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The Long Path

The Vision and the Trail

Howard Hart

The Vision

Vincent Schaefer had a vision. In the early 1930s this Schenectady scientist and outdoorsman had in mind a hiking trail in New York that would be similar in some ways to Vermont's Long Trail, but very different in its fundamental character. It would not be a marked trail, but a series of isolated landmarks indicating a route meandering from the George Washington Bridge to Whiteface Mountain in the Adirondacks. The name of the trail came from Walt Whitman's poem *Song of the Open Road*: "There lies before me a long brown path, leading wherever I choose."

From Schaefer's correspondence we know what he had in mind (1):

There would be no cutting or blazing, for this trail would be a truly wild walk that wouldn't erode the land or scar the solitude . . . and each found site would be an adventure in orienteering
. . . . a route that a person having good "woods" sense could use to move across a region using a compass and "topo" map . . .

Work started on the Long Path in the mid-1930s. Though the vision was Schaefer's, very important early work was done by W. W. Cady, who laid out the route from the George Washington Bridge to the Catskills, with the progress publicized by Raymond Torrey in a series of New York Evening Post columns entitled the "Long Brown Path." Schaefer concentrated on the Long Path from Gilboa north. With the death of Torrey in 1938 and the start of World War II, the Long Path dropped from public view for over 20 years.

The Trail

Beginning in the 1960s, the New York–New Jersey Trail Conference adopted the Long Path as a new trail.(2) In the years following World War II, there had been rapid and extensive development in southern New York and the Trail Conference decided that Schaefer's idea of isolated landmarks and an orienting public was not practical. Some of the landmarks were no longer accessible, now on posted private land, others had been so altered as to lose their character, and the idea of unwelcome hikers rambling across private lands was worrying. Thus the Long Path became a maintained hiking trail marked with aqua blazes, following the general route that Schaefer and Cady had in mind. Where possible, the Long Path was located on state land or on private land owned by willing landowners. Where necessary, those off-road sections were joined by short sections of secondary roads. The NY–NJ Trail Conference publishes a well-produced, detailed trail guide for the Long Path, now in its fifth edition.(3)

The Long Path is heavily dependent on those private landowners who let the trail cross their lands. They are

protected by a revocable agreement with the New York–New Jersey Trail Conference in which the landowner can determine the uses to which the trail can be used, for example: "Yes" to hiking, "Yes" to skiing, "No" to overnight camping, etc. In return the Trail Conference takes out liability insurance covering the landowner should a lawsuit arise. In fact, New York State law relieves the landowner from responsibility for such uses of the trail. The agreement can be revoked with sixty days' notice.

In the 1970s the Long Path North Hiking Club was formed to extend the Long Path northward through Schoharie, Albany, and Schenectady counties. The volunteers associated with this club maintain the trails, removing brush and downed trees, and building bridges across streams. Members of the club also lead scheduled public hikes on the Long Path.



At this time the Long Path is a hiking trail that starts at the George Washington Bridge and extends north through the Catskills and through Schoharie and Albany counties, as shown on the accompanying map. The officially recognized trail ends in Altamont. Unofficially, it continues across the Mohawk River through Schenectady County. It is hoped that ultimately the Long Path can be extended all the way to Whiteface Mountain in the Adirondacks.

Since private land often changes hands, and since New York State sometimes obtains new lands, the Long Path is a dynamic trail, changing to reflect changes in land ownership. For instance, private land north of Thacher Park has recently become available to the Long Path, thus creating a need for a new edition of the trail guide. When this happens, members scout possible new trails, obtain permission from willing landowners, and clear, blaze, and map the new trail.

We are fortunate that Schaefer's Long Path passes through our area, even though not exactly as he planned it. There are sections that are pleasant walks with beautiful views. There are other sections that are physically demanding. There are sections for each of us; he would want us to get out and enjoy them.

1. Waterman, Guy and Laura, Forest and Crag: *A History of Hiking, Trail Blazing and Adventure in the Northeast Mountains*, Appalachian Mountain Club, Boston, Mass., 1989.
2. *The Long Path Guide*, fifth edition, New York – New Jersey Trail Conference, Mahwah, N.J., 2002 (revised 2005).
3. Schedules of the public hikes led by members of the Long Path North Hiking Club can be obtained by calling Mark Traver at 518 295-8039 or Cherie Clapper at 518 827-4386. In addition, there are useful articles online: Wikipedia has a very thorough article: "[Long Path](http://www.wikipedia.org)" at www.wikipedia.org; and the NY – NJ Trail Conference has an article on the [Long Path](http://www.nynjtc.org/trails/longpath/th/) at its Web site: www.nynjtc.org/trails/longpath/th/



Trained as a physicist, Hart worked in many areas at GE Research, ranging from the study of moon rocks to the development of MRI. He has been active in the Adirondack Mountain Club and is one of the Directors of the Long Path North Hiking Club. Info on the club can be obtained by calling Mark Traver at 518 295-8039 or Cherie Clapper at 518 827-4386.

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