



A NEW TRAIL TO

Thundering Falls

BY J.T. HORN

Taking on an unfinished task can be a mix of frustration and reward. Frustration at having to solve unforeseen problems and reward at seeing something that has been long undone completed.

About seven years ago, I was asked to take over the project of designing a relocation of the Appalachian Trail to eliminate a road walk and bring the Trail to Thundering Falls in Killington, Vermont. Thundering Falls is said to be the sixth tallest waterfall in Vermont. It is part of Kent Brook which flows out of Kent Pond just north of where the A.T. and the Long Trail split. At high water it is a magnificent cascade as the stream tumbles over 100 feet through a steep and narrow cataract. The falls are also the site of a historic mill powered by the energy of the falling water.

After several trips to look at the site, I called Preston Bristow, the contractor who led the National Park Service A.T. land acquisition effort between Killington and Woodstock.

I wanted to talk with the person who purchased the land because, as a trail builder, I was encountering obstacles in all directions. In one direction was the 750-foot wide floodplain of the Ottaqueechee River—a daunting place to build a trail due to annual floods, active beavers and terrible soils. In two other directions there were private homes. It was easy to see how we could get down to the falls, but then it seemed we would be stuck there with no logical route to continue the Trail's progress northward toward Katahdin.

I understood that the decision to purchase the land around the falls meant there was a clear intention to bring the A.T. to this spectacular feature. Preston told me about the confluence of events that led to the NPS purchase of the falls in 1987.

After the passage of the National Trails System Act, the NPS was tasked with moving the A.T. footpath off of roads and onto a permanent corridor of protected land. The old A.T. ran along Thundering Brook Road, a town road open to vehicles. At the same time NPS was searching for a new route for the A.T., the owners of the mill were seeking to divert water from Kent Brook into the old mill to generate electricity. The plans for the hydroelectric



The falls tumble over 100-feet through a narrow cataract; existing rockwork on the trail to the falls.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE GREEN MOUNTAIN CLUB



plant met with stiff opposition from the neighbors who shared frontage on the stream. One of the reasons for the opposition was that they worried it would curtail access to the falls. These same neighbors also had a disputed boundary line with the owners of the mill. A settlement agreement solved all three problems at once. The boundary line was clearly defined, the neighbors removed their opposition to the hydroelectric power project, and the NPS would step in and purchase interests in land from both parties to guarantee public access to the falls via the A.T. It was a grand compromise and it seemed like the optimal solution.

As events rolled forward the boundary was clarified, the hydroelectric project was constructed, and NPS purchased the land around the falls. There was a problem though. Because of the steep slopes, thin soils and several cliffs above the stream, ATC and the Green Mountain Club (GMC) didn't have a good route to the falls. Nor did we have a way to connect the falls to the rest of the Trail on the north side of the floodplain. This was also the era when large sections of the Appalachian and Long Trails were being relocated and GMC volunteers and Trail crews had their hands full. Fifteen years went by since the land had been acquired. The A.T. was still on the road and there was no trail leading to the falls. It was clear that the details of the final trail design had not been thought through when the land was purchased for the A.T.

Along with Dave Hardy and Greg Western at the Green Mountain Club and Tom Paquette, John Kamb and Steve Kimball at the Green Mountain National Forest (GMNF), we started working out different routes for the Trail. Most were rejected by USDA Forest Service soil scientists due to the lack of stable ground in which to set rock steps and build a treadway. After dozens of trips and countless proposals, we finally reached consensus that the best location was to build a trail down to the base of the falls and then continue across the floodplain on a raised boardwalk. We estimated this route would cost more than \$200,000 due to the difficulty of building a boardwalk in the floodplain as well as the large amount of rock work required to get down the steep slope above the falls.



The accessible boardwalk leads to a working historical mill; a pull off encourages visitors to take in the view.

PHOTOS BY MATT STEVENS

Accessibility

By choosing to build a boardwalk, we had an opportunity to make the route accessible. For many years, ATC had been looking for places where we could improve access to the A.T. without diminishing the remote and challenging nature of the Trail. Thundering Falls was a desirable destination and because we were building a boardwalk to get there meant that we were very close to meeting the technical specifications for handicapped

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The Project That Ate a Field Season ■ GMC and Thundering Falls

BY WENDY K. PROBST

A tremendous amount of planning and improvisation on the part of the Green Mountain Club (GMC) went into the Thundering Falls relocation project. While the necessary process of eliminating a road walk on Thundering Brook and River roads was the introductory goal, the passion for the project was driven by a desire to create a wheelchair-accessible trail.

“People may be getting their first A.T. experience because of the accessibility, including friends and family,” said GMC’s director of communications, Jenn Karson. “[The project] is something that has been on people’s minds for so long ... only when considering all the options it became a great opportunity to create the accessible trail as well.”

With the elimination of a road walk and the addition of the impressive view of Thundering Falls and the Ottauquechee River, the relocation is a wonderful addition to the A.T. experience in Vermont. GMC’s mission statement sums up why they have been so intricately involved in the project: “To make the Vermont mountains play a larger part in the life of the people by protecting and maintaining the Long

Trail System and fostering, through education, the stewardship of Vermont’s hiking trails and mountains.”

“We are about creating access for the public to enjoy public land,” Karson said. “That’s what we are here to do.”

The project has taken up such a large amount of time and effort on GMC’s part, Karson said it became known as “the project that ate our field season.” Putting the posts in for the raised 5-foot-wide deck that goes across the flood plain was a complicated task that required unforeseen, necessary technical training on machinery that staff and volunteers had never used before. “It took considerably longer to get one post in the ground than originally estimated,” said Karson.

But it has been well worth the effort for GMC. “Not only will it expose people to the A.T. and to the experience of meeting hikers,” said Karson, “it will make it possible for more people to take a short walk and see Thundering Falls.”

For information about the project and its grand opening this fall, visit GMC’s Web site: www.greenmountainclub.org



GMC crew members work on the raised, 5-foot wide deck of the boardwalk.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE GREEN MOUNTAIN CLUB

accessibility. Accessible trails require three basic things—a very gentle grade, few bumps or obstacles, and a firm and stable surface. The boardwalk with its composite lumber deck lacked barriers and was firm and stable. The gradient was such that we would not have any trouble meeting the specifications for a handicapped accessible trail except in one spot, where we would have to build a substantial crib-wall of wood and stone.

In 2005 construction began with crews from the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps (VYCC) building the upper rock staircases and switchbacks. In 2006, the Green Mountain Club’s Volunteer Long Trail Patrol built the boardwalk under the able leadership of crew boss, Matt Wells. GMC crews encountered some real challenges when the helical piers that support the deck went down 90 feet before they hit soils that were firm enough to support the structure. This added lots of time and expense to a project that was already huge in scope and cost. This summer GMC and VYCC are finishing the boardwalk and the surfacing of the accessible trail. The National Park Service provided most of the funding and the ATC, GMC, and GMNF also kicked in. The project is on track to open this September.

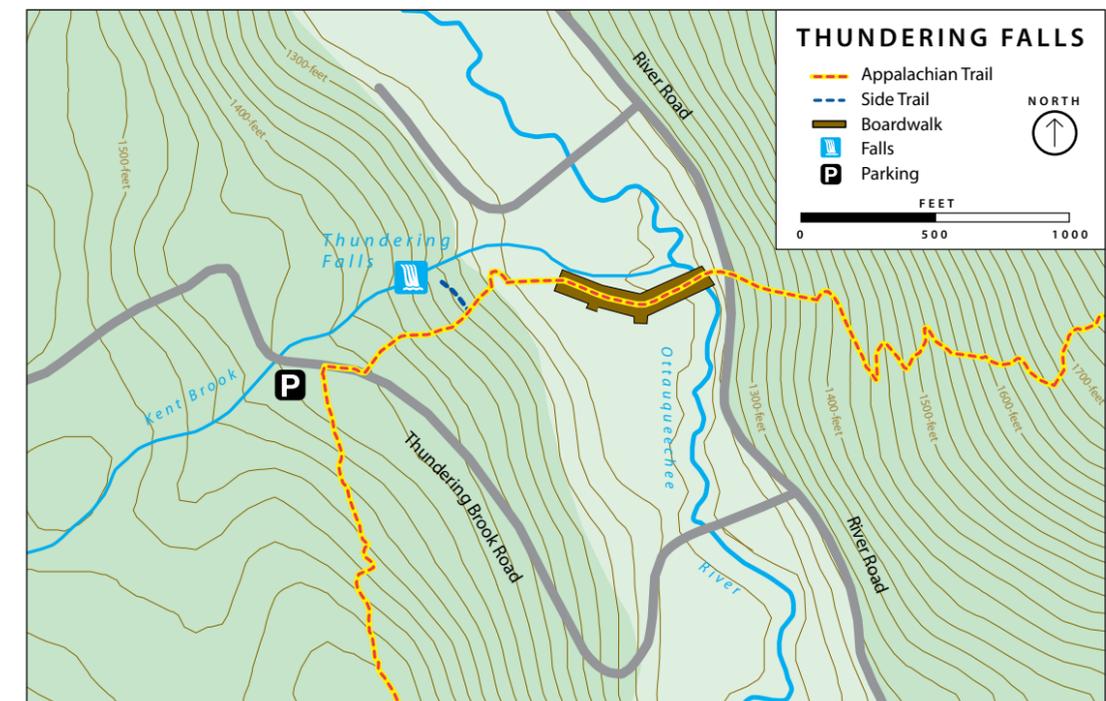
The completion of the Thundering Falls relocation is important for another reason; it is the last major relocation of the A.T. in New England. The 30-year effort to move the A.T. to a remote and scenic location and away from road is now complete in the northern part of the Trail. It is no surprise that a complex trail design, close to homes, with beavers, bad soils and local controversy made Thundering Falls the last big relocation to be completed. If you are ever in central Vermont after a big rain when the falls are thundering—you should come by and hear it for yourself.



Crews from VYCC have worked extensively on the project since 2005.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE GREEN MOUNTAIN CLUB

For more information on the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps and their 3-year involvement in the Thundering Falls relocation project, visit: www.vycc.org



MAP BY MATTHEW ROBINSON, ATC GIS OFFICE