



## **The MacKaye Biography: Unexpected Pleasures**

*By Tom Keene*

October 2021 is the 100th Anniversary of Benton MacKaye's treatise, 'An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning,' it seems fitting that we would look back on the life of the visionary forester, Benton MacKaye. That essay was the initial blueprint for the AT ... and his proposed southern spur route for the AT became the basis for our own Benton MacKaye Trail!

All his life Benton MacKaye loved maps. At fourteen he made a series of "expeditions" around his Massachusetts' hometown, Shirley Center. For each expedition he made a detailed entry into his personal "Geographic Hand Book," complete with hand-drawn maps that included his own contour lines. Later, his reports for the Forest Service were famous for the striking hand-drawn maps he invariably used to make his case. His enthusiasm for maps also was on display in his article proposing the Appalachian Trail. Many of his friends thought the striking overview map MacKaye drew for the 1921 article did more to capture people's imagination than all the rest of the article together.

MacKaye's preoccupation with maps is one of many insights that Larry Anderson brings to light in his biography, *Benton MacKaye: Conservationist, Planner, and Creator of the Appalachian Trail*. Numerous maps are reproduced in the text. They are fascinating.

Larry Anderson is not an academic historian; he is a journalist who grew up in Massachusetts near Shirley Center, loved the outdoors and developed a life-long fascination with MacKaye.

The book is meticulously researched and filled with fascinating details about MacKaye's numerous grand ideas and his many famous friends. Gifford Pinchot, Lewis Mumford, Aldo Leopold and Walter Lippmann are just four of the famous names that appear frequently in the book. And of course, there is the famous non-friend, Morton Avery, whose differences with MacKaye over the building of the AT, are given fair and thoughtful treatment.

The book pulls no punches about MacKaye's political radicalism. He was, for a time at least, a card-carrying socialist. This fact may seem shocking to Americans whose political attitudes were formed during the Cold War. But MacKaye was

born in 1879. His formative years were a full generation before the Russian Revolution -- at a time when capitalism was in its most bruising and raw form when the Robber Barons were at full cry and when men and women who tried to organize labor unions were gunned down by thugs hired by their employers.

In an age when economic development seemed a brawling, ugly free-for-all, the "socialist" notion of planning, particularly at the local and regional levels, appealed to many. Indeed, socialism's call for government planning of some aspects of economic life then seemed respectable, almost genteel -- especially when compared to anarchists and syndicalists of the time, who advocated a vast general strike that they hoped would bring capitalism to its knees and bring on world revolution.

Genteel socialists like MacKaye were an important element in the Progressive Movement that drove reform efforts in the U.S. -- from Teddy Roosevelt's assumption of the presidency in 1901 through the early 1920's. MacKaye got in on the ground floor. In 1903 he was the first graduate of Harvard's new forestry program and one of the first employees of the U.S. Forest Service established by Roosevelt in 1905. Readers of this newsletter will mostly be aware of MacKaye's advocacy of the Appalachian Trail and perhaps his contributions as a founder and early president of the Wilderness Society. But Anderson shows that Benton MacKaye played a behind-the-scenes role in many early conservation victories. One of these, the implementation of the Weeks Act of 1911, is of crucial importance to our trail.

By 1911 the fledgling Forest Service had shown it could successfully manage the existing National Forests in the west. Indeed Gifford Pinchot, the highly vocal first Chief Forester, gained such a reputation for aggressive empire building that he was forced from office. But virtually all National Forest land was in the west, where it had fallen, largely by inattention, into Federal hands -- the result of the Louisiana Purchase and other U. S. Government acquisitions. Creating National Forests in the east was politically tricky. Opponents claimed the government had no constitutional right to condemn and buy private land to create such forests.

Advocates of the eastern National Forests pointed to the Constitution's commerce clause, which the Supreme Court had interpreted as giving the federal government the right to take actions necessary to maintain the nation's navigable rivers. Advocates argued proper maintenance of the forests at the headwaters of the eastern rivers was essential to assure a moderate and manageable flow in navigable rivers. Opponents questioned this reasoning and forced an amendment

to the Weeks Act requiring that the U. S. Geological Survey (not the “empire-building” Forest Service!) should undertake a scientific study to determine whether in fact the management of the headwaters’ forests would have a significant impact on navigable waters.

The U. S. Geological Survey set up the needed scientific study but needed an experienced forester to take the necessary measurements in the New Hampshire’s White Mountains -- which were to be the test case. The man loaned to USGS by the Forest Service was none other than our own Benton MacKaye. MacKaye spent the summer of 1912 in the White Mountains collecting data. Thanks to his hiking trips as a young man, he knew the area well and he was very eager for a National Forest to be created in the area. On his return to Washington, he produced a powerful report filled with charts, tables, and, of course, maps. His report became a major part of the Geological Survey paper that enabled the Weeks Act to withstand numerous court challenges. That success was vital to the creation of the National Forests in the east, including much of the land through which the Appalachian Trail and our own trail pass.

The efforts surrounding the Weeks Act are only one of many dramas in which Benton MacKaye was involved during his long career. If you want the whole story, you will want to read the book, available on Amazon - Benton MacKaye: Conservationist, Planner, and Creator of the Appalachian Trail (Creating the North American Landscape) by Larry Anderson.

One final word: In 1930 MacKaye gave an address to the Appalachian Trail Conference as it was battling to create that famous trail. One of his lines strikes me as good advice for us as we continue to strive to make the Benton MacKaye Trail the preeminent mid-distance trail in the United States. MacKaye’s suggestion: “Speak softly and carry a big map.”

*This article first appeared in the President’s Column of BMTA’s March 2008 Newsletter -- Some revisions were made to reflect Benton MacKaye’s influence today.*