

History of the Appalachian Trail - The Foot Bridge

Story and photo by Tom Johnson


Seventy-seven miles south of Rockfish Gap, the Appalachian Trail crosses the James River. Originally it crossed on a narrow automobile bridge, and hikers had to

sitting in the river. He discovered that they were owned by one Henry Smiley, owner of a mining company in the area. Smiley had purchased the piers from the railroad company for

above the appraised price. Now, the club owned the piers, and the land on both sides of the river. All they needed to do was to build the bridge.

NBATC applied for a series of ICTEA grants to cover the cost of construction. They needed a 20 per cent match, but the piers were considered part of the match, and the appraised value of \$262,000 covered the match. The club submitted a total of four grant requests, finally getting enough money to cover the cost of construction. They were required to bid out to small companies, and the bridge was built in pre-fab sections and floated down the James River to be hoisted on top of the piers.

Legal issues dominated much of the project. The bridge was given to the Forest Service, but the Forest Service had to own the land under the piers to make it legal. This required an act of the Virginia legislature to donate ownership of the land under the river. And once the trail reached the south bank, it had to cross CSX land. The railroad had a huge staff of lawyers and always refused permission for an at-grade crossing. The company, however, eventually agreed to a trail under the tracks, a departure from its norm. Aside from the huge mound of paperwork necessary to complete the bridge, the role for volunteers was to construct the trail approaches to the bridge.

The bridge, dedicated on October 14, 2000, is the longest span on the Appalachian Trail. Tragically, Bill Foot had died of cancer the preceding April. The club named it after Bill, and since his last name was Foot, they didn't even have to change the name. It is now the Foot Bridge. 



Footbridge over the James River

compete with lumbering log trucks and speeding cars. On the south side of the river, the trail passed a hydroelectric plant. It was hardly the environment that Benton MacKaye envisioned for his trail, but was the best that could be done at the time, unless hikers wanted to swim.

Enter Bill and Laurie Foot. Laurie was from Chicago, and Bill came from Akron, Ohio. They met and married at Purdue University, and Bill became a purchasing agent for Babcock and Wilcox, while Laurie became a school psychologist. And they were hikers.

In 1987, after returning from an A.T. thru-hike, they became involved with the A.T. and the Natural Bridge A.T. Club (NBATC). Bill was constantly scouting for a more optimum route for the trail, and fastened on the James River crossing. He became intrigued with five piers

\$125 – since the railroad no longer used the crossing, they didn't need them. Now 80, he too no longer required the piers. Sitting at his home and talking to Bill and Laurie, he offered to sell them for \$1.

Bill and Laurie now had bridge piers. They got a friend to evaluate the soundness, and had to add height to elevate them above the flood line. (The James River coursed through a narrow gorge at that point, and flooding was always a concern.) Monetary grants would be necessary, but first they had to own the land on both ends of the planned bridge. On the north side, Virginia Power donated 35 acres. On the south side, a hunt club owned the land, and held out for a price above the appraisal. The Park Service prepared to condemn the tract, but the Trust for Appalachian Trail Lands (headed by PATC lawyer Chuck Sloan) stepped in first to get the agreement and pay

¹“James River Foot Bridge Story,” July 2, 2005, by Laurie Foot, as presented at the ATC Biennial Conference 2005; interview with Laurie by author; ATN, Mar-Apr 2000, p. 12.