Darlington Trail History (part 2)

by Jeff Buehler

In the 1980's and into the early 90's, the SATC still scheduled hikes on the Darlington Trail on the west side of the Susquehanna River. It was still possible to hike the entire 13 miles of the trail between Overview, near the river, to Sterretts Gap. The Club still continued to maintain this entire trail section which included the Tuscarora/Darlington section west of the Appalachian Trail (AT) junction which by now had moved about ¾ of a mile east of Deans Gap due to AT relocations. Sometimes club hike leaders would occasionally schedule and lead hikes using the old Darlington Trail East too even though that part of the trail was no longer being officially maintained by the Club.

In 1993, at a SATC quarterly meeting, a motion was passed to relocate the portion of the Darlington Trail West between Overview (eastern terminus) and Tower Rd due to problems with a landowner. The new proposed route would take the trail down the south side of Blue Mountain on the heavily eroded Tower Rd. This effectively moved the eastern terminus of the trail from Overview to Tower Rd and eliminated about 3 miles of the easternmost portion of the trail. This was a part of the Darlington Trail which was once the original route of the Appalachian Trail when it was first laid out on Blue Mountain in about 1930. The loss of this section also eliminated the Susquehanna River Gap viewpoint (winter views only by this time) at the eastern end of the mountain just as the Darlington Trail East viewpoint on the opposite side of the river was lost in the decade earlier. Now the Darlington Trail was down to 10 miles long including the Tuscarora/Darlington section.

DT East View Point

As mentioned earlier, the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC) took on the responsibility of maintaining and managing the Tuscarora Trail in Pennsylvania in the mid 1990's. The PATC North Chapter did an excellent job of reviving that trail much of which had been neglected for years. In the 1980's, much of the Tuscarora Trail had become impassable due to overgrown conditions caused by tree mortality from years of gypsy moth (now called spongy moth) defoliation of the trees.

There was a paint blazing issue after the PATC took over the Tuscarora Trail with the short (2.5 mi.)Tuscarora/Darlington combined trail section between the AT and Sterretts Gap. When the PATC decided to change the blaze color from orange to blue on the entire Tuscarora Trail, the PATC North Chapter leadership was unaware of the Darlington Trail history and that the two trails overlapped on this section. There was some discussion on dual blazing, but the PATC did blaze the Tuscarora Trail blue in 1997 along with the Tuscarora/ Darlington section. The PATC North Chapter eventually took over maintenance responsibility as well on this section.

By 2000, the SATC was interested in relocating much of the Darlington Trail to provide users with a more scenic and interesting route on protected lands owned by the Pennsylvania Game Commission. The Club was concerned about losing more trail mileage that was on private land holdings. The trail east of Lambs Gap Rd to Tower Rd was mostly on an old mountain top dirt woods road on private land and was being used by off-road vehicles and mountain bikes. Logging had obliterated much of the paint blazing. West of Millers Gap Rd there was new home development on the ridge top. A new trail route was needed to keep more of the Darlington Trail from being abandoned.

That new trail route was planned by SATC member and trail builder Tom Scully. It was his idea to relocate much of the trail and he worked with the game commission to get approval for it. His new route would retain much of the original ridge top hiking experience, but moved portions of the trail from the old, gullied out mountaintop woods road to newly built sidehill trail on the north side of the mountain. To the east of Lambs Gap, the new route would also include a descent down from the ridge top to the very pretty Bryson Hollow stream area between Blue and Little mountains. After crossing Bryson Hollow Run, the new trail would follow the narrow valley for almost a mile before climbing up and over Little Mountain to Tower Rd where it would reach its eastern terminus.

West of Lambs Gap, the Darlington Trail would follow the original trail route on a mountain top woods road for about two miles before dropping down slightly on the north side of the ridge to another old woods road that then came out to Millers Gap Rd away from the new development. The new route would then continue west by using another woods road and new sidehill trail on the north slope of Blue Mountain for almost a mile before gently climbing back to the ridge top to the original trail route and to its junction with the Appalachian and Tuscarora trails. This new Darlington Trail route of 7.7 miles (5.3 miles of newly designated trail and 2.4 miles of existing trail) would now be entirely on PA State Game Lands #170 with the permission and cooperation of the Pennsylvania Game Commission.

SATC volunteers built and continue to maintain the Darlington Trail. Construction of the new sidehill trail sections started in the Spring of 2001 with some club work trips and a lot of individual work effort from Tom Scully. His idea was to cut in a narrower trail to discourage mountain bike usage and to give the trail a more remote feeling for hikers. New trail sections were painted blazed orange to complete the relocation in a quick time frame.

On Saturday, June 2, 2001, National Trails Day, the SATC had a modest celebration to dedicate the new trail route at the Lambs Gap parking area along with a couple of hikes on it. Founding club member Ralph Kinter gave a brief history of the Darlington Trail along with remarks by SATC President Katie (Jones) Barker. The PA Game Commission sent representatives, and the Central PA Conservancy(CPC) was represented by President Carol Witzeman. The CPC had recently protected 80 acres of mountaintop lands near Millers Gap which the Darlington Trail passes through.

On the former Darlington Trail East, a new Pennsylvania State Park was established on Blue Mountain east of the high point of the mountain where television and communication towers dominate the ridge top. In 1999, Mr Alexander Boyd donated a large tract of land to the state of Pennsylvania that extended from the mountain top down the north side to the Fishing Creek Valley. Over the years, the park was expanded with additional lands purchased by the CPC and transferred to the Pennsylvania Dept of Conservation and Natural Resources (PA DCNR) and now totals over a thousand acres.

The new park, Boyd Big Tree Conservation Area, contained some of the old route of the Darlington Trail East. Many new hiking trails were developed in the park and the old Darlington Trail route was named the Janie Trail. Hikers can now access the old Darlington Trail route at the Lower Paxton Township's Hocker Park at the top of Blue Mountain just off of Blue Mountain Parkway and hike west on about 2 miles of the former route that follows a woods road. They can combine it with other park trails to form loops of varying lengths in the park.

In 2007, the SATC started to work with the Marysville, PA borough staff on a possible extension of the Darlington Trail West. The eastern terminus at Tower Rd was never an ideal location for ending the trail as there is only a very small, steep sloped parking area and access to it is on the rough dirt Tower Rd. The idea was to extend the trail further east to Marysville going through private land on the north side of Blue Mountain in Rye Township and then using a trail easement through a then newly proposed residential development. The developer did dedicate some land to the Marysville Borough for a park but lands also owned by the developer in the township were not available for the Darlington Trail extension. Perhaps in the future a trail easement could be negotiated with the land owner for one.

In 2015, a kiosk was installed at the Darlington Trail's Lambs Gap game commission parking area with information about the trail. The kiosk was built as a Boy Scout Eagle Scout project in collaboration with the SATC who now maintains it. Longtime SATC member and volunteer Stan Rudisill's grandson Kevin Rudisill planned and installed the kiosk with the help of fellow scouts and his grandfather.

The current Darlington Trail in State Game Lands #170 is for foot travel only. No biking or equestrian use is allowed nor motorized usage. The trail is for day use only as there is no camping allowed in most PA state game lands. An exception is for portions of the Appalachian Trail in Pennsylvania with restrictions. The Darlington Trail can be used with other old woods roads in the game lands to make loop hikes. Since it connects to the AT and the Tuscarora trails, hikers can combine those trails with the Darlington Trail for longer hikes. There is also a nice viewpoint on the AT a short distance (0.3 mi) from the junction of the AT and Darlington Trail on the south side of Blue Mountain overlooking the Cumberland Valley and beyond.

The Darlington Trail was once a 25 mile long trail on both sides of the Susquehanna River on Blue Mountain, part of the much longer Kittatinny Mountain that spans about 185 miles in an arc from the Delaware River southwesterly to the Pennsylvania/Maryland line. Today various land conservancies and the PA DCNR are trying to protect the Kittatinny Ridge Landscape as an important green corridor for wildlife, clean drinking water, and for recreation. Unfortunately for the Darlington Trail, these efforts came too late after much of the former trail route was lost to encroaching development and private landowners closing off the trail. Much of the old original route is no longer available to trail users. Fortunately, for hikers and other outdoor recreationists, the parallel mountain ridges to the north of Blue Mountain contain much public lands and trails for them to explore.