

## **Benton MacKaye and Freedom's Way: The "New Exploration" of a Regional Environment**

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A stated goal of the Freedom's Way Heritage Association is to preserve "the landscape of visionaries and experimenters," a landscape that encompasses some 42 Massachusetts and New Hampshire communities.

I'm gratified to be asked to speak to your association tonight, not just to talk about one of those visionaries, Benton MacKaye, but for the purely personal reason that I've been closely connected to this landscape all of my life. I resided here for most of my first thirty years, growing up and living in Townsend, Pepperell, and Harvard. My mother now lives in Groton. And although I now live in Rhode Island, I occupied this landscape daily in imagination while researching and writing Benton MacKaye's biography.

My family's experience in the region encompassed by Freedom's Way spans several generations and is perhaps typical of many such families who have participated in the region's dynamic history, economy, and culture. Most of us who have lived here aren't going to be remembered as famous visionaries and experimenters like Thoreau, Emerson, the Alcotts, or Benton MacKaye. But it's worth keeping in mind that the essence of the heritage you celebrate and seek to preserve was experienced and created by ordinary folks and families with their own ambitious personal visions, who were embarked on their own challenging experiments.

Benton MacKaye *was* one of the well-known visionaries and experimenters whose ideas and legacy still inspire those, like yourselves, who are working to develop Freedom's Way. MacKaye was a long-time resident of Shirley –or, as he liked to make clear, Shirley Center.

From the moment he arrived in Shirley Center as an eight-year-old boy in the summer of 1887, MacKaye fell in love with the community and with the regional landscape surrounding it. MacKaye's home terrain provided the model, the inspiration, and the on-ground laboratory for many of his ideas about recreational trails, regional planning, conservation, transportation, wilderness preservation, and the creation and cultivation of habitable, sustainable communities.

"How can we develop in fullest measure the inherent environment of home community and landscape?" MacKaye asked in his 1928 book, *The New Exploration: A Philosophy of Regional Planning*. *The New Exploration*, as its subtitle suggests, is more a philosophical tract describing the quest for the good life than a technical manual about land-use planning. The era of exploration that opened up new lands or, as MacKaye put it, "the wilderness of nature," had come to an end. The "new exploration" of his era confronted what he called a "wilderness of civilization." And that "new exploration" consisted of the "visualization" – a favorite term of MacKaye's –of three processes that corresponded to what he described as "the three needs of cultured man." Those three processes were, in his words: "The conservation of *physical* natural resources. The control of commodity-flow. [And] the development of environment, or *psychologic* natural resources."

Decades before conservationists began describing themselves as "environmentalists," MacKaye devoted most of his book to explaining the significance of what he called "environment as natural resource." MacKaye's notion of the "development of environment," it seems to me, reverberates today in your own efforts to create and win federal recognition for the Freedom's Way Heritage Area.

"Man *lives* not by bread alone," MacKaye wrote, "nor by clothing, nor by shelter.... Each one us, each family of us, needs a roof, and warmth, and light, and water supply, and some degree of sanitation. But it takes more than these to make a home. Each group of us who live in the same town need houses and stores and streets and churches and school buildings; but it takes more than these to make a real community. The nation as a whole needs towns and roads and industries and a great deal of other material plant: but it takes more than these to make a pleasant land to live in. Mere 'shelter', therefore,

will not suffice. We need further category. This is environment: it is a particular environment – *indigenous, innate, symphonies environment.*”

The issues MacKaye addressed in *The New Exploration* are remarkably similar to the themes around which Freedom's Way is organizing its programs, namely: Rediscovering the Native Landscape, Inventing the New England Landscape, and Shaping the Landscape of Democracy. These themes echo MacKaye's approach to the development and preservation of what he called the “indigenous environment,” the setting necessary, as he saw it, for living a spiritually, psychologically, and materially complete life.

MacKaye is of course best known for his conception of the Appalachian Trail, the 2,170-mile hiking path between Springer Mountain in Georgia and Katahdin in Maine, which he proposed in 1921. [Many of this season's hopeful Appalachian Trail thru-hikers have already set out from Springer Mountain, headed north.] But his long career and considerable legacy consisted of much more than the Appalachian Trail.

I want to focus on a brief period of MacKaye's life, in the mid-1920s, when he was working at a fever pitch to refine and articulate his ideas about regional planning, not only in *The New Exploration*, but in the blizzard of articles, reports, maps, and correspondence he produced in these years. During this period he was headquartered at the MacKaye's residences in Shirley Center, on the family property he measured at precisely 2.709 acres. With a combination of irony and pride, he called the little two-house family compound –the “Empire.” From this vantage point he surveyed the region, the continent –indeed the entire earth.

Even as a young teenager, Benton had begun to explore the countryside surrounding Shirley Center in a systematic and scientific manner. He was inspired by explorers like John Wesley Powell and Robert Peary, both of whom he had heard lecture in Washington during the winter of 1890 and 1891. In the summer of 1893, Benton set forth on a series of what he called “expeditions” to investigate the countryside within daily walking distance of Shirley Center.

“I have the country spread out like a map before me,” the fourteen-year old explorer wrote in his notebook on June 12, 1893, during the ninth of his expedition, as he surveyed the panorama from the 542-foot summit of Hunting Hill, in eastern Lunenburg. He could see “the Mulpus Valley breaking through the hills” to the southeast, widening as it neared the Nashua River. Across Mulpus Brook, he wrote, “stands Shirley Ridge 422 feet high on which the little town of Shirley Center is situated hemed [*sic*] in by the woods so that high as it is very little can be seen of the outside world. A pretty place but overrun with gossip.”

When James MacKaye, one of Benton's older brothers, came across the record of this excursion to Hunting Hill, he teasingly described the young pathfinder's habits as “expedition nining.” Benton use the phrase proudly thereafter as a metaphor for his new explorations, both physical and philosophical.

MacKaye pursued an active and accomplished career before a series of professional setbacks and personal tragedies brought him back to Shirley in the early 1920's as an unemployed widower at mid-life and mid-career. I'll only briefly summarize his early career. He had graduated from Harvard in 1900, spent several frustrating years as a tutor in New York City, then returned to Harvard to study forestry, where he earned the first graduate degree granted by the university in that discipline. During these years, he spent part of each summer hiking and exploring the mountains of northern New England, gathering the experiences that would inspire his conception of the Appalachian Trail and his devotion to the cause of wilderness preservation as a co-founder and leader of the Wilderness Society. He entered the United States Forest Service in 1905, the year of that agency's creation, and spent the next several years splitting his time between Forest Service work throughout the northeast and teaching forestry at Harvard. He was fired from Harvard in 1910, but secured a full-time position with the Forest Service the next year, when he moved to Washington. He spent most of the next decade working for that agency and for the Department of Labor, traveling the country widely in pursuit of his official duties. In fact, he once claimed that he had visited 46 of the 48 contiguous states.

While living in Washington, Benton met and in 1915 married Jessie Hardy Stubbs –familiarily known as “Betty” –who was active in the causes of women suffrage and world peace. During these years, Benton was becoming more politicized and radicalized. He was concerned about both the federal government's natural resource and conservation policies and the nation's involvement in World War I, which he opposed. The most significant product of those years was his substantial and provocative 1919 report for the Department of Labor, entitled *Employment and Natural Resources*, in which he outlined a program for planned, government-owed lumbering and agricultural communities on national forests and other federal lands.

Already, though, he was thinking about developing and connecting the nation's natural features, such as mountain ranges and river valleys, as a nationwide recreational system. In a 1916 article titled "Recreational Possibilities of Public Forests," he envisioned what he described as "a land-and-water transportation system which would connect and unify a possible national recreation ground which would reach from ocean to ocean."

1920 and 1921 were tumultuous and dramatic years in Benton's life. He left the federal government, and he and Betty moved to Milwaukee, where he worked as an editorialist for the *Milwaukee Leader*, a socialist daily newspaper. But he left that job after only a few months, as a result of his wife's outspoken involvement in the disarmament movement, including her controversial campaign to promote a "bride strike."

In early 1921, they moved to New York City. But while Benton was visiting an old friend in Quebec, Betty took her life, leaving Benton distraught, his life in shambles. Later that year, partly as a therapeutic exercise undertaken with the encouragement of his friend, Charles Harris Whitaker, editor of the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, he wrote the article in which he first proposed the Appalachian Trail. "The project in one for a series of recreational communities throughout the Appalachian chain of mountains from New England to Georgia, these to be connected by a walking trail," he wrote. "Its purpose is to establish a base for a more extensive and systematic development of outdoor community life. It is a project in housing and community architecture."

The response to this article, which appeared in Whitaker's magazine in October 1921, changed the direction of MacKaye's life. Not only did he work productively during the early 1920's to promote the Appalachian Trail, but he also began collaborating with new colleagues and friends, including architect Clarence Stein and writer Lewis Mumford, to create the Regional Planning Association of America. It was during these years that he re-established and cultivated his connections to Shirley.

MacKaye used New England, the state of Massachusetts, and the region surrounding Shirley as a testing ground for his ideas about regional planning. For MacKaye, Shirley Center set the standard for his ideal of balanced, harmonious community life. In fact, he dedicated his *New Exploration* to "Shirley Center, An Indigenous Community."

MacKaye sometimes romanticized and idealized regional landscapes, whether the thousands of miles of the Appalachian Mountain domain or the modest terrain within view of Mount Monadnock. But he had explored these landscapes on his own two feet and studied them with his own eyes. His plans and schemes were rooted in real places, including the region surrounding Shirley Center.

While he worked on *The New Exploration*, MacKaye was reading and thinking about the region's cultural, historical, and literary legacy. He was powerfully influenced by his friend, Lewis Mumford, whose reputation was then growing rapidly. Mumford's 1926 book, *The Golden Day*, subtitled "A Study in American Experience and Culture," was largely an examination of the 19<sup>th</sup> century era and regional experience that other critics came to call the "American Renaissance." In *The Golden Day* Mumford wrote at length about the influence of Emerson and Thoreau, among others.

"Just as Thoreau sought Nature, in order to arrive at a higher state of culture," Mumford wrote, "so he practiced individualism, in order to create a better order of society."

"What Thoreau left behind is still precious," he continued. "[M]en may still go out and make over America in the image of Thoreau." I like to think that disciples of Thoreau might work to link nature and culture and "to practice individualism in order to create a better order of society."

"Your book has been doing its part in tuning up my thoughts," MacKaye wrote Mumford from Shirley as he read *The Golden Day*. "I am eating it alive." MacKaye's letters to Mumford provided the first drafts of substantial portions of his *New Exploration*. One such letter illustrates how MacKaye used the local landscape as the source and setting for his general idea about regional planning. "I'll try to tell you what the hell I've been up to this autumn," he wrote Mumford at the end of 1926. "I have written three spiels. The first is a treatise of about 15,000 words called 'Planning a Region for Play'. I have done this in the hope soon of giving birth to its twin brother—a treatise on 'Planning a Region for Work'.... The second thing I've done is a boiling of the first. It is an article... entitled 'A Region Equipped for Play'. The third spiel is a less technical version of a portion of the latter. It is called 'The Kidder Mountain Trail: A Boy's Project Against Civilization'."

"The 'twin brothers' above noted would cover the whole ground, as I conceive it, of regional planning. The "region" for "play" is the region that we *live* in. This is the local region: the territory roughly embraced within the radius of a day's trip by motor car from the home site. The "region" we "work" in, on the other hand, is the region embraced by the industrial fabric, since whatever job we do in industry is

part of an endless chain reaching to the far corners of the Earth. Hence the work region consists of the industrial web throughout the World.

...  
 "...The autumn I've been digging in the realm of living. I have carved out a little region in that realm. It consists of the territory around about Shirley Center. This little region embraces the three fundamental environments (as I conceive them) which are necessary for man's full development. These are the primeval, the rural ([or] the "colonial" in New England), and the urban. The primeval is represented by a little range of mountains –the Wapack Range. The colonial is represented by several little "hill villages", among which is Shirley Center. The urban is represented by Fitchburg..., and Boston is near by. Each environment, I point, should be kept intact and developed as a basic human resource in itself. But each one is threatened (and the urban already immersed) called the "metropolitan". And the job of planning a region for play, as I see it, consists in repelling the "invasion" of this metropolitan influence and of developing, as assets the preservation of the primeval; the restoration of the colonial[i.e., rural]; and salvaging (some day) of the true urban. The immediate tasks seem to be the first two just named –the problems of the primeval and the colonial environments.

"The spiel which I have written on "The Kidder Mountain Trail" relates only to the primeval environment. I have written this as the result of a little experiment which I have been conducting up here this autumn. The Bridgman School (for boys) is located here.... I have made several trips with a group of them up on the Wapack Range. We have put in a branch trail on one of the mountains –Kidder Mountain. Here is a laboratory experiment. (Of course no such terms are used –all we have done is to cut the trail and make a panorama as a first step in a real survey).

"I consider this Wapack Range as a very significant bit of country. In the first place it is already equipped "for play". A footpath has been cut and marked from one end to the other –20 miles. A permanent camp has been built midway on the route. The Range is about 50miles, air distance from Boston –the same as the Hudson Highlands country from New York. Someday it must become an Interstate Park (or public reservation of some kind). It will be for Boston what Bear Mountain Park is for New York. But it should be better. And now, before it becomes an institution, is the time to visualize and "plan" its proper usage. The foot-path mentioned is called the Wapack Trail. It is to the Wapack Range what the Appalachian Trail would be to the whole Appalachian Range. Here then we have in miniature the equipment for our whole Appalachian scheme. Here is a chance, on an epitomized, to develop the primeval environment."

For Benton MacKaye, then, leading a group of school boys on a trail-making trip on the miniature Wapack Range was a project of equal significance as the planning and creation of the entire Appalachian Trail. The Bridgman School boys many not have understood, however, that they had been conscripted not only to map the panorama from atop Kidder Mountain –but to fight a battle in MacKaye's campaign to salvage what he called a "balanced civilization." During these years, MacKaye participated in or proposed many other local and regional projects. For example, he urged Massachusetts state officials and conservationists to develop a linear park along the full length of Willard Brook and the Squannacook River. He proposed what he called a "Wachusett/Watatic Wilderness Way," a north-south recreational greenbelt that would link up with the Wapack Trail. As a consultant for the Governor's committee on the Needs and Uses of Open Spaces, he promoted a network of such wilderness ways throughout Massachusetts, from the Berkshires to Cape Cod. This idea was far too radical for the commission and for the times, though. The Governor's Committee choose not to include MacKaye's plan in it's report. Instead, he incorporated the material into his book as an example of how such wilderness ways could serve as what he called "dams and levees" to control the flow of "metropolitan civilization."

Later in the 1920's after the publication of *The New Exploration*, MacKaye immediately set to work on plans to control the impact of the automobile on communities and the environment. His most elaborate response was what he called the "townless highway," a proposed nationwide system of controlled-access roads intended to bypass town and city centers and to control roadside development. Unlike the Interstate Highway System initiated in the 1950's however, MacKaye's townless highway program included the simultaneous development of new pedestrian-friendly communities, which he called "highwayless towns," and the designation of parklands and wilderness areas protected from commercial and highway development. He provided one local example of the idea in his 1930 proposal for what he called a "Boston Bay Circuit." The proposed parkway surrounding Boston called for a separate northbound and southbound roads, flanking a 125,000-acre belt of parkland that would encompass a 100-mile continuous trail between Plum Island and Duxbury Beach. Some of these proposals were unrealistic and impractical. Some represent lost opportunities. A few have been pursued in modest

degree. It's necessary to acknowledge that Mackaye, like many visionaries, did have some blind spots. He wasn't much of an economist, for instance. He envisioned a sort of steady-state, planned economy. His plans didn't usually allow for the fast-moving dynamic of competition and capitalism, in which industries come and go, producing significant and unpredictable impacts on natural and social landscapes. He was, in fact, a sentimental, romantic socialist, hewing to the notion that economic activity should be planned and pursued for "use," as he put it, not for profit. His plans and maps usually didn't provide spaces for large-scale factories, for instance, even though such industrial plants were a part of the twentieth-century landscape and society in which he lived.

Mackaye's vision of regional development had no place for suburbs either. During his high school and college years, he had traversed the landscape between Cambridge and Shirley by train and sometime by bicycle, observing firsthand the transition from the 19<sup>th</sup> century rural landscapes of horse-and-buggy to the 20<sup>th</sup> century suburban landscape shaped by the automobile,

"Although the growth of cities can be accomplished in no other way than by the institutions of suburbs," he wrote as a Harvard undergraduate in the late 1890's "the last should be regulated, it seem, with more care than is now taken. Instead of pushing further into the country and turning farms, not into parts of real cities, but into deplorable 'half-way' state? Give me noisy streets, heaving crowds, and egotistical policemen, rather than a country of smoky sky, with oozy ground and manure flavored atmosphere knows so tersely [sic] as 'Lonesomehurst'!"

Today, of course, the landscape of Freedom's Way is in large measure a suburbanized landscape. What he called the "metropolitan invasion" was what we would call "sprawl." In searching for ways to control that "metropolitan invasion," MacKaye struggled, not always successfully, to manage the transition between public landscape and private landscapes. The American tradition of private property rights sometimes clashed head-on with the notions of public land ownership an regulation he promoted. This is the classic challenge with which we still struggle.

There are important element's of MacKaye's ideas and visions that are well worth heeding today, though.

One is the notion of using corridors following natural features, such as mountain ranges and rivers, as "dams" and "levees" for controlling and limiting growth, while providing recreational opportunities and protecting natural resources. Greenways, the conversion of abandoned railroad beds to trails, urban growth boundaries, the activities of local land trusts, and, of course, the creation of heritage areas exemplify today's approach to "linking up" separate corridor projects into larger regional networks.

It's also worth keeping in mind MacKaye's belief that the protection and cultivation of one environment requires consideration of all environments. The "primeval," "rural," "urban" and, of course, suburban environments are all elements of one regional environment. They can't be regarded or planned separately.

MacKaye also believed that "development" was not necessarily a dirty word. He used the term in biological sense. Organisms developed and grew. Humans were part and parcel of an organic environment, not separate from it. MacKaye always linked nature and human culture.

MacKaye's somewhat abstract notion of the "indigenous environment," I believe, means something like what we now call "sense of place." How can the idea and protection of "heritage" accommodate inevitable change and growth" including the provision of economic opportunities? How do we protect a "sense of place" without turning landscapes into "theme parks<" which freeze in time and place a romanticized version of the past?

Finally, MacKaye took seriously the role and abilities of volunteers and amateurs. The Appalachian Trail didn't exist before MacKaye called into action the volunteer "camp community," as he called it, that created the trail. Today, the Appalachian Trail is an established, well-known social and physical American institution, traversing almost 2,200 miles, some 14 states, and enjoyed by millions of people every year. The trail right-of-way has now been acquired by the federal government, (except for about 15 miles). But the management and maintenance of the trail still remain largely in the hands of the members of the volunteer clubs who belong to the Appalachian Trail conference.

During the 1950s and 1960s MacKaye came to know David Brower, then the fireband executive director of the Sierra Club. Years later, describing the distinctive nature of MacKaye's influence, Brower cited what he called "Benton MacKaye's Theory of How to Build Big by Starting Small." MacKaye himself, in a 1922 article about the prospects for the nascent Appalachian Trail, explained his subtle technique of reform in concrete terms comprehensible to any hiker or trailworker. "In almost every locality along the Appalachian ranges a greater or less amount of trail-making is going on anyhow from year to year," he

wrote. "Various local projects are being organized, and in one way or other financed, by local outing groups. The bright idea, then, is to combine these local projects to do one big job instead of forty small ones."

The Freedom's Way effort echoes the "bright idea" MacKaye described more than 80 years ago. In each of the communities of the Freedom's Way region, private organizations and governmental bodies are working on individual local projects. Together, the progress and completion of these projects add up to "one big job," which can benefit all the communities and residents of the region. During the 1960s and 1970s, as the environmental movement gained public and political support, the elderly MacKaye, then living in Shirley Center, won recognition for some of his visionary ideas and causes, such as the Appalachian Trail, the 1968 federal legislation to protect the trail, the creation of the wilderness Society, passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act, and the beginning of the National Wilderness preservation System. But he also took pride and pleasure in several local environmental initiatives, including the preservation of land along the Squannacook River and the efforts to clean up the Nashua river.

During those years, in an effort to build support for what he called "a hometown wilderness movement," MacKaye wrote a series of articles for a local newspaper, *The Public Spirit*. Recollecting his boyhood expeditions, he instructed readers in the fundamentals of ecology, as represented in the region's swamps, streams, geological features, and wildlife. In 1969, on the occasion of MacKaye's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, the Wilderness Society, of which MacKaye was then the honorary president, published his recent articles in a book titled *Expedition Nine*. Subtitled "Return to a Region," the book was the culmination of MacKaye's long-time desire to write a guide to what he once called the "open book of primeval nature." Describing a proposed local nature trail, he envisioned in his hometown a "path of endless expeditions," as he wrote, "never complete so long as kept open to what nature has to tell."

A nature trail in Shirley, the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine or a Freedom's Way National Heritage Area, a corridor comprising 42 communities each represents "a path of endless expeditions," connecting people to their history, to the natural environment, and to one another. The "new exploration" Benton MacKaye envisioned in the 1920s remains new today, some 75 years later. And it continues in the same landscape of vision and experimentation that inspired his personal quest to preserve and develop a balanced, harmonious, indigenous environment, in which, as he wrote, "work and art and recreation and living will all be one."

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