

Footpath for the People? A Zine Companion to a Data Quilt about the Appalachian Trail



By Claudia Berger

Thank you to the Scholars' Lab for their generous support and for this opportunity.

I am a white settler who lives on, and studies, occupied Lenapehoking. I believe studying the history of a land can help us connect to it, and I try to use my art and scholarly practices to honor the lands I reside on and visit. I will be paying a portion of my honorarium for this project as a voluntary land tax to native organizations in my area.

Learn more:

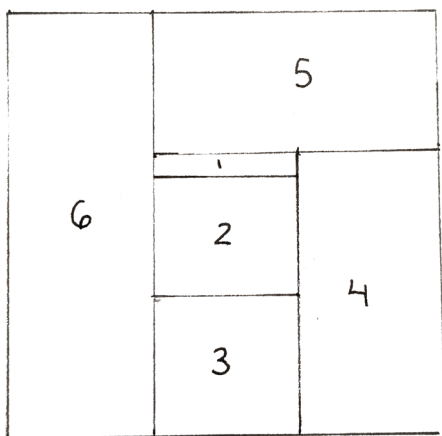
<https://nativegov.org/news/voluntary-land-taxes/>

<https://lenape.center/>

<https://aich.org/>

WHICH PUBLIC?

This quilt is an exploration of the Appalachian Trail and who the American outdoors was made for. American national parks were founded on the idea that nature can only exist without people, and that to preserve it all people who were living in it (Indigenous, Black, and immigrant communities) had to be displaced. Since the parks were founded with these beliefs, it is likely still ingrained into its design and who feels comfortable in them. Through the pages of this zine, and the blocks of the quilt, we will look at the history and present of the Appalachian Trail (AT) and the people who travel it.



This quilt is arranged in a spiral and is meant to be “read” in the following order:

How to read this quilt

1. Prompt
2. Emma Gatewood
3. Demographics
4. Land use
5. Shenandoah
6. States comparison

Emma Gatewood

In May 1955, Emma Gatewood, who was 67 years old, started her historic solo hike of the AT. She had 11 kids and 23 grandchildren, and told none of them what she was planning. She wanted to hike the trail after reading about it in a 1949 feature in *National Geographic*, but found the trail “more rugged” than she had anticipated, without all of the promised shelters and many of the paths being poorly maintained. Over the course of her hike, her story went to the *Associated Press*, *Sports Illustrated*, and countless local papers, as the nation fell in love with this hiking grandma. She completed her hike in September and was the first woman to complete a solo thru-hike of the trail, and she became a mascot for hiking in the US. The attention she brought to the AT helped increase interest in the trail, and that interest led to more groups maintaining it properly.

By the time she died she completed three AT thru-hikes, hiked the entire Oregon Trail, and helped establish trails in her home state of Ohio, all of which she did in her 60s, 70s and 80s. It is estimated that she hiked over 14,000 miles in her lifetime, which is more than half the circumference of Earth.



STATE W/
NEWSPAPER
COVERAGE
OF HER HIKE



STATE W/OUT
NEWSPAPER
COVERAGE*



AT. STATE

Questions:

Why do you think her story resonated with so many people?

If you want to read more about Emma, this book is amazing:

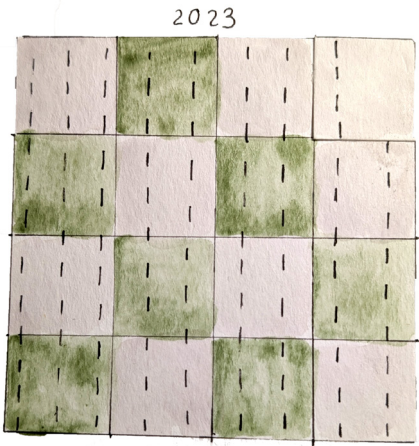
Montgomery, Ben. *Grandma Gatewood's Walk: The Inspiring Story of the Woman Who Saved the Appalachian Trail*. Chicago Review Press, 2016.

Demographics of Thru-Hikers, 2016-2024

Since 2016, The Trek (formerly, Appalachian Trails) has conducted an annual (except for in 2020) demographic survey of AT thru-hikers, and published the results on their site. They ask about age, gender, and race, but also things like how much money was spent on gear, employment status, educational level, hiking experience, and more. This can give a sense of trends in who is hiking the trail and how that is changing over time.

2024	2023	2022
2021	Average	2019
2018	2017	2016

The ratio between green/
orange (non-men) and
white (men) represents
the gender balance.



44% NON-MEN
56% MEN
8.6% NON-WHITE

Questions:

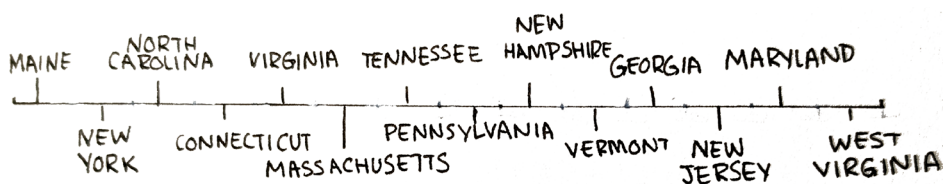
What does this make you think about who has the time and resources to thru-hike? What other information would you like to add to this?

This doesn't include information about people who just visit the parks, but Walsh and Keyes show us this is REALLY (really) difficult to capture:

Keyes, Melanie Walsh and Os. "U.S. National Park Visit Data (1979-2024)," *Responsible Datasets in Context*. June 1, 2024. <https://www.responsible-datasets-in-context.com/posts/np-data/>.

Land Use by State

The AT goes through 14 different states, and I wanted to compare the different priorities of each state when it came to how they allocated their land. While it isn't a direct one to one, this compares square miles of reservation land to miles of AT in each state, it does work as a proportional relationship. I also wanted to note how many recognized nations are in each state as another way of thinking about each states' attitude towards Native people. Remember, just because a state doesn't recognize any nations doesn't mean there aren't established Native communities that live and have ties there.



TWENTY-FIVE
MILES OF
AT TRAILS

Question:

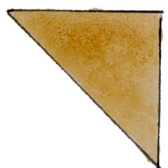
What do you think this says about how we view land and who gets to be on it? Do any states surprise you?



TEN
SQUARE MILES
OF INDIG.
CONTROLLED
LAND

Presented without comment:

Treuer, David. "Return the National Parks to the Tribes." *The Atlantic*, April 12, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/05/return-the-national-parks-to-the-tribes/618395/>.



ONE
STATE OR
FEDERALLY
RECOGNIZED
NATION

Shenandoah National Park

As we saw in the previous block, Virginia has more trail land than any other state. About 100 of the 500+ miles go through Shenandoah National Park. Shenandoah has its own difficult history. When the State of Virginia wanted to establish the park, there were many people living in the mountains. The mountain residents were primarily of European descent who made their livings off the land. However 465 families, over 2,000 individuals, were forced to leave their homes to make way for the park. Once the construction of the park was completed, Shenandoah continued to have a fraught relationship with some communities in the area as it was a fully segregated park.



Questions:

Does this make you think about the park differently? How can we decide if it was worth it?

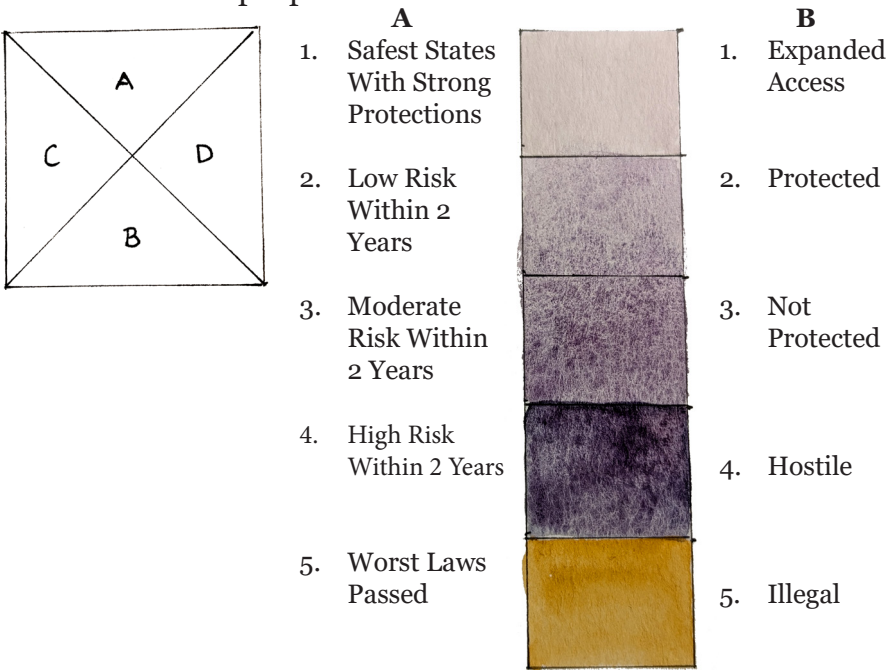
To learn more about the Mountain People:

National Parks Service. "Spirit of the Mountain: Shenandoah National Park." Accessed April 7, 2025. <https://www.nps.gov/features/shen/index.html>.

States' Rights

Thru-hiking is a multi-month strenuous activity, where hikers may frequently be reliant on the kindness of strangers. I wanted to think more about who would feel comfortable, or safe, taking part in this activity beyond the demographics and hopefully by exploring data on harassment on the trail. But! That data doesn't really exist. Instead I needed to think about proxy data. What were other ways I could think about how welcome non-white non-cis men might feel?

Instead, I looked at data on legislation and the like. Specifically I used **(A)** Erin in the Morning's (EITM) Post-Election Anti-Trans Risk Assessment Map to see the AT states' ranking when it came to trans rights; **(B)** data from the Center for Reproductive Rights on abortion access; **(C)** the number of book challenges that had been tracked in each state by the American Library Association (ALA), and **(E)** historical data on which states had what laws when it came to educational segregation. I figured these could be proxies to understand attitudes towards Black, trans, queer, and female-bodied people.



Questions:

Given what we know about the demographics of thru-hikers, and this data here, do you think this could impact how comfortable people feel traveling alone or in small groups in these states?

A first person perspective is always more telling. Here you can read about a queer black woman's experience thru-hiking in 2016.

There is nothing approximating a *Green Book* for minorities navigating the American wilderness. How could there be? You simply step outside and hope for the best. One of the first questions asked of many women who solo-hike the Appalachian Trail is whether they brought a gun. Some find it preposterous. But one hiker of color I spoke to insisted on carrying a machete, an unnecessarily heavy piece of gear. "You can never be too sure," he told me.

Haile, Rahawa. "Going It Alone." *Outside Online*, April 11, 2017. <https://www.outsideonline.com/culture/opinion/solo-hiking-appalachian-trail-queer-black-woman/>.



What now?

Prior to 2025 I would've identified as someone who is very critical of the National Parks, at least in terms of what they represent. But given what has been happening under the current (at the time of writing) administration and the efforts to defund, dismantle, and extract from National Parks land, I think I need to clarify my thoughts a little.

We should absolutely be protecting our national landscape. However, land doesn't need to be devoid of people to be "nature." Indigenous people should be allowed to access and make decisions about the lands they have ties to. We need to reckon with how we can make these spaces more open to wider swaths of the population, and that requires us to think about how our histories would turn people away from these spaces.

Questions:

What do you think needs to be changed? If you could reimagine national parks, what would they look like?

Materiality

This entire quilt is made of natural materials. The fabric is raw silk, which I dyed myself using natural dyes I extracted myself, and I used 100% cotton thread for the sewing. Could I just purchase fabric in the colors I need and save myself countless hours (and not fill my tiny kitchen with a bunch of strange aromas)? Yes. So why am I not doing that? That's a great question, and I don't have an easy answer to that. I guess in part, as a serial-crafter, I like having my hands

involved in as many aspects of the creation of my project as possible. But it does go beyond that. I am not just making my life harder for myself.

I feel like it is important for me to connect the values of my project with its physicality. I research environmental humanities. And I really like plants. A lot. So any opportunity I have to interact more directly with the environment and learn more about what these materials are capable of is important to me. There is something magical about putting a bunch of wood chips in a pot and somehow turning it into purple dye. Plus, this is a project about access to nature. If I can highlight the incredible things nature can do in hopes for folks to pay more attention to the natural world around them, then my project is achieving its goals. My quilt doesn't just have brown fabric in it -- the brown was dyed using walnut hulls and maybe if you live somewhere where walnut trees are common you could gather some and try dyeing your own materials. Or make ink!

Additionally, one thing I like about making data physicalizations is thinking about the environmental impacts of the work. And by making a quilt out of natural fibers and natural dyes, any scraps, leftover dye, etc. could all be disposed of with minimal impact. (Not including the emissions that were produced in getting it shipped to me.) The entire quilt could even be composted if I wanted to get rid of it, and it could be turned into food for gardens.

But, maybe I am just a glutton for punishment and like to go over the top with my crafting.

Questions:

Do you think you would've absorbed this differently if it was a "standard" visualization? How was this experience different?



**Nothing can be designed
for everyone. So when it
comes to “the great out-
doors” which “public”
was it made for?**