

MEETING RECORD NOTES

Tilson Farmstead Property Acquisition Planning Meeting

PATH/USFS/ATC @ Sugar Grove (Konnarock) Trail Camp
 Wednesday, June 17, 2009 (10am – 3pm)
 (These notes completed September 24, 2009)

NOTE: This report will also be accessible via the PATH web site
 on the Newsletters/Work Trip Reports page under the June 2009 entry.
 URL => <http://path-at.org/mainhtml/nlcover.html>

MEETING SUMMARY:

A meeting was conducted at the Konnarock Trail Camp recreation/meeting room (Sugar Grove, VA) among PATH members and representatives of the USFS (MRNRA) and ATC (Blacksburg, VA). The main topic of the meeting was to discuss the pending acquisition of the Tilson Farmstead (Nelson Tract) property located at the AT crossing of VA610 in the Rich Valley (Nebo/Ceres, VA). Other topics were discussed as well, including other PATH-only topics after the joint meeting. The information captured here is a compilation of the notes accumulated on the wall charts annotated during the day's meetings.

MEETING ATTENDEES (This listing is based on the action item response provided by attendee Mark Doty (PATH) to document the contact information for all attendees at the meeting.

| NAME | ORG | FUNCTION | E-MAIL | PHONE |
|------------------|------|---------------------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| Laura Belleville | ATC | Blacksburg Office | lbelleville@appalachiantrail.org | 540.953.3564 |
| Bill Boudman | PATH | Trail Boss | billboudman@aol.com | 919.782.3117 |
| Mark Doty | PATH | Section Co-Leader | mmdoty@comcast.net | 540.448.0551 704.433.8702 |
| John Hartpence | PATH | Secretary | HartpenceJohn@yahoo.com | (C) 704.645.1373 (H) |
| Jim Houck | PATH | President | houckjw@bellsouth.net | 321.383.5441 |
| Norma Johnson | PATH | Member @ Large | ngjohnson@earthlink.net | 919.929.8276 |
| Andrew Mitchell | PATH | Section Leader | atpathman@msn.com | 919.266.1833 |
| Bill Sadler | PATH | Member @Large | 2billsadler@gmail.com | 252.633.1426 645.635.0866 |
| Greg Weaver | PATH | Meeting Facilitator | nchome@aol.com | 336.918.3455 |
| Steve Yonts | PATH | Historian | MrZachsDad@aol.com | (N/A) |
| Beth Merz | USFS | MRNRA - District Ranger | bmerz@fs.fed.us | 276.783.5196 |
| Pete Irvine | USFS | GW/Jeff NF - Roanoke | p Irvine@fs.fed.us | 540.265.5298 |
| Sara Schell | USFS | MRNRA - Supervisor MRNRA – Grazing | sschell@fs.fed.us | 276.783.???? |
| Tom Blevins | USFS | Mgmt | tblevins@fs.fed.us | 276.783.5196 |
| W.J. Cober | USFS | MRNRA - Trails | wcober@fs.fed.us | 276.783.5196 |

AGENDA:

Following is the agenda for the meeting as posted at the beginning of the day.

1. Introductions – *Jim Houck* (PATH)
 2. Vision Statement -- *Greg Weaver* (PATH)
 3. History Overview of Tilson/Nelson Tract) – *Steve Yonts* (PATH)
 4. Property Purchase Status – *Laura Belleville* (ATC)
 5. Concerns/Hot Button Issues (Topics to Discuss) – *Greg Weaver* (PATH)
 6. What Next ? (Projects, Action Items, etc.) – *GROUP*
 7. Meeting Wrap-Up – *Greg Weaver* (PATH)
 8. Tilson/Nelson Tract Site Visit (?) – *GROUP*
- [NOTE – Due time constraints, no site visit was conducted]

VISION STATEMENT:

A vision statement, originally drafted by PATH, discussed and modified by the group in order to articulate the groups mutual desires for the ultimate use and goals for the Tilson Farmstead (Nelson Tract) property in the Rich Valley. This vision statement as finalized, is captured below:

Once under direct closed-purchase ownership ⁽¹⁾, draft/review/concur in partnership ⁽²⁾ a multi-term ⁽³⁾ management framework that continues/enhances the tract’s historical use in the context of ongoing local community benefits ⁽⁴⁾ and goals, while fulfilling applicable AT and USFS guidelines and requirements.

NOTES:

- (1) *Ownership* => Who, how funded, restrictions, etc. of a final, closed sale
- (2) *Partners* => PATH, USFS (MRNRA) & ATC
- (3) *Timeframe* => Near-term, medium-term and long-term
- (4) *Local Communities* => Nebo & Ceres, VA

HISTORY OVERVIEW OF THE TILSON FARMSTEAD (NELSON TRACT):

Steve Yonts (PATH) provided a short overview of the historical context of the Tilson Farmstead property tract and the surrounding area in the Rich Valley, including the Tilson Mill on the Holston River nearby. The present owner is Mr. Nelson, hence the property is sometimes referred to as the “Nelson Tract” in other documents and communications. The historical summary was also provided in printed paper form (2 pages) to attendees, and is included below as an “appendix” at the end of this document. The MS Word file of that document was provided electronically via file attachment in an email from Steve to all participants on June 22, 2009 (Ref. Action Item #2 in the table later in this document).

POINTS TO ADDRESS:

A round-robin brainstorming discussion was held for the purpose of soliciting participant’s ideas on items that needed discussion and potential follow-up. The initial agenda identified this as “CONCERNS”, but it was agreed by all meeting participants that this list should be considered items identifying “POINTS TO ADDRESS” during the meeting and any appropriate follow-up activity and/or action items. The following table lists all of the generated items in order of identification, along with the name of the person that suggested that item. At the conclusion of the meeting, each item was revisited to insure that participants, particularly the identifying attendee for a particular item, were satisfied that their item had been adequately addressed during the course of the day not all “POINT TO ADDRESS” items resulted in specific follow-up action items

| <i>ITEM</i> | <i>ITEM DESCRIPTION (POINT TO ADDRESS)</i> | <i>PARTICIPANT</i> |
|--------------------|---|---------------------------|
| 1 | Group concurrence on a “Vision Statement” for the property | Greg Weaver |
| 2 | Property deed restrictions that may exist | Bill Boudman |
| 3 | Making goals and plans realistic and achievable | Pete Irvine |
| 4 | Thinking too small or having a restricted vision for the future | Steve Yonts |
| 5 | Understanding the playing field and partnership “rules” | Laura Belleville |
| 6 | Establishing trail relocation needs and implementation of them | Mark Doty |

| | | |
|----|---|------------------|
| 7 | Concurring on a property tract naming standard (e.g., Tilson Homestead, Tilson Farmstead, etc.) | John Hartpence |
| 8 | Completion of NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) study for tract (i.e., who, when, \$\$\$) | Bill Sadler |
| 9 | Land character definition for resource management | WJ Cober |
| 10 | Protection of historical/cultural/natural resources | Jim Houck |
| 11 | Reclaiming the tract in its historical context (e.g., invasive plants, hawthorns, loss of pasture, etc.) | Bill Boudman |
| 12 | Maintenance and ongoing management of tract | Beth Merz |
| 13 | Making assumptions (boxing ourselves in) about land use that is restricted by regulations (e.g., grazing, etc.) | Tom Blevins |
| 14 | Cultural vs. land resource conflicts and priorities | Greg Weaver |
| 15 | Open land vs. tools and methods to use them appropriately | Pete Irvine |
| 16 | Preservation and enhancement of “hiker experience” (e.g., Trail Angels, trekkers, etc.) | Steve Yonts |
| 17 | Project timing and priorities (i.e., first things first) | Laura Belleville |
| 18 | Definition of an appropriate scope of the NEPA study | Mark Doty |
| 19 | Interim ownership (NPS) and interim property management needs until final ownership is established | Jim Houck |
| 20 | Water pipe on tract and what it represents (e.g., where, what, deed, etc.) | Beth Merz |

POTENTIAL PROJECTS:

This item was posted for general discussion, but ***did not result in any specific project planning*** other than consideration for including items in the action item list generated later in the meeting context. The information below is included here for the purpose of capturing the context of a project concept for dealing with the future of the Tilson/Nelson property and its ongoing management.

Phase I:

What => Purchase/transfer property from present owner (Nelson) to NPS to USFS
Timeframe => Near-Term
Deliverable => Deeds and properly “restricted” tract under USFS/ATC (PATH) control

Phase II:

What => Plan for and execute site stabilization activities
(e.g., deal with hawthorns, fields, water, fences, etc.)
Timeframe => Near-Term
Deliverables => (A) Accelerated NEPA Study
(B) Site Stabilization Plan
(C) Completion of clearing, removal and ongoing control activities

Phase III:

What => Trail reroute (e.g., over Plaster Bank Turnpike, by Tilson Cemetery, etc.)
Timeframe => Medium-Term
Deliverables => (A) Agreed-to (PATH/USFS/ATC) marked route
(B) Execute reroute implementation

Phase IV:

What => Community engagement for interpretation and participation in appropriate historical context
Timeframe => Long-Term
Deliverables => (A) Engagement Plan
(B) Trail Kiosk
(C) Loop trail(s) to Ceres and/or Nebo communities

(D) etc. ?

ACTION ITEMS LIST

At the conclusion of the meeting there was a wrap-up time when the main discussion was focused on “*What’s Next?*”, which took the form of identifying a list of appropriate action items for future completion. The table below lists those resulting action items, which became the basis for the more formal “Action Item (AI) Register”.

This formal AI Register was captured in excel spreadsheet format and included a number of additional items (in particular, those related to the “Parking Lot” (STILES) item discussed in more detail later in this document. The formal AI Register was published the first time via email (from G. S. Weaver) with file attachment on June 26, 2009 (Rev. 1).

A later version (Rev. 2) of the AI Register was similarly published and forwarded by email (G. S. Weaver) and file attachment on September 15, 2009.

The original in-meeting action item list generated during the June 17th meeting is contained in the table below>

| AI # | DESCRIPTION | ASSIGN TO | DUE DATE |
|-------------|--|---------------------------|---------------------|
| 1 | Distribute survey copies, 1 ea. to the following: => Pete Irvine & Beth Merz – USFS => Steve Yonts & John Hartpence - PATH | Laura Belleville (ATC) | 07/07/09 |
| 2 | Provide electronic copy of history summary to attendees | Steve Yonts (PATH) | 06/25/09 |
| 3 | Identify a PATH representative to attend the ATC’s TTEC Summer Institute follow-up fall workshop (Oct. 2009) | Jim Houck (PATH) | 08/07/09 |
| 4 | Conduct a Tilson/Nelson tract site visit to include PATH and USFS representatives (Pete Irving, Tom Blevins, WJ Cober, Beth Merz) | Mark Doty (PATH) | 07/31/09 (NLT) |
| 5 | ID and flag the PATH-proposed reroute of AT over the tract, with participation of USFS if possible | Bill Boudman (PATH) | 11/21/09 (NLT) |
| 6 | Propose a near-term site/tract stabilization plan | Beth Merz (USFS-MRNRA) | 08/31/09 (TBD-?) |
| 7 | Document concern about water pipe(s) on tract and provide information to Laura (ATC) to communicate to the NPS land acquisition rep. | Beth Merz (USFS-MRNRA) | 06/26/09 |
| 8 | Document and communicate the AI (Action Items) list to all meeting attendees | Greg Weaver (PATH) | 06/26/09 |

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

There was discussion during the meeting and afterwards amongst PATH members regarding the identification of ways that PATH could improve its engagement with the local SW Virginia community. One goal of this type of discussion was how to improve awareness of PATH’s existence and activities locally as well as possibly promoting a higher level of local Virginia resident membership and involvement.

One means of soliciting some input from members at Sugar Grove for the June 17th meeting as well as those there for that same weeks PATH Summerfest Work Trip was by posting some easel sheets on the wall titled “**FOCUSED INQUIRY**”. The sheets posed the following question =>

“What specific actions or projects can the PATH membership undertake to engage the local citizens of SW VA in AT-related support and engagement to result in benefits to their local communities and to PATH and the AT?”

The following listing provides the result of some of these discussions as well as the “*Focused Inquiry*” activity that week of the meeting.

| ITEM | FOCUSED INQUIRY & DISCUSSION ITEMS IDENTIFIED |
|-------------|--|
| 1 | Identify a PATH member to be a “Community Relations Manager” |
| 2 | ID/document community stakeholders by name and contact them to make them aware of PATH and its mission and solicit engagement and involvement (e.g., County Supervisor/Administrator, County Development Board members, Chamber of Commerce members, civic organizations like Rotary, Tourism Development staff, etc.) |
| 3 | PATH join local Chamber of Commerce (Bland, Wytheville, Marion ?) |
| 4 | PATH implement initiatives to focus on local Virginia resident membership expansion |
| 5 | ID PATH public relations (“PR”) management responsibility |
| 6 | Engage with local schools, principals, teachers, students, Boy Scouts (youth in general) |
| 7 | Update PATH information brochure to be “public-ready” for possible distribution |
| 8 | Arrange for and implement brochure distribution at local outlets (e.g., MRNRA Visitor Center, Sugar Grove Convenience Store, Marion Army/Navy Store, etc.) |
| 9 | Anytime PATH is “in-camp” locally, have some members attend local special events to promote awareness of PATH (e.g., community center events, local charitable events, etc.) |
| 10 | Develop a CD/PowerPoint (.pps) format slide show depicting PATH/ATC for use by members for presentations to community organizations and individuals (5, 10, 15 minute version?) |
| 11 | Conduct periodic through-hiker and/or Boy Scout work weekends (Fri. PM thru Sun AM) |
| 12 | Coordinate with local Boy Scout troop to partner with PATH and NC scouts for a work weekend/project/etc. (e.g., Dr. Paul Brown @ 276-783-8123, Marion VA scout leader). |
| 13 | PATH donate \$ to local community centers in areas adjoining AT or where trail passes through on PATH’s AT section (e.g., Flat Ridge, Ceres, etc.) |
| 14 | Complete one local school teacher/student engagement with trail maintenance |
| 15 | Make one presentation (CD/Slide Show) to one local community development council or board in Smyth, Bland or Wythe counties. |
| 16 | Develop a network of local trail monitors to work with PATH section leaders |
| 17 | Partner with a local community to put one loop trail connector to the AT into operation (i.e., assist with planning, layout and implementation) |

PARKING LOT (“STILES”):

An easel sheet for this general category of items (“Parking Lot”) was posted on the wall in case discussion got too far afield from the basic intent of the meeting, which was to focus on the Tilson/Nelson property tract. Only one item ended up being assigned to the *Parking Lot* => *STILES*. This item arose out of some discussions related to concerns about grazing and the trail, and it was observed that there were a number of fence stiles either in poor and/or unsafe condition or where the adjacent fencing was in poor condition. (NOTE: Stiles are structures, most typically of a “ladder” style, placed at fence lines on the AT to facilitate hiker passage over or through the fence). Stile typically are required where grazing of animals is occurring and fences must be kept up in a functional condition by a permittee (i.e., USFS/NPS lands with grazing permits) or a landowner (i.e., trail on private property easements)

This item (“STILES”) was not revisited at the end of the meeting, therefore it was not closed out properly. However, after the meeting as a result of ongoing email discussions by PATH, a “Stile Inventory & Repair” project was undertaken by PATH during the July/August 2009 time frame with the goal of inspecting all stiles for condition/safety issues, and completing “emergency” repairs and upgrades as appropriate. This activity is documented in a separate report and was the subject of some action items being captured in the “Action Item Register” resulting from this meeting. The “Action Item Register” was published separately after the meeting, as well as a September 15th version (Rev. 2) published to all attendees via an email distribution of an attached excel file of the register.

Prepared and submitted by: Greg S. Weaver, PATH Member, Beaufort, SC (Email => nchome@aol.com)

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NOTE

For questions about the information contained in this summary,
please contact Greg Weaver (PATH) @ nchome@aol.com.

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APPENDIX

Nelson Tract – A Brief History and Background [aka “Tilson Farmstead”] (Prepared by Steve Yonts – PATH)

The Appalachian Trail once climbed the East slope of Walker Mountain along the Wythe, Smyth and Bland County lines and followed the crest of the mountain about 40 miles to the village of Crandon in northern Bland County. A lack of water sources, patches of private land, a tourist trap and a hazardous highway crossing prompted a relocation, and since the early 1980's the Trail has crossed Walker Mountain at Tilson Gap where the three county lines intersect and has descended to the North Fork of the Holston River, traversing working farms of Rich Valley on its way to the magnificent panoramic views from 4,400 foot Chestnut Knob. Between the shoulder of Walker Mountain and the approach to Chestnut Knob, a patchwork of easements and acquisitions were hastily put in place to temporarily make way for the Trail. One such easement, crossing a cow pasture at the base of Walker Mountain, was only 75 feet wide. This bottleneck has remained for nearly 30 years as efforts to purchase land to the east of the Trail went through various fits and false starts always ending in no sale. What was once open pasture has become a tree lined alley accentuated by barbed wire fence. Frustrated with the lack of progress in protecting the Trail within an adequate corridor, Piedmont Appalachian Trail Hikers (PATH) approached the newly arrived Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) Virginia Regional Director, Laura Belleville, suggesting the land on the other side of the bottleneck would be just as suitable and perhaps the owner more agreeable. She telephoned the owner, determined he would consider a sale and the process was begun.

Today we know the land to the west was the better buy. A neglected cemetery on the property showed the most recent interment about 1918, several Tilson names and many stones too worn to read. As PATH members researched the cadastre, a fascinating story emerged. It seems a Virginia land grant was made to a Massachusetts man named Tilson, who, the day after his wedding, announced to his bride they were going to relocate to Seven Mile Ford, Virginia. Their family grew in the new location and by 1820, the elder Tilson and part of the family had relocated to near Erwin, Tennessee, while one son had remained in Virginia and married the only issue of Mathias Harmon, a well off land owner in upper Rich Valley and the Harmon farm had become the Tilson Farmstead. Eventually the Tilson family owned a mill and several other essential businesses in the neighborhood and petitioned for and was granted the establishment of Tilson Mill Post Office. Working with members of the Tennessee Eastman Hiking Club, PATH members explored the Erwin area and determined that the Tennessee branch of the family established a much more modest mill on their land and prospered at a somewhat slower pace. However, they produced a son who graduated Yale Law and in the 1920's was elected Speaker of the US House of Representatives. Today these two Tilson sites are connected by the Appalachian Trail which passes near Tilson land at Erwin and crosses Tilson land in Rich Valley.

Under Virginia's Internal Improvements Act, a corporation was formed around 1840 to construct a toll road or turnpike from Black Lick, near Rural Retreat, to Plaster Bank north of Broad Ford. The route selected passed through Tilson Gap, passed the Tilson manor house and forded the North Fork of the Holston near Tilson Mill. Definitive evidence has not been found to date, but PATH members researching this turnpike have determined that it is most likely the Black Lick and Plaster Bank Turnpike on which the Trail is located for most of its climb up the east slope of Walker Mountain. It had been thought the route was just an old logging road, but evidence indicates it was most likely the turnpike and that it continued in use as a thoroughfare until sometime in the late 1930's. PATH has documented the route for several miles, from Reed Creek to VA Route 42. In addition to documenting this piece of transportation history, PATH seeks to relocate the Trail to the turnpike route and to incorporate the existing Trail into a loop trail to provide area residents an opportunity to get on the Trail, get some exercise and learn a little local history.

PATH members have researched census records, libraries and their special collections, deeds, wills, newspapers, trial records and have interviewed neighbors to develop dozens of documented stories and events in the lives of the Tilsons. Photographs shared by Trail neighbors depict the Tilson Farmstead as it was in the 1920's and provides documentation of the location and composition of the extensive farmstead.

PHOTO



Tilson Farmstead, Thought to be Circa 1925

The Tilson family figures in sports history as well. Several Tilsons were football players of some reputation, and one, Dewy Sumner Tilson not only played for Virginia Tech in the early 1900's, lettering a record five years but also coached the team in the 1930's. He owned the Tilson Farmstead in the 20's and constructed a "vacation cabin" and several improvements on the property, remains of which may be seen today.

This land acquisition paves the way not only for achieving the standard Trail corridor but also for PATH to begin documenting and maintaining the agrarian life of the remaining Trail corridor between Interstate 81 and VA 42, said to be one of only two places in Virginia where the Trail traverses still working farms. Our goal for the Nelson Tract is to avoid the fate of many acquired Trail tracts that are removed from farming and simply allowed to return to forest by encouraging the recognition and maintenance of this land use while providing the hiker interpretation and appreciation for life and residents in the Southern Appalachians, present and past, whose stories would have been lost without the efforts of the volunteers of PATH.