

# One **STEP** at a Time: A Six-Month Journey to Understand, Document, and Share

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## Overview:

In 1921, Benton MacKaye publicly announced his proposal for “An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning.” This detailed his vision for a new approach to the “problem of living” as he worded it; romanticized into a utopian corridor of trails, towns, farms, and people along the entirety of the Appalachian Mountains. Fast forward to 1937, after some difficulty and alterations to the original plan, the Appalachian Trail (AT) is open from Maine to Georgia. However, the advent of WWII puts a halt to much of its amenity construction and maintenance. Nonetheless, three years following the war, Earl V. Shaffer becomes the first AT thru hiker—traversing the entirety of the trail in a single season.

For thirty years the AT remained a trail under the full responsibility of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) and other trail organizations. Then in 1968, President Johnson signed into law the National Trails System Act establishing the AT as the first national scenic trail, a unit of the national park system. The AT is placed under federal protection forty-seven years after MacKaye’s original proposal.

Upon completion of my time at Iowa State University, I will be following in the footsteps of the many hikers who have succeeded Mr. Shaffer in an attempt to complete my own 2,190 mile thru hike of the AT. I have interest in pursuing a future career in trail building, maintenance, and conservation. To me, there seems to be no better way to understand the ins and outs of a trail than to walk its length with nothing but what I can carry on my back. Through this experiential study, I will explore various built amenities that accompany the trail—most of which fall under the realm of landscape architecture—in order to better understand how they are constructed and how they contribute to the user experience.

## Background:

I cannot point to a single instance that sparked my desire to attempt a thru hike, in contrast I hold a conglomeration of successes and failures that have evolved into a desire to understand the landscape and to simply do the AT. Let me highlight three examples.

- (1) An Iowa native, I always held a special place in my heart for this “flyover state” in the middle of the country. Nothing truly struck a chord though until the summer of 2016. For three months I had the opportunity to be a Land Stewardship Intern for the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF). We traveled to some of the most remote places throughout the state, with the goal of protecting and preserving the land, water, and wildlife. Many of our sites were impossible to reach unless we walked there. Working in a sort of group isolation, those elusive prairies taught me to closely examine things that others may write off and see the elegance viewed from my hands and knees.
- (2) Running is just like walking, except it’s faster and hurts a lot more. Most people give up when the pain becomes too great to bear, when they believe they can continue no longer. But they fail to reach the meditative state, the point of no fear (or feeling), that results when that

perceived threshold is broken. A marathon gives a person many miles and hours to bargain with one's mind over where their personal threshold lies. Mine was around mile nineteen. The determination of the mind defeated the overwhelming plea from my body to stop. I reached my meditative state. In October 2016, I finished my first marathon.

- (3) Ankle surgery. Due to an injury suffered while playing rugby, I tore a major ligament in my right ankle that required seven hours of surgery. That pain previously experienced while running, I endured tenfold from not being able to do that singular act. My body was simultaneously crying out in desperation to move and begging me to stay still. I hated every minute of recovery. It was torture. I'm not one to keep still for long or half-commit to anything. So naturally, I decided to flee the country seven weeks later to a place where every day required working on my feet in the blazing sun. Not the conventional choice—and it was hard—but it resulted in the most wonderful reward. On my birthday, just shy of six months post-injury, I ran for the first time again along the pristine waters of the Panama coast.

Much like the motto says, “take it one step at a time” is a battle cry of sorts. Regardless of how you move forward, each jump, skip, or crawl brings the goal closer. Two thousand one hundred ninety miles is roughly five million steps. At a certain point, all the preparation in the world will not prepare a person to walk for six months straight. It's all about that threshold and falling back on previous lessons to get through the rough patches, so that you can gain the rewards that follow.

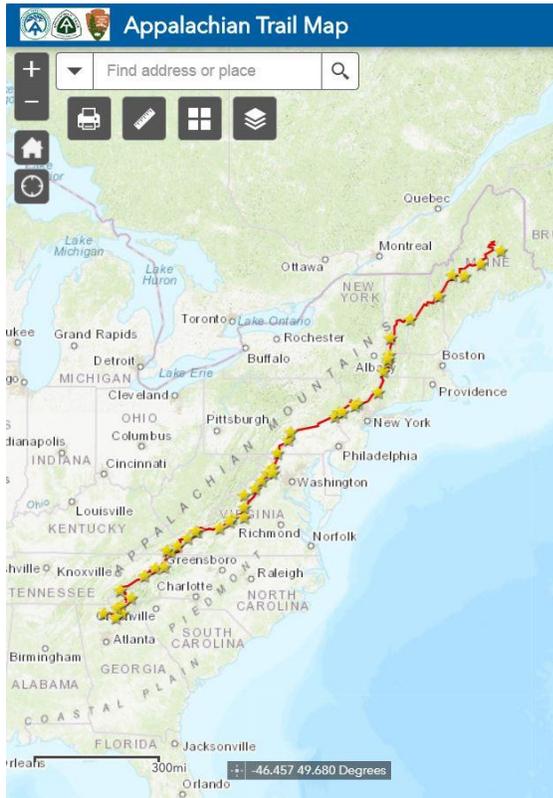
### Proposal:

This proposal combines my love of landscapes with the desire to cover all the ground possible under my own self-propulsion. If I've gleaned anything from my time at Iowa State University, it is that experiential learning is the most effective, most valuable, and most enjoyable. From the time students enter the Landscape Architecture program and travel on Savannah Studio, to our semester away, and all of the opportunities that await after graduation, the department teaches us how to get the most out of our degree.

As a result, I am embarking on this project to put to use those skills that I have gained and wish to develop further. Over the course of my six-month journey, I will document the trail but also trail amenities—specifically stairs—that allow man-made access to these wild areas. Most people sigh at the sight of stairs, yet they are necessary and designed components of the experience. By understanding their location, construction, materials, landscape aesthetic, and overall function, conclusions can be drawn about their success as environmental elements and their greater social implications.

The ATC website gives public access to AT data in the form of an interactive map. Parking, vistas, shelters, trail clubs, and communities can be seen visually along the length of the trail corridor and more detailed descriptions of each layer are delineated through additional links. The ATC has also launched a new campaign in 2019 called “Wild East.” Their aim is to bring greater attention to the importance of the AT and its surrounding lands by showing that the trail is the link tying together many impressive views and habitats along the east coast. “Our ultimate goal is to show how vital the AT is for the eastern United States...to preserve the AT and the remaining open spaces surrounding it as a natural retreat for all of us to enjoy.” (Suzanne Dixon, ATC President and CEO). A map of the focus areas for this initiative

can also be found on the ATC website. Screen captures of both these graphics are shown below for reference.



Using this data and the GPS features on my cell phone, I will be able to pinpoint each stair location within the greater context of the trail. I will then compare the conditions of each staircase to its proximity from the nearest parking lot, vista, shelter, and trail town. This will allow me to answer questions about the following qualities:

- Material choice
- Landscape position and “blending in”
- Physical demand (during construction and use)
- Relative popularity and usability
- Differences in staircases based on location

**Outcomes:**

Upon the completion of my thru hike, I will compile the photos into an interactive APP with all design, qualitative condition, and quantitative distance information. The analysis portion will take the form of a report available within the APP, and also a separate document provided to the department. The APP will be sent to Chris Seeger and be distributed to the department. This APP will serve as a visual and electronic resource to understand how external conditions affect site specific design, implementation, and use. It will act as a personal resource as well as a guidebook to be referenced by others when attempting to propose trail amenities.

Preliminary contact has already been made with a friend I have who is a software engineer for assistance with the APP development. I will also be reaching out to the ATC to coordinate if there are specific avenues that I would be able to partner directly with them on this. Possibilities could include up-to-date datasets to help them better plan their intra-trail organization maintenance planning; or more layers to reach the public through their interactive online map as well as in the APP format.

A presentation of this work will take place on LA Day of the Fall 2019 semester or in January as a kickoff to the Spring 2020 semester (to be determined once the end date of my hike is known). It will include a video screening of the entire hike summary, demonstration of the APP, and an oral presentation.

Landscape architecture offers a variety of lenses through which to view the world around us. Based upon our own personal bias and life experience, those lenses shape our perception of the landscape. I would like to think that I understand what I as a (soon-to-be) college graduate, lowan, and outdoorswoman bring to the table. Although, my first goal for this project is to strip myself of all conveniences and attempt a feat others deem impossible, the ultimate hope is that it will grant me another lens to add to my collection. The greater diversity of experiences a person possesses, the more likely they are to produce a holistic vision. Whether that's within a future project, the exploration of more knowledge, or planning the next adventure, I know that the thru-hiker lens will be one of my most treasured.

### Budget:

Funding Options	Cost
Total Hike & Expenses	\$3,200
Essential Expenses	\$1,600

<b>Total Hike &amp; Expenses</b>	<b>Rate</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Cost</b>
Flight from DSM to Portland, ME	\$170	1	\$170
Backpack	\$220	1	\$220
Hammock underquilt	\$150	1	\$150
Hammock rainfly	\$110	1	\$110
Camp stove	\$30	1	\$30
Fuel	\$6	6	\$36
Cookpot	\$50	1	\$50
Rain poncho	\$15	1	\$15
Trail runners	\$130	1	\$130
Food	\$50/week	24	\$1,200
Lodging in trail towns	\$25	12	\$300
Laundry in trail towns	\$5	12	\$60
Flight from Atlanta, GA to DSM	\$190	1	\$190
APP development	\$100	1	\$100
Unforeseen expenses	\$439	1	\$439
<b>Total</b>			<b>\$3,200</b>

<b>Essential Expenses</b>	<b>Rate</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Cost</b>
Flight from DSM to Portland, ME	\$170	1	\$170
Backpack	\$220	1	\$220
Hammock underquilt	\$150	1	\$150
Hammock rainfly	\$110	1	\$110
Camp stove	\$30	1	\$30
Cookpot	\$50	1	\$50
Rain poncho	\$15	1	\$15
Trail runners	\$130	1	\$130
Flight from Atlanta, GA to DSM	\$190	1	\$190
APP development	\$100	1	\$100
Unforeseen expenses	\$435	1	\$435
<b>Total</b>			<b>\$1,600</b>