

Mountain Club of Maryland

GIMME SHELTER: A HISTORY OF MCM APPALACHIAN TRAIL SHELTERS

By Bill Saunders

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As MCM's supervisor of shelters for the past 11 years, as I research our club history I have had a particular interest in learning more about MCM's work to build and maintain hiking shelters as an Appalachian Trail (A.T.) maintaining club. The information in our documents and other information sources demonstrate that—as might be expected—our A.T. shelters have changed and evolved over the years. The early shelters often were damaged by weather and insects and vandalism; multiple times our individual shelters had to be repaired, rebuilt, and/or moved to safer locations. The photos included in this article show that the early shelters were usually rustic structures built of logs. Without the benefit of pressure-treated lumber and modern roofing materials, it is only natural that those structures would deteriorate quickly and require regular repairs. Similarly, the outhouses at those shelters were pit privies that faced the same difficulties, plus the need to move or replace them when the pits filled.

In addition, sometimes the A.T. itself was moved because of land ownership situations, vandalism related to nearby road access, or other factors that led to relocation of a Trail section. These changes sometimes led to the movement of a shelter to keep it close to the Trail.

Our historical documents indicate that MCM has held responsibility for the following shelters over its 90 years as a Trail club:

- Dark Hollow Shelter (1938-1960s)
- Campbell Springs cabin (1980s)
- Tagg Run Shelter (built 1930s; relocated 1975/1976; replaced by the James Fry Shelter 1998)
- Bishop Darlington Shelter (built 1956, relocated / replaced 1976s, replaced 2004)
- Thelmas Marks Shelter (built 1960, replaced by the Cove Mountain shelter 2002))
- Alec Kennedy Shelter (built 1991)

The map at the end of this article shows the approximate location of all of these sites. The focus of this article is on the older shelters, with only brief mentions of the more modern ones that exist today.

The Dark Hollow Shelter and Campbell Springs cabin no longer exist, and their exact locations can only be estimated. The Tagg Run Shelters (two buildings) were both relocated to a new site and later replaced by a new building. The Bishop Darlington shelter was replaced by a new structure at a different location, and then later rebuilt again. The Cove Mountain Shelter was built at the site of the earlier Thelma Marks Shelter. The Alec Kennedy Shelter might be viewed as a replacement for the Dark Hollow shelter since their locations are in the same general area—but there was a gap of at least 20 years between the closure of the Dark Hollow site and the building of Alec Kennedy. One clear fact shown by our records is that there has always been a lot

of work required to keep our hiking shelters--and their privies--functional over time to serve A.T. hikers.

As explained in my earlier 90th Anniversary article the history of MCM's Trail section in PA, in the fall of 1934 the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC) transferred responsibility to MCM for a 29-mile section from Long Mountain fire tower to the Susquehanna River." A Michaux State Forest map provided by our long-time member John Eckard shows that this fire tower—the southern end of our original Trail section--was north of Whiskey Springs Road (and a few miles south of Boiling Springs, PA).

Dark Hollow Shelter

This shelter, located south of Boiling Springs, PA, was the first one built by MCM. Soon after MCM was assigned responsibility for a section of the A.T., discussions began about adding hiking shelters—often called “lean-tos” in those early years. The July-September 1935 MCM Bulletin newsletter contained a Shelters Report article that stated, “Interest centers on Dark Hollow, Pennsylvania, and arrangements have been made for the Shelter Committee to call on the owner of the land in this section to discuss permission to erect either an open-front or a closed shelter near the trail there.” The next two years were spent raising funds and picking out a specific site.

The January-March 1938 issue of the Bulletin contains an article about a planned Outdoor Life Show in downtown Baltimore in February 1938. MCM decided to set up a campsite with an actual hiking shelter at the show as part of a camping exhibit. That display shelter became the basis for the actual Dark Hollow shelter. At the close of the show, the logs of the shelter were loaded on a truck and hauled to a location near the proposed Dark Hollow site. The 1939 Michaux State Forest map provided by John Eckard, shows that the Dark Hollow Shelter location was adjacent to Little Dogwood Run (approximately a mile south of Center Point Knob), but downstream from the points at which the Trail crosses the stream.

In October 1938, a group of 22 volunteers camped at the proposed site, leveled the foundation, and set up the first three rows of logs. A couple of trees were felled and sawed into lengths for a bridge across Dogwood Run, and stone steps were placed near a spring. On the second day, the shelter was completed except for the shingles and the wire bunks. The 1938 MCM photo scrapbook contains several pages of pictures of the work trip to build the Dark Hollow shelter. The last photo on the final page shows the completed log structure.

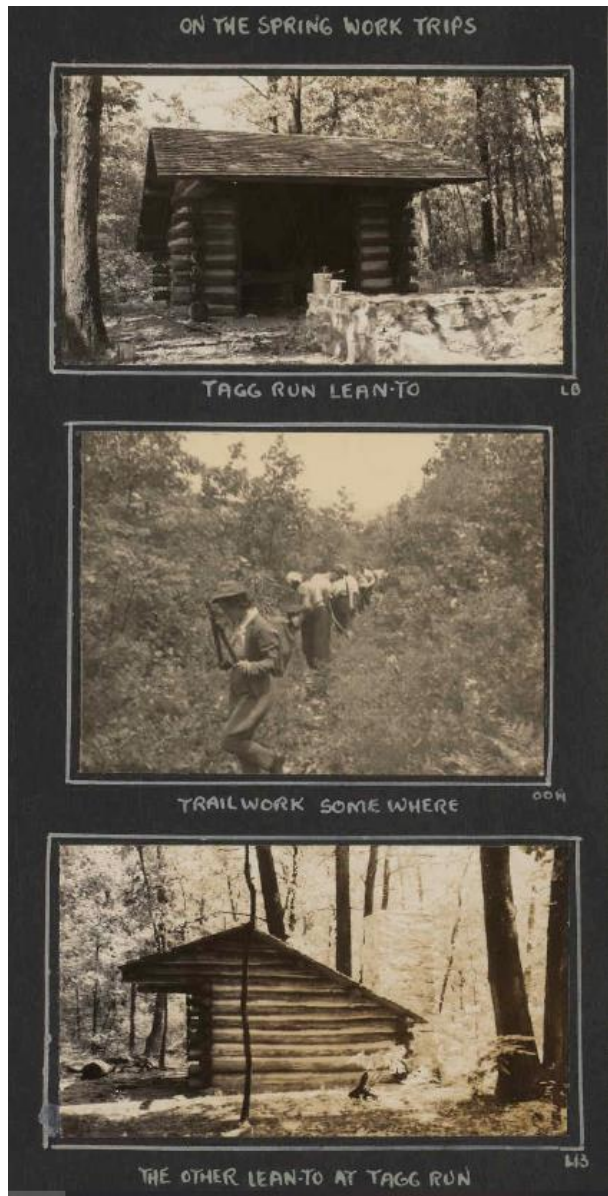


Decades later, the land on which the shelter rested was given by the owner to the York YMCA for a camp. As a result, the A.T. was moved farther to the east away from the YMCA site—and away from the shelter. Sometime in the 1960s, MCM stopped its maintenance work there. The September 1971 edition of the MCM News (which replaced the Bulletin as our newsletter) contained a single sentence stating that the Dark Hollow shelter still exists but is not maintained. The newsletter mentioned that the shelter would eventually be torn down when the YMCA's new Family Camping Area was completed.

But as it turned out, the York YMCA found it too inconvenient and costly to maintain the camp because of the distance from York. Years later the National Park Service and PA Gamelands purchased portions of that land, providing future stability for the Trail location in that area. (The remaining land and the buildings of the YMCA camp are now the site of the Diakon Wilderness Center.)

Tagg Run Shelter

In my earlier article about the history of MCM's Appalachian Trail section, I noted that the section of the Trail from Route PA-94 south to Pine Grove Furnace State Park was apparently transferred to MCM in early 1941. At that time, there were already two shelter buildings on that section at the Tagg Run stream crossing; these buildings had been built by PATC in the 1930s. The MCM photo scrapbook for the first half of 1941 mentioned a work trip (probably in May 1941) to work at our new shelter. This scrapbook page shows photos of the two structures.



Over the years, our club newsletters include several mentions of problems with vandalism because of the proximity of the Tagg Run crossing to roads. As a result, starting in October 1975 the two shelter buildings were moved to our current location about .25 miles from the Tagg Run stream crossing. Years later, an article in one of our newsletters explained that friction between the hiking community and nearby campground owners over the use of campground sanitary facilities by hikers, and the use of the shelters by campers--along with the need for improved sanitary facilities for the shelters away from the stream--resulted in the decision to move the shelters up the hill away from the stream and the campground, as well as the decision to build a new type of privy. For the first time, MCM decided to build a version of the clivus multrum privy--which was developed in Sweden and was now only beginning to be used on the A.T.—at

the new site instead of a pit privy. (The clivus multrum approach would be widely adopted in future years—we tend to refer to them as compost privies.)

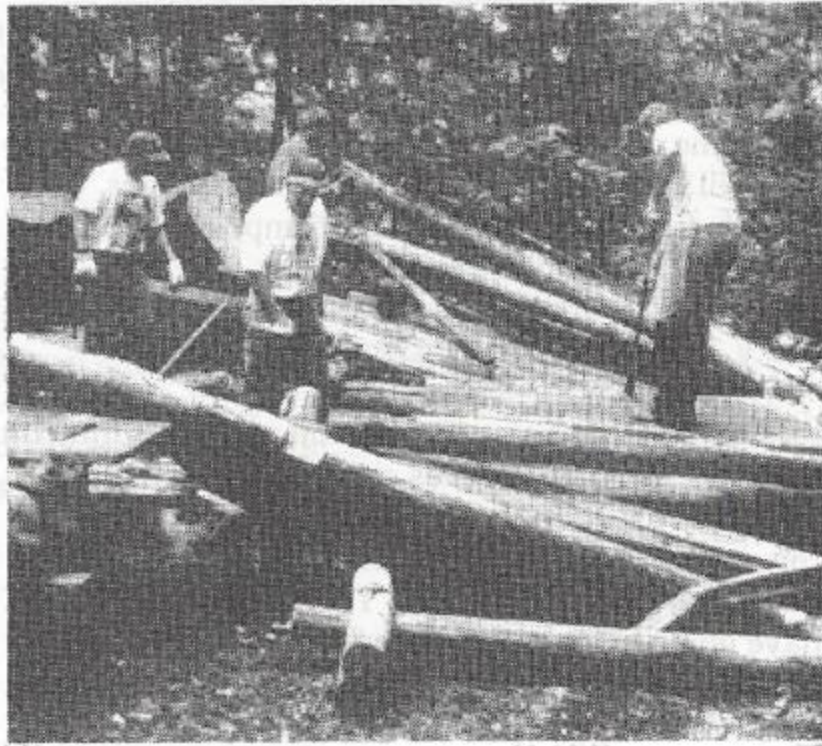
The two shelters were dismantled by a team of volunteers from MCM, PA trail clubs, and Boy Scouts--and moved piece by piece to the new location. Over the remainder of 1976, several work trips took place to reassembling the shelters and build the new privy.

The photo below from the July/August 1976 MCM News provides an indication of how these early shelters were built.



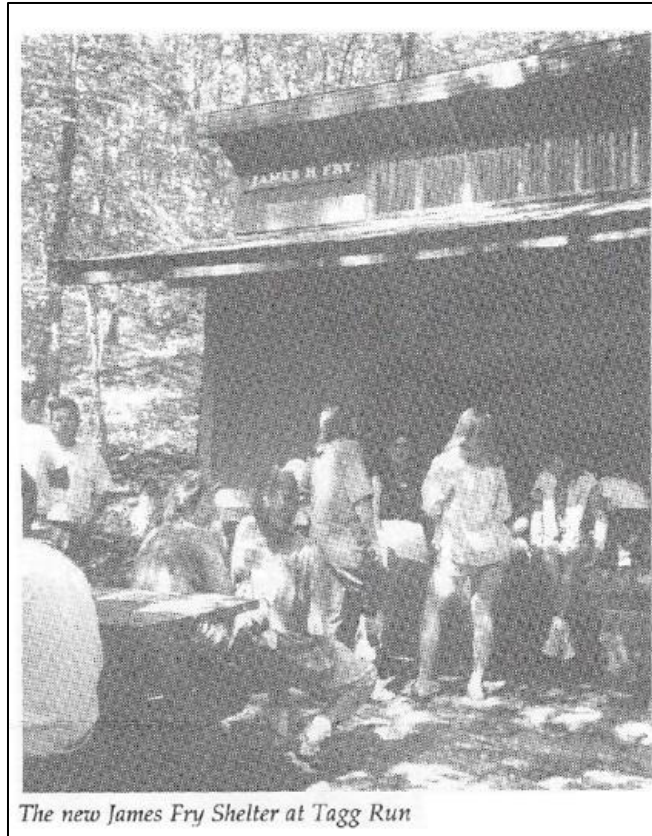
In the late 1990s, MCM decided to replace the two aging shelter buildings with one larger, more modern structure. Money donated to MCM in memory of James Fry, a long-time club member, was used to fund the new shelter which was named the “James Fry Shelter at Tagg Run”.

The October 1997 News includes this photo of a work crew dismantling one of the buildings.



It took only about one hour to disassemble the shelter. It took something longer than that to remove all the debris. Photograph by Paul Ives.

One year later, the October 1998 HHP had an article describing the dedication of the new James Fry shelter, including this photo.



The December 2001 HHP reported that MCM had completed construction of a new double bin composting privy to accompany the James Fry Shelter. The shelter and privy buildings are still in use.

Campbell Springs Cabin

In the 1980s, when the National Park Service acquired land along the Trail between Whiskey Springs Road and Boiling Springs surrounding MCM's Trail section, MCM "inherited" existing buildings known as the Campbell Springs Shelter and Gribble Cabin. MCM decided the shelter use would be limited to thru hikers; "the cabin is locked and may be used under certain conditions, with the permission of... its overseer." There was probably a single building that was called by two names. The location was near Kuhn Road and the current White Rocks Trail. The February 1988 newsletter mentioned that because it had easy access to the road and since it was a cabin with four walls, (not a lean-to), it was an attractive place for homeless persons to find shelter. It may never have served as a regular hiker trail shelter. The 1988 article also pointed out that someday, when the Cumberland Valley A.T. relocation work was complete, the Campbell Spring Cabin would not be on the Trail. The November 1990 HHP reported that an Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) volunteer work crew had demolished the Campbell Springs Shelter in October. So far, I have not found any photo of this cabin.

Alec Kennedy Shelter

In July 1989, the HHP reported for the first time on a new planned shelter in this same general area. In a letter from MCM President Ted Sanderson to the widow of Alec Kennedy, one of the club's founding members, that MCM planned to build a new shelter in the Little Dogwood Run area at the eastern end of the Cumberland Valley in Pennsylvania. This shelter, which was completed in 1991 and named the Alec Kennedy Shelter, is located near the modern A.T. route, south of the old Campbell Springs cabin site, and east of the Dark Hollow shelter site. Below is a photo of the Kennedy shelter.



In 2017, the original single-bin composting privy was replaced by a double-bin moldering privy.

Bishop Darlington Shelter

This shelter was built by Earl Shaffer, the first known person to thru hike the entire Appalachian Trail, which he did in 1948. Earl repeated the feat numerous times. Shaffer lived in PA and was an active member of the York Hiking Club, the Susquehanna Appalachian Trail Club (SATC) after that club was created, and also an MCM member at times. Earl seems to have taken the initiative to build two shelters on the northern part of MCM's Trail section—the Thelma Marks Shelter and the original Bishop Darlington Shelter. My information sources about these two shelters include an article written by Jeff Buehler of the Susquehanna Appalachian Trail Club (SATC) about several early A.T. shelters in PA—including these two MCM shelters—and I've used

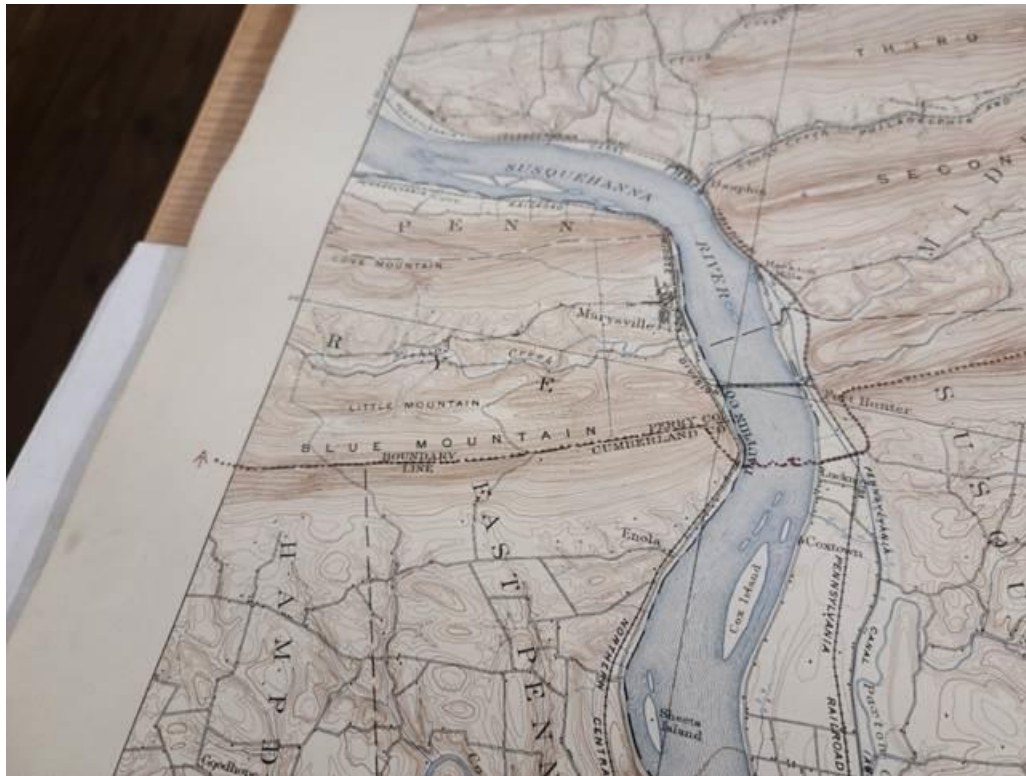
several photos from his article, which is available on-line at [old at shelters in south central pa for the web site 12-2-23.pdf \(sac-hike.org\).](http://oldatsheltersinsouthcentralpaforthewebsite12-2-23.pdf)

According to Buehler, the original Darlington shelter was built of stone in 1956 with the assistance of SATC members. At that time (in the late 1950s) the A.T. left the Cumberland Valley on its north side and climbed Blue Mountain at a different location than the current Trail. The current route ascends Blue Mountain about halfway between Deans Gap and Miller Gap, but in the 1950s the Trail followed Deans Gap Road up and over the mountain—roughly a mile west of the current route.

The original Darlington shelter was a short distance from Deans Gap Road on the north side of the mountain near a spring. The shelter was so named because the nearby Darlington Trail ran along the top of Blue Mountain. (That trail was named in honor of Bishop James Henry Darlington of Harrisburg, Secretary of the Pennsylvania Alpine Club, an early hiking club in PA.)

[I am adding a side note here about Earl Shaffer and his role in the early A.T. in PA, because it is very relevant to the history of MCM's shelters. In addition to building two shelters on MCM's section of the Trail, Shaffer built at least two more shelters on the A.T. on the eastern side of the Susquehanna River. But before that, he was a major impetus for a significant rerouting of the Trail in this section of PA.]

Before the 1950s, the section of the A.T. on which Shaffer built the Darlington and Thelma Marks shelters did not exist. Originally, the A.T. did not cross the Susquehanna River at Duncannon as it does now. The original route on the eastern side of the river took it to the Susquehanna River north of Harrisburg (and south of Duncannon), where an early MCM Appalachian Trail map shows the Trail crossing the river to the town of Marysville on the western side of the river. You can see the scenario on this MCM map prepared in the late 1930s. The thick dotted line shows the Trail approach the river and “cross” it, then follow the crest of Blue Mountain on the western side.



But there was actually no river crossing there; you had to hike south six miles along roads, cross the river on a bridge that allowed pedestrians, then hike six miles north on the other side to return to the Trail at Marysville—or cross the river illegally on a railroad bridge. At Marysville, the A.T. turned west onto Blue Mountain and followed the Darlington Trail about 5 miles to Lamps Gap, where it turned south and became a long walk on roads through the Cumberland Valley.

Under the leadership of Shaffer and others, in the early 1950s the A.T. on the eastern side of the river was moved further north onto a different set of ridges, including Peters Mountain, and then it crossed the Susquehanna on a highway bridge at Duncannon (several miles north of Marysville). From Duncannon, the Trail then proceeded west along Cove Mountain, then descended and headed southward to cross Valley Road (PA-850). From there, the Trail climbed up to the top of Blue Mountain, and then continued down the southern side into the Cumberland Valley, using Deans Gap Road. That major shift in the A.T. led to the creation of the Trail section (which became part of MCM's maintenance responsibility) on which Shaffer built the Bishop Darlington and Thelma Marks shelters a few years later.

More information about this reroute and Shaffer's role can be found in Thomas R. Johnson's book, [From Dream to Reality: History of the Appalachian Trail](#), 2021.]

Returning to the discussion of the Darlington shelter: the Buehler article includes a photo of the remains of the original Darlington shelter, taken years later.



While Schaffer built the shelter, the site was part of MCM's section and it was maintained by MCM volunteers. Because of its proximity to Deans Gap Road, our newsletters reported ongoing problems with vandalism and littering over the years. By the 1970s there was interest in finding another location.

The June 1976 issue of the MCM News reported that a purchase by the PA Game Commission of formerly private lands in that area of Blue Mountain might make it possible to take the A.T. off roads and route it through the woods, possibly along the Tuscarora / Darlington Trail at the top of Blue Mountain. MCM saw this as a possible opportunity to relocate the Darlington Shelter, which the club reported was "in a hopelessly exposed location and repeatedly vandalized." For this relocation, Dennis Rudd of Monroe, New York offered MCM... a 'portable shelter' of 28 pieces... which could be assembled in one day once the foundations had been poured and set.

The April 1977 News reported that Dennis Rudd had completed the portable lean-to be built for Darlington. "This new design provides a shelter that can be carried in by 15 to 20 people, set up, and bolted together in two days. No one piece weighs more than 85 pounds. We expect to use this as a replacement for the vandal-ridden stone shelter at Darlington, locating it further into the woods. MCM work crews must pour cement footings for the shelter at the new site..."

The May 1977 edition reported on two relocation efforts: moving the A.T. away from Deans Gap Road and into the woods, and replacing and relocating the Darlington Shelter. "The A.T. was rerouted to follow the Tuscarora Trail eastward from Deans Gap along the mountain crest for about half a mile, then goes down through the woods along a seasonal stream and an old woods road... This makes a little over a mile of relocation." In the next paragraph, the article continues, "Dennis will transport it by truck for installation and assembly on the weekend of May 21-22..."

The footings for this shelter will be placed during the April 23-23 weekend. A crew of only four is required for assembly of the shelter, but a larger crew will be needed to carry in the pieces – about ½ mile... Invitations are being sent to various clubs to send representatives to witness this historic event – the first fully portable, deep woods, five-man shelter to be erected on the A.T.” The Buehler article includes this photo of the new 1977 shelter.



Twenty-five years later, the condition of that shelter had deteriorated to the point that replacement was warranted. There are no mentions of specific problems in Council meeting minutes during these years, other than references to a couple of meetings with officials of the PA Gamelands and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy requesting permission to build a new shelter. But a caption in the June 2004 Hiker High Points (HHP) mentioned that the Darlington shelter will be replaced within the next two years, so planning was well underway then. The very next year, the February 2005 edition stated that in 2004 the old Darlington shelter was razed, footings were built for the new shelter (with great difficulty in breaking through rocks). The construction of the new Darlington shelter was finished in 2005, and a new double-bin compost privy was constructed and put into service in 2006. Here is an early photo of the current Darlington shelter, which is now approaching 20 years of age.



Relocation of the Original Stone Shelter. The Buehler article notes that the remains of the first Darlington shelter were later moved to the A.T. Museum at Pine Grove Furnace State Park:

The original stone Darlington Shelter remained along Deans Gap Rd but was no longer a part of the AT. Over the years the structure was engulfed by vegetation and at one point a large tree fell onto the roof and rotted away there. Trash and old chairs occupied the dirt floor inside the stone walls. In August 2012, volunteers from SATC and others, with permission from the PA Game Commission, disassembled the stone walls and helped transport the stones to Pine Grove State Park where they were stored for future reassembly and display outside of the AT Museum there... The old stone shelter was finally re-built in August of 2023 beside the AT Museum by a contracted mason and an official dedication was held on Aug 12 on the grounds with many in attendance. Future plans may include a roof and exhibits inside the shelter with a protected front panel.

Here is a photo from the Museum web site.



Dedication of the Darlington-Deans Gap Shelter

For information about this exhibit at the Museum, see [News - Appalachian Trail Museum \(atmuseum.org\)](http://www.atmuseum.org).

Thelma Marks Shelter

This was the second shelter built by Earl Shaffer on MCM's Trail section. It was named for Thelma Marks, a charter member of SATC. Its design was similar to many of the Adirondack style three-sided lean-to shelters that were common along the A.T. at the time. It was made of small chestnut logs that Shaffer found standing near the site. MCM volunteers helped cut and bring in the logs in April 1960. Trimming, chinking and finish work continued until the next year with the assistance of MCM volunteers. Mike O'Connor of MCM provided this photo of the old shelter.



The November 1972 newsletter edition mentioned that MCM purchased two metal outhouses at a cost of \$20 each and transported them to sites at Darlington Shelter and Thelma Marks Shelter. Five years later, the June 1977 newsletter announced a shelter work trip on June 18/19 to replace and relocate the privy at the Thelma Marks Shelter—a common maintenance requirement at the early shelters.

The November 1990 issue of HHP contained a report on the now infamous tragedy at the Thelma Marks Shelter, where a young couple staying at the shelter were brutally murdered. As a result of the terrible event, as well as the age of the shelter, there was interest among the public, and especially the family of the slain hikers, in demolishing the old shelter. However, the planning, fund raising, and approval processes for new shelters took considerable time. The December 1998 HHP included a mention that MCM hoped to replace the Thelma Marks shelter within the next two years. The March 1999 edition reported that MCM received a \$3,000 grant from the Appalachian Trail Conference to support the replacement of the shelter.

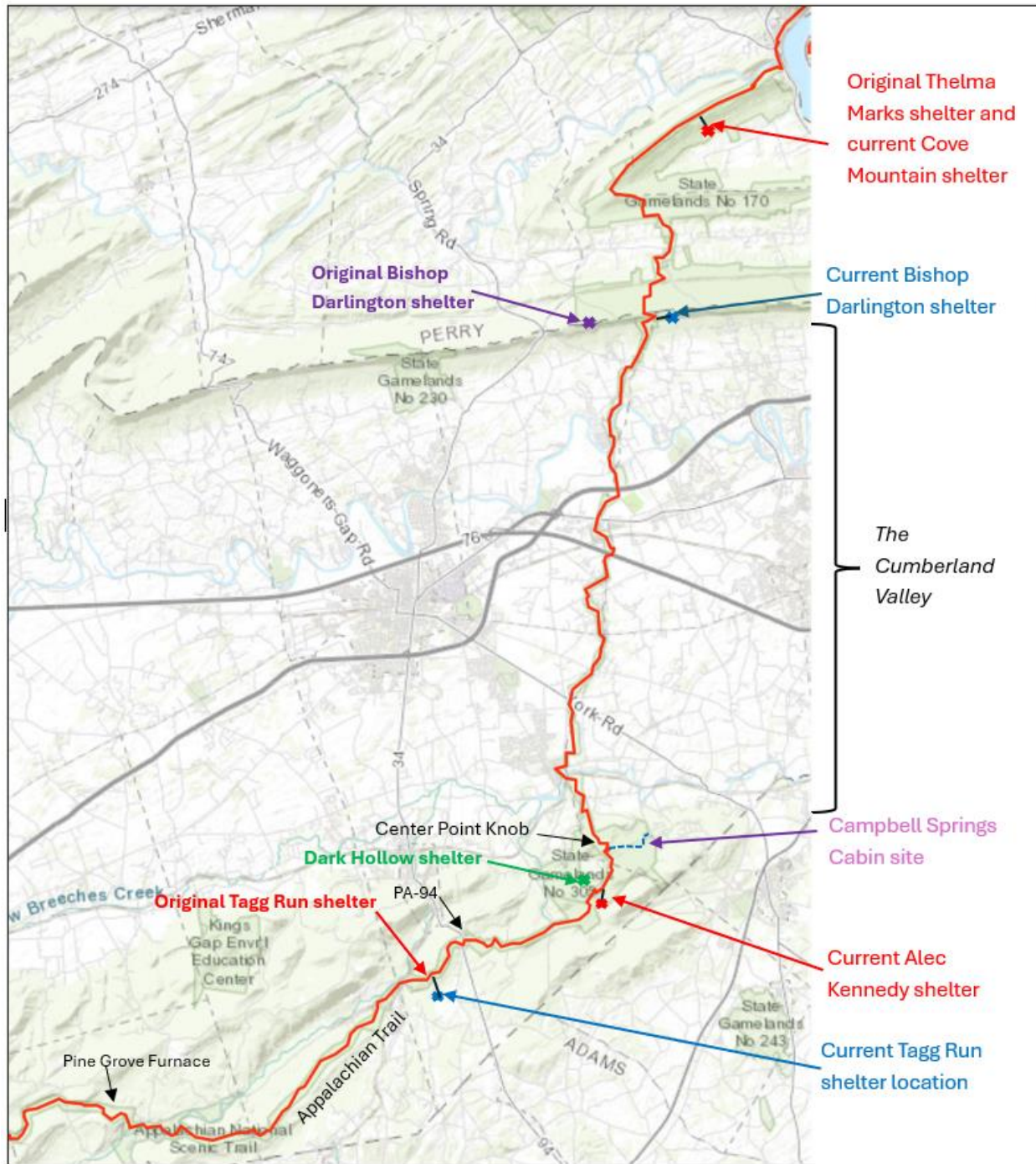
Ted Sanderson (MCM Shelters Supervisor at that time) developed plans to replace Thelma Marks with a timber-framed structure using timbers from an old barn. MCM worked with the Timbers Framing Guild of North America, which assisted in the planning and also provided training of our club volunteers. The construction of the new shelter was finished in 2000 and there was a dedication ceremony in 2001. Here is a photo of the new structure, with the old shelter still standing in the background.



Afterward, volunteers dismantled the old Thelma Marks shelter, sawed up and burned the old logs, and scattered the stone foundation in the woods. In 2010 the existing pit outhouse was replaced with a new double-bin composting privy.

Map of Shelter Locations

The location of all the original shelters and the current sites are shown on the map below.



Observations

MCM’s historical records show that its work managing shelters and privies along its assigned Trail sections is a history of change—of building, rebuilding, demolition, and relocation. Over this 90-year period, the nature of this work has changed as the Trail evolves:

- The construction techniques and materials of early shelters and privies were often rudimentary compared to current facilities, and needed more frequent repair. Most of our current shelters are now several decades old, and thanks to sturdier building materials and framing, they should last much longer than those built in earlier years.
- The advent of double-bin composting and moldering privies means that privies no longer need to be moved or rebuilt regularly when pits fill up.
- New National Park Service processes--such as project approvals and budget planning--require that clubs must plan, and request approval for, new changes years in advance of their installation. New policies such as accessibility necessitate that structures must be designed and built differently.
- As a result of lighter tents and sleeping bags, more hikers are tenting rather than using shelters—at least sometimes. Consequently, clubs can expect more need for tent pads and camping sites at shelters. Some A.T. and club officials and volunteers speculate that the A.T. need fewer shelters in the future.
- MCM and all Trail clubs can expect more changes to their shelter situations and requirements in the future as new trends emerge. We will adapt to such changes as they are identified.
- Over a period of less than 15 years between 1990 and 2004, MCM built four new shelters—Alec Kennedy, James Fry, Cove Mountain, and Darlington. Considering the amount of work involved in planning, hauling materials, and doing the construction at each site, that is an impressive accomplishment by the Mountain Club and its volunteers. These well-built structures have already given us decades of service, and all of them should continue to serve A.T. hikers for many years into the future.