined the term "Geotechnics" to describe this philosophy. In addition to writing the first argument against [urban sprawl](#), MacKaye also authored two books, *The New Exploration: A Philosophy of Regional Planning* and *Expedition Nine: A Return to a Region*. Thirteen of his essays were published in the collection *From Geography to Geotechnics*. A co-founder of [The Wilderness Society](#), he is best known as the originator of the [Appalachian Trail](#) (AT), an idea he presented in his 1921 article titled *An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning*. The [Benton MacKaye Trail](#), some portions of which coincide with the Appalachian Trail, is named after him.

Early life

Emile Benton MacKaye was born in [Stamford, Connecticut](#) on March 6, 1879 to actor and dramatist (James) [Steele MacKaye](#) and his wife Mary.^[2] He was the sixth child and last son born to the couple. His siblings were Arthur Loring MacKaye (1863–1939), Harold (Hal) Steele (1866–1928), William Payson (1868–1889), [James \(Jamie\) Medbery](#) (1872–1935), [Percy](#) (1875–1956), and Hazel (1880–1944). Benton's name was derived from his paternal grandmother, Emily Benton Steele. The family often suffered from financial troubles due to the patriarch's numerous failed business ventures; although the Stamford home where Benton was born and where the family had lived since 1875 was a comfortable one, in late 1879 the family began a restless series of moves due to

lack of funds. They lived in farms and houses in Brattleboro, Vermont; Norton, Massachusetts; Mount Vernon, New York; and Ridgefield, Connecticut, before moving to [New York City](#) in 1885.^[3]

To escape the bustle of city-life, the family took to visiting [Shirley Center, Massachusetts](#), a quiet village 30 miles from [Boston](#) which Benton would continue to visit until his death.^[4] In 1888, his brother William purchased an estate in Shirley that the family would come to call "The Cottage". Eight-year-old Benton was immediately enamored with the beauty and freedom of the country, proclaiming he enjoyed it far more than urban existence. Shortly after William died of a sudden respiratory disease in 1889, the family moved to Washington, D.C. An indifferent student, MacKaye once described school as "a place that boys like to run away from".^[5] Drawn to the study of the natural world, he often pursued knowledge on his own; he spent much time in the [Smithsonian](#), making sketches of the abundant collections and volunteering to help scientists in their labs.^[6] He befriended assistant curator James Benedict, and attended lectures given by such luminaries as Civil War hero [John Wesley Powell](#) and arctic explorer [Robert Peary](#).^[7]

His early immersion in nature helped him cope with tragedy that eventually struck the MacKaye family; the frequently absent Steele died in early 1894, when Benton was fourteen.^[8] While attending high school in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he began charting the landscape around Shirley Center, documenting vegetation, landforms, rivers, and roads in numbered notebooks. Lewis Mumford, a close friend of MacKaye and his future biographer, wrote that "This direct, first-hand education through the senses and feelings, with its deliberate observation of nature in every guise—including the human animal—has nourished MacKaye all his life."^[6]

Harvard and forestry

After dropping out of school in order to prepare for college entrance exams on his own, in 1896 MacKaye followed his brothers—James, an engineer and philosopher, and Percy, a dramatist and poet—to [Harvard University](#), where he studied geology. It took him two years to overcome deficiencies in subjects such as [German](#), algebra and physics.^[9]

When he graduated in June 1905, MacKaye was still unsure what career he should embark upon. During this time, he read [Thomas Henry Huxley](#)'s 1877 work *Physiography: An Introduction to the Study of Nature*—a gift from his brother James, and a work that would prove influential in MacKaye's future regional planning.^[10] In October 1903, he enrolled in Harvard's newly established forestry school; he was the school's first student to graduate, in 1905. For the next five years, he alternated between teaching at Harvard's newly created forestry school near Petersham, Massachusetts, and working as a Forest Assistant with the Forest Service.^[4]

MacKaye made some important contributions during the early years of national forestry. While working as a Forest Examiner in the early teens, he performed groundbreaking research on the impacts of forest cover on runoff in New Hampshire's [White Mountains](#). This was during a time in which an intense debate regarding the connection between [deforestation](#) and irregular stream flow was occurring, and MacKaye's scientific evidence that forest cover controlled stream flow helped in the creation of the [White Mountain National Forest](#).^[11]

Progressive politics

In 1913, while still living in Washington, MacKaye helped form a social activist group called the Hell Raisers. Composed of government workers, congressional staffers, and journalists, the informal group aimed to raise public awareness about social and political issues.^[10]

He married [Jessie Belle Hardy Stubbs](#) in 1915.

Appalachian Trail

MacKaye's article *An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning*, which called for the construction of the [Appalachian Trail](#), was published in the October 1921 issue of *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*. The article was partly inspired by the [Green Mountain Club](#) who had helped usher in Vermont's [Long Trail](#).^[12]

Legacy

In his 2002 book *Long Trails of the Southeast*, writer and avid hiker Johnny Molloy wrote that the Benton MacKaye Trail "is what I imagine the Appalachian Trail was like many decades ago—a lesser tamed path, steep in places, rough in spots, and still evolving".^[13]

On June 17, 2011 he was inducted into the Appalachian Trail Hall of Fame at the [Appalachian Trail Museum](#) as a charter member.^[1]

The Benton MacKaye Trail

The Benton MacKaye Trail (BMT) is a footpath of nearly 300 miles (480 km) through the Appalachian mountains of the southeastern United States. It is designed for foot travel in the tradition of the Appalachian Trail (AT).

Running from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Davenport Gap on the northern edge of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (the [Smokies](#)), the BMT passes through some of the most remote backcountry in Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina, including eight federally designated Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas. For further information on the trail, visit the [BMT Vital Info](#) page.

For Hikers

There are numerous [access points and trailheads](#) along the BMT route creating many options for one-way and loop hikes, and several more in combination with local trails. Longer hikes are possible on the BMT by doing a partial or full [thru-hike](#). And the longest walks are done by also using the three major intersecting trails, the [Pinhoti](#), the [AT](#), and the 900-plus mile [Mountains-to-Sea Trail](#).

Because the BMT intersects the AT at each terminus and in the middle, three large hikable loops are formed in a figure 8: a lower circle of 364 miles, an upper Smokies-only walk of 158 miles, and 'The BMT Loop' - a complete circuit hike of over 500 miles. The [Georgia Loop](#), "toughest hike in Georgia", is a 55-mile triangle of the BMT, the AT and the [Duncan Ridge Trail](#). In the [Eastern Continental Trail](#); the 4400-plus mile route from Key West, Florida to Cape Gaspe, Quebec, Canada; the BMT connects the Pinhoti and Appalachian Trails. For more hiker information, check the [Hiker Resources](#) page.

The Association

The Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA) was organized in 1979 and incorporated in 1980 to build and maintain the BMT. Driving the effort was a desire to see opened for hiking Benton MacKaye's chosen route for his Appalachian mountain trail. MacKaye (rhymes with *sky*), Massachusetts forester and co-founder of [The Wilderness Society](#), was the man whose vision inspired what is today the Appalachian Trail. In the south, he had selected a more westerly route, along the western crest of the Blue Ridge, roughly that followed today by the BMT. The BMTA's 25th anniversary year saw the original plan completed as the route was [officially opened](#) on July 16, 2005.

As with most trail organizations, the BMTA is an all-volunteer, nonprofit group of folks who want to see the trail remain open and in good shape. Those who live close enough and are able gather regularly to work on maintaining the trail, also to hike and for special events. They and others contribute through their [membership](#).

Want to Help?

Your support is welcome. Becoming a member, participating in or leading [maintenance](#) and/or recreational outings, adopting a section of trail, serving on the BMTA board of directors, being a project leader, assisting with administrative needs, and/or making a financial donation are all ways in which you can lend a hand. It's easy to [join](#) and when you keep your membership current, you're helping us maintain and improve the trail. See the [Want to Help?](#) page for a list of current needs.

Any and all are invited to participate in BMTA outings; no experience is necessary and membership is not required. Join us!

Hike the Benton MacKaye Trail

Named for the planner who envisioned the Appalachian Trail.

Named for the regional planner who envisioned the [Appalachian Trail](#) and founded the Wilderness Society, this trail journeys deep into the most remote areas of Fannin County. Here are a few trailheads on the Benton MacKaye in Fannin County.

Springer Mountain

Beginning at Springer Mountain, the Benton MacKaye skirts the ridge of Ball Mountain with occasional scenic views on the trail or a short walk from the trail. It returns to the Appalachian Trail to share its path up Rich Mountain just after the Springer Mountain Day Use Parking Area. While the AT leaves Rich Mountain and quickly descends to Stover Creek, the BMT continues on a much more gradual descent along an old logging road. It rejoins the AT for the crossing at Three Forks. After the side path to Long Creek Falls, the Benton MacKaye turns left.

***Directions:** From Blue Ridge, go south on Aska Road 13.5 miles to end. Turn right onto Newport Road, go 4.5 miles to end. Turn left onto Doublehead Gap Road and continue on this road about .8 miles to intersection with dirt-gravel USFS Road 58 intersecting sharply from right. Turn onto FS 58 and continue into forest and uphill 5.3 miles to Three Forks. The parking area is on the right at Noontootla Creek, a beautiful trout stream. The trail to Long Creek Falls is on the left.*

The Swinging Bridge Trail

Over the next 7 miles the BMT crosses no roads, and there are rarely any hikers until it crosses Forest Service Road 333 and descends into the Toccoa River Valley. Here the 265 foot [swinging bridge](#) crosses the Toccoa. From the bridge to Highway 60 is a 3 mile hike. North of Highway 60 the trail climbs Wallalah and Rhodes Mountains in a gentle arc as the trail swings from traveling northeast to northwest. In the vicinity of Wallalah the trail is treacherous ; there are some excellent views from Rhodes. On the top of Rhodes Mountain the Duncan Ridge Trail leaves the BMT.

***Swinging Bridge Directions:** From Blue Ridge, take Hwy 515 east to Hwy 60/Morganton. In Morganton, follow Hwy 60 South toward Dahlonega for 11.3 miles passing Skeenah Mill. Another .7 miles on the right is FS 816. Turn right and follow the gravel road 3 miles to the parking area. Short hike down to the Toccoa River and the Swinging Bridge.*

Wilscot Mountain/Tipton Mountain

Once through Skeenah Gap Road (Skeenah Gap Road, County road 227), the trail offers additional scenic views of distant mountains, then begins an easy climb up Deadennen Mountain, descends to Lula Head Gap and ascends Wilscot Mountain and descends to Highway 60 in Wilscot Gap. After the gap the trail begins the steep climb to the top of Tipton Mountain, but its worth the climb. At the top of Tipton are some excellent views regardless of season. Watch the trail blazes in this area, for it's easy to get off the path.

Brawley Mountain

From Tipton Mountain the trail falls to a gap, then ascends Brawley Mountain. As the trail heads west, it skirts the top of Garland Mountain. There are some excellent views of the Toccoa River Valley from the top of Garland, and there is an easy descent to Dial Road. (Access the trail at the intersection of Shallowford Bridge and Old Dial Road.) Here the Shallowford Bridge crosses the

Toccoa, and the trail follows Aska Road to Riverside Restaurant. The Benton MacKaye then turns on Stanley Creek Road. In 2.5 miles the trail returns to the forest, and begins the climb to Falls Branch Falls. After visiting the falls on a side trail, return to the Benton MacKaye for the long climb to the top of Rocky Mountain.

For more information about the trail, see the [Benton MacKaye Trail Association](#) website.