Darlington Trail History by Jeff Buehler

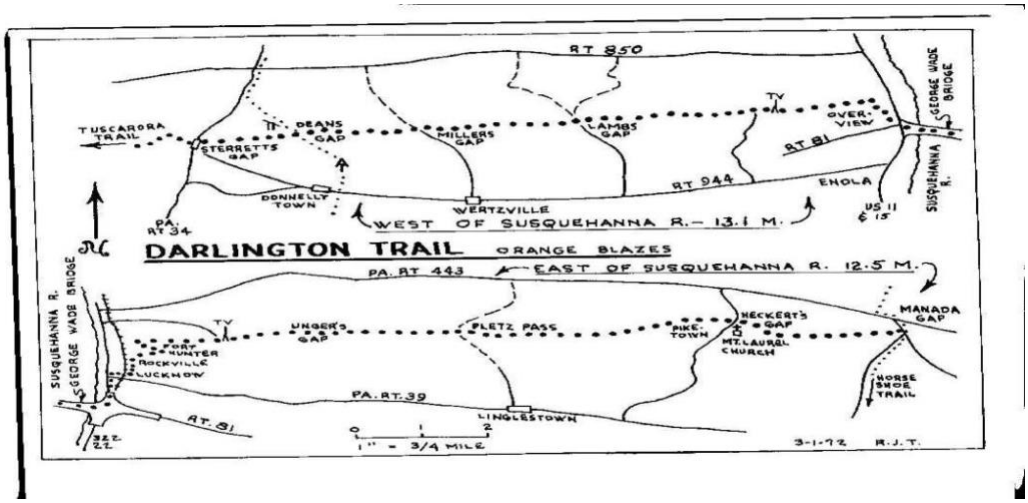
The Darlington Trail is a hiking trail near Harrisburg, PA and is located on Blue Mountain on the west side of the Susquehanna River. The current trail route was built, and is maintained, by the Susquehanna Appalachian Trail Club (SATC). The trail is 7.74 miles long and is entirely within the boundaries of PA State Game Lands #170.

The Darlington Trail was named in honor of Bishop James Henry Darlington (1856-1930) who was the 1st Bishop at Saint Stephens Episcopal Cathedral in Harrisburg. He was a prominent Harrisburg resident and Secretary of the Pennsylvania Alpine Club, the first PA state-wide hiking club. Henry Shoemaker, an early conservationist and environmentalist, founded that hiking club in 1917 and was its first president.

The original route of the Darlington Trail was laid out by the Pennsylvania Alpine Club. The trail was probably built sometime in the 1920's by the Harrisburg Chapter of the Alpine Club. It ascended Blue Mountain from near the west bank of the Susquehanna River and followed along the ridge top of the mountain. The Alpine Club was more of a conservation organization rather than a trail building club as by 1929 they only had a six mile section of the Darlington Trail built between the river and Lambs Gap. Eventually the trail was extended further west to Sterretts Gap and possibly beyond that gap on Blue Mountain.

In the 1920's, when the Appalachian Trail (AT) was first being built in Pennsylvania, the PA Alpine Club became involved in that project with the newly created Appalachian Trail Conference (ATC) now known as the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. The Alpine Club preferred that the new AT route follow their Darlington Trail route west of the Susquehanna River on Blue Mountain and then follow a more southwesterly course on various mountain ridges south to the Potomac River near Hancock, MD. That route would have been very similar to the present day Tuscarora Trail.

By 1930, and after much disagreement on the AT route south of the Susquehanna River between the Pennsylvania trail clubs and the ATC, the matter was settled by Myron Avery who was running the ATC by then. Myron Avery wanted the AT to leave the existing Darlington Trail at Lambs Gap on Blue Mountain and head south through the Cumberland Valley and then onto South Mountain. In December 1930, ten miles of the AT was marked between Lambs Gap to the Chambersburg-Harrisburg pike (US Rt 11) across the valley by Avery and another volunteer. The AT route now used the six mile stretch of the Darlington Trail from the Susquehanna River to Lambs Gap.



On the east side of the Susquehanna River, the AT was built by the Blue Mountain Eagle Climbing Club (BMECC) on Blue Mountain between Lehigh Gap and the Susquehanna River, a distance of 102 miles. The BMECC was formed in 1916 in the Reading area and started work on the new *Sky Line Trail*, as the AT was called then, in 1926. By 1931, the BMECC had constructed and marked this entire new AT section.

The AT route in Pennsylvania on Blue Mountain presented some problems for the trail clubs, ATC, and hikers. A Trail crossing of the Susquehanna River did not exist. The Rockville railroad bridge just north of Harrisburg and very near the foot of Blue Mountain, was off limits to hikers using it so they had to travel south five miles to Harrisburg to cross the river there on highway bridges. Also, during World War 2, the trail was closed on Blue Mountain near the Ft Indiantown Gap military base and had to be rerouted onto local roads.

In 1948, Earl Shaffer of York, PA, became the first recognized person to hike the entire AT continuously in one trip. He later became the Corresponding Secretary for the ATC and advocated for a major AT relocation in central PA that would rectify the problems associated with the Blue Mountain route. He would go on to help form a new AT club, the SATC in 1954. The SATC would, as their first project, help build this AT relocation with Shaffer leading the way.

Shaffer's idea was to move the trail off of Blue Mountain north onto other parallel mountain ridges between Swatara Gap and the Susquehanna River. The AT then could cross the Susquehanna on a highway bridge at the town of Duncannon and continue south on the north arm of Cove Mountain, cross a valley between two mountain ridges, and climb back up and across Blue Mountain at Deans Gap. There were also other AT relocations south of Blue Mountain in the Cumberland Valley and to White Rocks Ridge, northern part of the South Mountain, in this same time period. The ATC approved this major trail relocation and by March 1955, the new AT relocation was dedicated at the Clarks Ferry highway bridge crossing of the Susquehanna River.

With the newly relocated AT route done, that portion of the Darlington Trail between the Susquehanna River and Lambs Gap was no longer a part of the AT. According to first SATC President and founding member Ralph Kinter, Henry Shoemaker of the by now defunct PA Alpine Club, called him in 1954 to ask that SATC take over the Darlington Trail. Ralph indicates in an article in the Mar-May 1989 SATC *Bushwack Bulletin* club newsletter that the section of the trail between Overview near the Susquehanna River and west to Sterretts Gap was found at the time.

On the April 3, 1955 SATC Hawk Rock Installation of Officers hike, Ralph Kinter gave a review of the club's first year achievements and future plans to maintain the abandoned AT route on Blue Mountain from Manada Gap to Lambs Gap and its extension to Sterretts Gap under its original name, the Darlington Trail. The Darlington Trail from this point on would be referred to as the Darlington Trail West on Blue Mountain from Overview to Sterretts Gap (13 miles) on the west side of the Susquehanna River and Darlington Trail East on Blue Mountain from Manada Gap to Rockville (12 miles) on the east side of the river.

As early as the April/May 1955 Bushwack Bulletin edition, the SATC had scheduled hikes on the now 25 mile long trail. For many years, it was one of the favorite trails for the club to schedule hikes on including loop hikes with other old roads and unmarked trails. The trail was close to where most club members lived and the hiking was easy as the trail was relatively level and used a lot of woods roads on the mountain top for its route.

When the SATC took on the responsibility of maintaining the Darlington Trail on both sides of the river, the club decided to paint blaze the trail in blue which is the color for most AT side trails. It did cause some confusion with hikers with other blue blazed trails. It stayed blue until on an April 11, 1965 club work trip, then club president Hazel "Pat" Heim and past president Ruth Bolla finished painting the Darlington Trail East with a flamingo pink paint color. Pat indicated in her Bushwack Bulletin write-up that "if you inspect thoroughly, you will find vestiges of blue and possibly some white (old AT paint) interspersed with the flamingo paint." She went on to say, "Anyone free on Saturdays to help paint on the other side of the river so that our markings will be consistent?" On a March 1966 SATC loop hike using the Darlington Trail between Lambs and Millers gaps, the trail section was still blazed blue and still needed conversion to the flamingo pink paint! Eventually the entire trail received this very visible color.

By 1971 the Darlington Trail was re-blazed orange, the color it still is today. The Club most likely wanted the trail to match the blaze color of the new Tuscarora Trail in Pennsylvania which, along with the blue-blazed Big Blue Trail in Virginia, was conceived as an extensive "bypass" route for the AT in the 1960's due to threats to the AT in northern Virginia by private ownership of land and development. The Tuscarora Trail connected at its northern end with the AT on Blue Mountain and the Darlington Trail. Since the Tuscarora Trail used the Darlington Trail route between the AT and Sterretts Gap, the blaze color was changed to orange on that Tuscarora/Darlington Trail section and on the rest of the Darlington Trail.

The Tuscarora Trail in PA was built by Keystone Trails Association (KTA) members and affiliated clubs. By the 1990's the KTA transferred maintenance responsibility to the Potomac AT Club (PATC). The PATC wanted to combine their Big Blue Trail and the Tuscarora Trail into one long trail. PATC changed the blaze color to blue on the entire Tuscarora Trail section in PA to match the Big Blue Trail. They dropped the Big Blue Trail name and kept the Tuscarora Trail name for the entire combined trail. So nowadays the Tuscarora Trail is blue-blazed between the AT/Darlington Tr junction west to Sterretts Gap and the PATC maintains this 2.5 mile section.

Up through the years to the 1970's, there were still quite a few hikes scheduled on the Darlington Trail West and East described in the Bushwack Bulletins. Sometimes there were confrontations on hikes with private land owners. Over the years, the Darlington Trail East, which was entirely on private lands, began to be posted with more and more "No Trespassing" signs and access to parts of the trail were sometimes cut off. The club did continue to maintain and blaze the trail with work trips and individual trail section overseers. In the Piketown area of the trail, the club even tried to relocate a portion of the trail in 1976.

There were new home developments built along the south side of Blue Mountain as suburbia expanded towards the mountain and some new homes were built high on the mountain top near the river end of the trail. On April 14, 1982, at a program meeting, SATC members voted to discontinue the formal recognition and maintenance for public use of the Darlington Trail East, from Manada Gap to Rockville due to a recent landowner action closing a key portion of the trail north of Harrisburg, combined with extensive firewood cutting, vandalism, and housing development elsewhere along the trail. The Darlington Trail was now reduced to only 13 miles long on the west side of the Susquehanna River counting the Tuscarora/Darlington section east of Sterretts Gap to the AT.