

## **TOM'S Trail Talk:**

### **ATPO – the Appalachian Trail Park Office**

If you've ever been to Harpers Ferry and had occasion to visit Jefferson Rock, you might remember the walk back toward town. Those concave rock steps, worn down by thousands of tourists, keep your eyes trained downward, and you probably didn't look off to your left, at some old, red brick, nineteenth-century government buildings. One of them has a small wooden sign that you undoubtedly missed. It is the headquarters of the Appalachian Trail Park Office.

Since the passage of the National Trails Act of 1968, the National Park Service has been the steward of the Appalachian Trail (AT). Created by volunteers, the AT had become too important an enterprise to be subjected to the vagaries of development pressures and private land owners. And so, in 1968, the Federal Government created the longest, skinniest national park in the country. It took many years for the Feds to protect the entire trail, and in fact the job is not yet quite finished. (Of the 2175 miles, about 7 miles are still not protected.)

In the beginning, the Park office that was responsible for securing the trail was called the Appalachian Trail Project Office, because it was a project. It is now a Park (a "unit" of the National Park Service) rather than a Project, with a regular staff that manages the trail. It makes its headquarters only a mile or so from the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), and the two organizations enjoy a very close relationship. ATC is the private partner, and ATPO is the public entity.

The Park Manager is Pam Underhill. Pam joined the Department of the Interior in 1977, after running a pottery shop in Harpers Ferry. She worked in the Department of the Interior legal counsel office, and two years later she joined the AT Project Office. After stints as a realty specialist, planner, and environmental protection specialist for the AT Project, she became the Park Manager in 1995.

Despite being responsible for a park almost 2220 miles long, she has only nine staff members who are expected to handle all Trail affairs for the Federal Government. There is Ranger Bob Gray, formerly known as the Lone Ranger because he was the only law enforcement ranger for the entire park. (He has recently been joined by a second ranger, Todd Remaley, who hangs his Park Service hat in Boiling Springs, co-located with the Mid-Atlantic office of ATC.) There is Pete Irvine, who is a Forest Service ranger on liaison duty with ATPO.

Don Owen is one of the staffers who we deal with frequently. Don is responsible for environmental compliance, cultural resource programs, and the federal land acquisition/corridor design for the Appalachian Trail Park Office. After previous stints with the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management in Colorado, he began work as a realty specialist on the Appalachian Trail in 1985. He and several other ATPO staffers are also proud members of PATC.

Rita Hennessy, Outdoor Recreation Specialist, has been with ATPO for nine years. Rita started with the National Park Service in 1989 in Zion National Park, and has also worked at Bryce Canyon National Park, the National Mall and the Department of the Interior.

Dave Reus has helped us on trail condition assessments, while Casey Reese is their GIS specialist, and someone who can give us advice as we get into the GIS world. Kent Schwarzkopf is the natural resources specialist, and works closely with Bob Pickett, the Club naturalist, in order to identify and protect rare and endangered species along the trail. Angela Walters is their administrative specialist, personally responsible for keeping Pam organized.

The Delegation Agreement signed between ATC and NPS in 1984 (just renewed for another 10 years in 2004) gives trail maintenance responsibility to ATC, and ATC, in turn, delegates most of that action to clubs like PATC. But the Federal Government reserved five functions: land acquisition, law enforcement, surveys, compliance with Federal statutes and administrative regulations, and issuance of special use permits. That, and maintaining a vibrant relationship with thousands of volunteers up and down the trail, keeps Pam and her staff busy more than full-time.



**Folks, meet Pam Underhill and her staff.** Left to right: Rita Hennessy, Dave Reus, Pete Irvine, Angela Walters, Kent Schwarzkopf, Bob Gray, Pam Underhill, Todd Remaley, Casey Reese, and Don Owen.

*Tom Johnson is the President of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC), one of 30 local A.T. Clubs affiliated with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC). This article appeared in Tom's regular column in the April 2006 edition of the PATC newsletter, the "Potomac Appalachian."*