I arrived in Southwest Virginia in 2005 and was reviewing all of the active A.T. projects when Cindy Schiffer, the local U.S. Forest Service (USFS) district ranger, said, “Here's the file for the New River relocation.” She handed it to me. It weighed at least five pounds and was almost three feet thick. She noted that she was told that relocating the A.T. to its permanent location on the north side of the New River in Giles County, Virginia was her highest priority when she joined the staff of the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests five years earlier. Now it was mine.

I dug into that file and was amazed by the history of the project, which dated back more than 30 years. It was the 1955 relocation of the trail from its former location along the eastern Blue Ridge Mountain range westward roughly 50 miles into the Allegheny Mountains that was the start of the challenge to permanently locate the trail on the north side of the New River. This significant move created the dilemma of crossing the New River. There were two choices, traversing the river on the bridge near Pearsburg, Virginia or the bridge in Narrows. The 1955 route took the bridge near Pearsburg then meandered upwards over Hemlock Ridge on unprotected private lands owned by Celanese, also known as the Celco plant, to Peters Mountain.

The overlook from the War Spur Loop Trail — connected to the A.T. — offers views of the Mountain Lake Wilderness, Johns Creek Mountain, and the valley below — all of which are part of a now continuously protected corridor in Giles County, Virginia. Photo by Alisa Moody
The Celco plant near Narrows, Virginia has been a locally important industry since the plant opened on Christmas Day in 1939. It has been an economic driver in a relatively poor county, and essentially replaced significant logging in the region before the U.S. Forest Service began acquiring logged out lands and ridge tops beginning in 1936. As the Celco plant grew, the unprotected A.T. shifted from the 1955 location that meandered through the back portion of the Celanese lands to a wooded strip closer to Route 460, skirting past the plant operations. For years, Celco had offered the Trail an informal right-of-way with a handshake agreement. But Trail managers knew that it was only a matter of time before the Trail would need to be relocated yet again.

In the late 1970s, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), the U.S. Forest Service, volunteers with the Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club, and eventually the newly formed Outdoor Club at Virginia Tech, began the long process of determining an optimum location for the Trail using the optimum location review (OLR). The OLR is an analytical process critical to ensuring that the Trail is located in the setting that best meets the congressional intent for location, outstanding recreation opportunities, and scenic resources. This process was pioneered by the U.S. Forest Service on the Appalachian Trail and is now used on other national scenic trails. The OLR analyzes land ownership, scenic resource values, natural and cultural resource concerns, and trail location and determines the optimal location for the Trail.

Actual trail relocations require an environmental analysis. After years of discussion about the OLR for the area north of the New River, several alternatives were selected and presented for consideration. For a variety of reasons — a baptismal site, railroad crossing, private homes — only one route emerged as a real option for the permanent siting of the Trail. In the early 2000s, Cindy Schiffer and former ATC regional representative Teresa Martinez worked collaboratively with representatives at Celanese to explore the potential of routing the Trail through the back portion of their property, squeezing through a narrow corridor between Celanese ownership and other private lands and up and over Hemlock Ridge. Interestingly, the chosen route was similar to the one initially developed for the major 1955 relocation. The relocated Trail arrives at the top of Peters Mountain near Peters Mountain Shelter.

Once it became clear in 2005 that everyone, Trail managers and the local community, agreed on the proposed route, we set to work on securing the necessary funding to acquire land from Celanese. The ATC lobbied Congress for three years. In 2009, largely supported by Senators Jim Webb and Mark Warner, the A.T. was allocated an appropriation of $1.7 million dollars to acquire lands necessary for the relocation as well as to protect the Trail corridor in Smyth County, Virginia. A private donation was also secured to help with pre-acquisition costs.

In the meantime, ATC’s Virginia regional staff worked on the ground with Celanese staff to put the finishing touches on the route. We met often with Celco plant manager Richard Mitchell and “Boomer” Brown. On more than one occasion Boomer joined the Trail design team to ensure the final route was compatible with the plant operations. Both Richard and Boomer provided invaluable assistance. Yet, I never sensed that they had any awareness of the real impact they were having on A.T. history. As Ron Tipton, executive director and CEO of ATC, wrote, “This is a wonderful opportunity to showcase what this region is all about — the mountains and the river.”
of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy has noted, “the acquisition of this route is a landmark achievement for everyone who cares about the Appalachian Trail. With this action more than 99 percent of the entire Appalachian mountains, including Peters Mountain, at Wind Rock Overlook; A hiker on the Trail in Pearsburg near the New River — photos by Alia Moody; Laura Belleville (centre), along with other ATC employees, community partners, and the Forest Service’s David Ferguson (far right) stand near a brand new white blaze at the dedication ceremony.

This was the first time in this region that nearby communities had been so actively engaged in Trail management.

Most experienced land acquisition specialists from the Cherokee National Forest, Dave Ferguson.

Dave is wonderfully patient and has a keen ability to listen. He worked diligently with Celanese attorneys to navigate their concerns while meeting federal land acquisition standards. It was another five years until the acquisition was finalized with Celanese ultimately donating the lands necessary for the new route (the appropriated funds will be used on another prior-ity A.T. acquisition in Virginia). Adding to the delays, before the easement could be recorded it required a review by the Department of Justice.

During the cold winter months of December and January, the Outdoor Club at Virginia Tech hosted six work days to help complete the portion of the Trail relocation on USFS lands. This was a feat of dedication given how cold and miserable the winter in Giles County was.

Waiting on the sidelines to complete the relocation, Andrew Downs, the ATC’s new Southwest and Central Virginia regional director, was organizing the ATC’s longstanding volunteers and new community volunteers to assist with the route as soon as the easement was recorded. The ATC received a generous $40,000 donation from Columbia Gas and Columbia Gas Transmission to help with construction to complete the relocation by this summer. “The opportunity to make the final protected section of the Appalachian Trail a reality is consistent with our sustainability strategy and philosophy to be good stewards of the environment,” said Carl Levander, president of Columbia Gas of Virginia. While the ATC’s largest Trail Crew, the Konnarock Crew, had nearly completed the 2.5 miles of Trail construction on the northern half of the relocation, there was still almost another three miles to complete on the new right of way.

The deed was recorded on April 2, 2014. Immediately, Andrew and his Virginia team’s engaging spirit organized volunteers from several Virginia A.T. clubs, including Natural Bridge Appalachian Trail Club, Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club, and the Outdoor Club at Virginia Tech. The first step was to clear trees from the new route. Several certified sawyers joined the efforts and in no time the route was ready for the U.S. Forest Service to use a trail dozer to rough in the new trail. Bill Gorge of the Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club and the Pathfinder crew were particularly helpful during the route clearing. Other volunteers followed up to put the finishing touches on the new Trail.

This ambitious project offered a perfect opportunity for residents from Pearsburg, and Narrows, Virginia, communities that are part of the official Appalachian Trail Community network, to get their hands dirty. Several volunteers, including the town manager of Pearsburg, Ken Vitrutum, joined the efforts. Others helped the cause by hosting dinners for the Konnarock Crew as they continued their hard work. This was the first time in this region that nearby communities had been so actively engaged in Trail management.

On May 23, the ATC hosted a dedication and ribbon cutting. Many community representatives joined the celebration as we hiked up to a scenic area overlooking the New River. This new route is the only Trail section where, hiking along a ridge, the hiker has a close, unimpared view of the river. This is a wonderful opportunity to showcase what this region is all about — the mountains and the river.

As we stood at this scenic spot we heard from several rep-representatives about the value of this project and the importance of the partnerships. As Tom Speaks noted, “this is a great example of what can be accomplished when corporations, federal agencies, non-profits, communities, and volunteers work together.” Celanese representative, Kristina Geelmuyden Karlsson, reflected on her passion for hiking and excitement for Celanese to be part of A.T. history. I am certain that her enthusiasm is contagious and many community members will be inspired to explore the Trail. Rob Innes from Columbia Gas leaned over to me at the end of the ceremony and said, “You know, our contribution to this project was a no-brainer. We were all so excited to help.” He added, “As we discussed the project internally I learned that one of our Columbus-based employees is a relative of ‘Grandma Gatewood’ (the first woman to thru-hike the A.T.).”

It’s truly amazing how the A.T. inspires collaboration and how its history weaving together people in unique ways. We painted the first white blaze. We cut the ribbon, shook hands, and promised an annual hike. It was a very good day on the Trail. 

Laura Belleville is the ATC’s director of conservation.