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SARA FOX FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Restoring Acadia’s Trails

Work crews follow the steps of trail blazers to revive the scenic paths of a national park in Maine.

By PORTER FOX

A 120-foot white pine shaded what was left of the trail. The best indication of which way to walk was an auburn arc of fallen pine needles, bending to the right. Then a small clearing. Then flecks of blue filtering through the branches and the muted growl of the Atlantic meeting the shore of Mount Desert Island, in Maine.

My guide, Christian Barter, a 6-foot-3 Acadia National Park trails work supervisor, blazed ahead in his size 13 work boots. He was wearing park service greens with tan gaiters over the pant legs and had dark smears across his forehead from working on the trails. Mr. Barter is a poet by profession, with two acclaimed books to his name. After working on Acadia’s trail crew for over two decades, he’s also become something of a trail-building scholar.

Mr. Barter, under the management of Gary Stellpflug, an Acadia trails foreman, has spent the last 15 years researching, cataloging and rebuilding century-old trails like the one we were on. Last month, he guided me along several routes, pointing out meticulous stonework and explain-



THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE AT ACADIA NATIONAL PARK

ing what it took to unearth and rehabilitate the most elaborate trail system in the country. He described 19th-century “path-makers,” highbred gentlemen who spent summers armchair-engineering intricate paths around Mount Desert Island’s barren 1,500-foot peaks, glacial lakes and iron-bound shoreline. Shards of afternoon sunlight fell between the trees as he spoke. A patch of golden thread blossoms alongside the trail mustered a streak of color against the dark green backdrop.

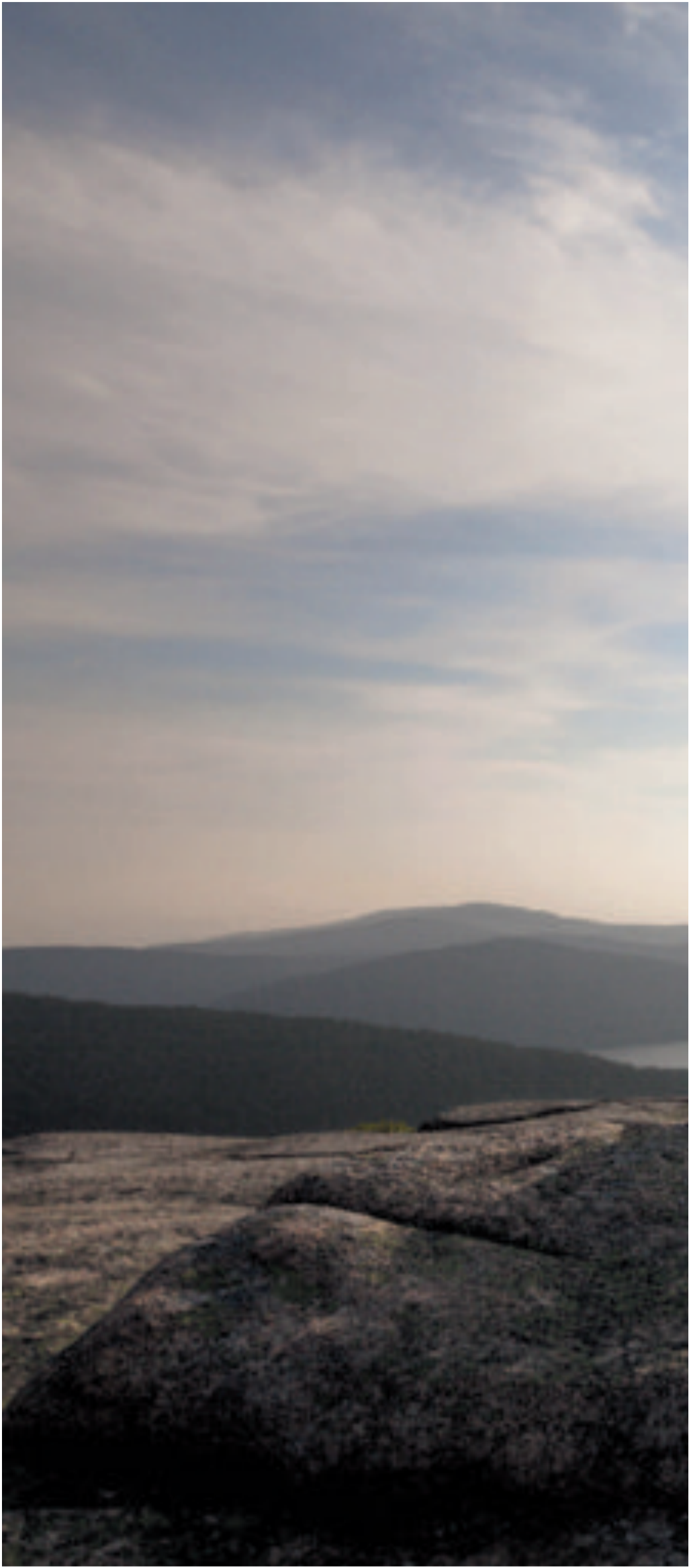
It was the kind of Maine summer day that makes you think about dropping everything and putting down stakes. Which is exactly how the trails and park got started in the first place, he said.

“Right here,” he said, pointing to a granite slab lying across the path. “This would have been his front door.”

The remnants beyond the threshold were from an estate that belonged to George Bucknam Dorr, a Boston lawyer, philanthropist, trail builder, bel esprit and a founder of Acadia National Park. In 1868 Dorr arrived on Mount Desert Island, which is five hours northeast of Boston by

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Above, a hiker walking on the trail around Upper Haddlock Pond in Acadia National Park. Left, George Bucknam Dorr on Flying Squadron Mountain, taking in the views of Mount Desert Island. The peak was renamed Dorr Mountain in 1945, a year after Dorr’s death.



Restoring Acadia National Park’s Tr



From top, Rockefeller Pond near Northeast Harbor, a view of Schoodic Point from the end of the Great Head Path and Maple Spring Trail. Chris Barter, above, work supervisor.

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car and bridge today; it was two days by train, steamer and buggy in the 19th century. His family was among the first “cottagers,” along with the Rockefellers, Fords, Vanderbilts and Astors, who built estates on the coast of Maine in the late 1800s. On one of those perfect Maine days, his family fell under the island’s spell. His father bought property south of Bar Harbor, and the seeds of the first national park east of the Mississippi were sown.

America experienced a naturalist revival in the late 1800s, a belated enlightenment inspired by the likes of Charles Darwin and Henry David Thoreau. Mountain tourism boomed in the Catskill and White Mountains, and walking became a required activity on weekend getaways. A decade after Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School painters returned from Mount Desert with plein-air paintings of the island, the first tourists arrived. And they wanted to walk.

Dorr eventually joined a handful of wealthy patrons like Waldron Bates, Rudolph Brunnow and Charles W. Eliot, a Harvard president, who along with Frederick Olmsted, the father of American landscape design, were formalizing a budding network of island walks. The routes were no ordinary trails. Their design was inspired by 18th-century landscape gardening and path-making in Europe, though on a vastly larger scale. They deviated past scenic vistas, dove through granite tunnels and crept around sheer, 200-foot cliffs. These were among the first scenic hiking trails in the country, and when the trail system reached its peak in the 1930s, thanks to a few hundred thousand hours of

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work from the Civilian Conservation Corps, there were 270 miles of them.

But that was a different time, Mr. Barter said as we walked past the vestiges of an acre-wide saltwater swimming pool Dor built. “The man was like a beaver,” he said. “Constantly building.” Like a bona fide visionary, the father of Acadia died blind and penniless, having invested all of his resources in the park. World War II, the Bar Harbor, Me., fire of 1947 and the arrival of auto touring all but ended hiking in Acadia for 30 years. By 1960, almost half of the

park’s trails were decommissioned.

For decades, a small cult of hikers mapped and walked the lost trails of Acadia, scouring the softwood for clearings, a cairn or granite steps covered in moss. Nature takes quickly, and many were completely lost. But grant money rebuilds even faster, and in 1998, a local organization called Friends of Acadia saved the trail system with the Acadia Trails Forever campaign, which raised \$9 million in private donations to go with \$4 million in park entry fees. This initiated the rehabilitation

of the trails.

Since then Acadia’s trail crew, in collaboration with the Olmstead Center for Landscape Preservation, has restored miles of lost trails like the smooth, graded path Mr. Barter led me to a few minutes later.

The Schooner Head Trail was another Dor original, built in 1901 and designed to meander three and a half miles through fir and spruce forests to 100-foot sea cliffs south of Bar Harbor. It was a classic Acadian “broad path,” wide enough to walk arm-in-arm and topped with crushed stone so the gentry could wear dress shoes. The trail was closed in the 1950s because of a lack of use and maintenance. When Mr. Barter and his crew started restoring it in 2008, there were trees as thick as telephone poles growing in the middle of it. The fix was 14,000 hours of labor, 1,500 tons of blown ledge, 500 tons of crushed rock, 100 culverts and 3 miles of ditches dug by hand. And just like that, one of the lost trails of Acadia was revived.

IT TAKES A SPECIAL KIND of person to spend the summer digging ditches and hauling 200-pound granite blocks through the woods. The original path-makers were inspired by a pioneering spirit and a sense of philanthropy, perhaps something only a wildly successful industrialist can feel. Today’s trail crew, Mr. Barter said, is a different demographic, but their inspiration is much the same.

“Trail building is a way of mixing your labor with nature, so that you can more fully appreciate it,” he said. “There is also generosity of spirit in building. You want others to be able to share those deep experiences that you have, and what better way than literally building a path to get there.”

A few shaggy workers milled around the trail crew headquarters after work the next day, writing notes on a dry erase message board while brainstorming on how to



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARA FOX FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ails

Above, a hiker enjoys the view on the summit of Parkman Mountain with Somes Sound in the background. Below left, the trail crew on the Asticou and Jordan Pond Path.

repair a 1930s corps rock trailer. “It’s the only way to keep track of everyone,” Mr. Barter said. He and Mr. Stelpflug manage 50 full-time employees in the summer, double the usual number thanks to additional funding this year, plus more than 1,000 part-time volunteers. Though they use modern tools now, nearly all of the work still must be done by hand.

Mr. Barter pointed out early wooden corps trail signs nailed to the ceiling and a rack of pulaskis, ditch-digging tools with an ax on one end and a digging implement on the other. Hammer drills the crew uses to split rocks lay stacked on a workbench below a giant map of Acadia’s trail system.

The park occupies nearly half of Mount Desert Island and logs 2.5 million visitors a year. Many come to see famous roadside sites like Thunder Hole, an underwater cave that creates an Old Faithful-esque geyser when waves strike it, and Cadillac Mountain, the highest point along the North Atlantic seaboard. Thousands of others walk the park’s 130 miles of trails and ride bikes on 45 miles of gravel carriage roads, the latter donated by John D. Rockefeller Jr.

Fifteen years into the rehabilitation campaign, 12 miles of those trails are reclaimed. The most recent were the 1915 Homan’s Path, featuring 400 spiraling granite stairs; the Penobscot South Ridge Trail, with sweeping views of the Atlantic and the Cranberry Islands; and the 1890s Quarry Path, where granite for the Congressional Library, Brooklyn Bridge and Philadelphia Mint was once mined.

I headed out to the Asticou and Jordan Pond Path the next morning to see the crew in action. The trail has connected Northeast Harbor with the Jordan Pond House, a tea-and-popover terminus, since the 1800s. The trailhead sits less than 100 feet from the restaurant, beyond crowds of visitors waiting for a table. It then crosses



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Jordan Stream on a wooden bridge and wends through stands of cedar and striped maple on a graded gravel path.

A mile in, I came across a group of college-age trail workers building granite “checks” to hold gravel in place when it rains, then another crew hauling rock with two ATVs. A few hundred yards later, near a junction with a carriage path, I met a crew who had strung up a high line from a granite ledge, where they hoisted freshly cut granite and slung it to the trail on a sling and pulley.

On the way back, I ran into Mr. Barter, who was placing a row of stakes to mark

the next construction zone. He suggested I check out one of the completed trails to see the crew’s finished work, so I headed across the island to the Perpendicular Trail on the shores of Long Pond.

After a quarter mile tracking the shore of the pond, the trail jutted straight up along 1,000 granite stairs, lined by coping and stone culverts. A third of the way up, it veered to the right onto a granite outcropping overlooking Long Pond, now a few hundred vertical feet below. The trail then dived into a wide, rocky streambed along granite slabs pinned with steel spikes. The trail was never abandoned but, like much of the system, had been on the verge of losing the battle with nature. Its hand-cut stone stairs had slipped out of place and the treadway was eroded. Now the path looked new, with a column of

The original path-makers were inspired by a pioneering spirit and a sense of philanthropy.

stairs winding across the landscape. A few minutes later I was descending Mansell Mountain on the remains of a pre-Revolutionary War road, buzzing with the sensation you can only get when there’s nowhere to go but down.

MY LAST DAY ON THE island, Mr. Barter and I walked the Great Head loop. Every 20 feet, he grumbled about a flaw in the path like a penny-sized gap in a granite check — “This is going to go soon!” — or water collecting in a muddy section — “Put it on the list!”

A half-hour after we started, we arrived at a 100-foot sea cliff and a view of the Atlantic wide enough that you could detect the curvature of the earth. Waves bashed into an offshore rock formation called Old Soaker and, to the east, we could see the tip of Schoodic Point and the beginning of the end of the country’s northeastern coastline. Set on the edge of the cliff was a pile of pink granite. A century ago, it was a teahouse that J. P. Morgan’s daughter had built on the estate she had received from him as a wedding present.

The structure had been reduced to mortar and granite blocks, a memory of a bygone era that most people miss. Like the trails, Mr. Barter said, it was one of the few portals left on the island that connects us to the generation that pioneered Acadia.

“From the beginning, Acadia was a combination of natural beauty and man-made beauty,” he said. “When that marriage is working, it’s incredible.”