



Traveling the Tanglefoot

The RTP-assisted trail preserves an abandoned railroad corridor and offers unlimited potential

Story by Deborah Roberts / Photos by Chris Hutcheson

In Mississippi's northeastern corner lies a corridor that once was truded by Native Americans, traversed by explorers, trappers and traders, and traveled by locomotives. Today, Tanglefoot Trail appeals to history buffs, nature enthusiasts, and recreation opportunists alike.

With the northern trailhead at New Albany and the southern one in Houston, the 43.6-mile trail meanders through pastures, soybean fields and forests, and crosses creeks and three counties. Whistle Stops in Ecu, Pontotoc, Algoma, and New Houlka offer entrances to the trail

in between the larger municipalities and provide restrooms, water fountains, picnic tables, and parking.

Early Years

First blazed by Native Americans, the trail was also used by early explorers Hernando de Soto and Meriwether Lewis. In the late 1800s, Col. William Clark Falkner, great-grandfather of Mississippi's Nobel Prize-winning author William Faulkner, built a railroad along the route. When the railroad was abandoned in 2003, locals expressed an interest in

developing a recreational trail similar to the Longleaf Trace in Hattiesburg, one of Mississippi's first Rails-to-Trails Conservancy projects. Such a project would preserve the legendary corridor while offering recreation and economic development opportunities.

In 2006 the newly formed Rail Corridor Alliance proposed the trail be called "Tanglefoot," the name of a work engine used to construct the original rail line. Three Rivers Planning and Development District became the fiscal administrative agent. Multiple grants were secured to purchase, build, and develop the Tangle-



foot Trail as an asphalt nature trail and recreation venue.

Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks has awarded the project grants totaling \$210,000 through the Recreational Trails Program (RTP), an assistance program of the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration. The RTP helps states develop and maintain recreational trails and trail-related facilities. These grants assisted with four Whistle Stops, three pavilions, seven rain stop shelters, five rest stops, benches, tables, bike racks, and trash receptacles.

In September 2013, after generations of traffic, subsequent abandonment, and then a decade of deliberation and development, Tanglefoot Trail opened a new chapter in history.

Replacing Rails with a Trail

"I knew that it would be a very significant asset, but it has exceeded my expectations," said Randy Kelley, director of Three Rivers Planning and Development District, who became involved with the project early on. "People from 49 states

and six foreign countries have signed in as guests on the trail. That says a lot."

Kelley says the trail's benefit is twofold. "It is a tremendous community asset. There are places in this country that would give their right arm for something like this," he said.

Scores of local businesses have been critical to the trail's development, and small business ventures have sprung up along the route. "We recently had a bed and breakfast open up next to the trail," Kelley said. "The trail hasn't reached its full potential yet, but it's well on its way."

Real Blessing

Those who use the trail frequently concur.

"I love to just get on it and go," said Robby Rowland of the Pine Grove community in Benton County. "No cars, beautiful nature, it's smooth, and straight. I've spent countless hours and run literally hundreds of miles on it over the years. I usually listen to music, pray, think about my life, and or just turn everything off and enjoy the Lord's creation.

"I just keep my running stuff in the car and stop there for a run if I'm coming

through and have time," said the pastor who usually runs between New Albany and Ingomar. "I really am thankful for the Whistle Stops — they are a great place for people like me to stop and change to go for a run when I'm just driving through."

Rowland generally runs 4 to 8 miles, unless he is in training. "Once I ran on the trail from downtown New Albany to downtown Pontotoc when I was training for a marathon," he said. "That's 18 miles."



Need a quick tune-up along the way? Features like this bike repair station make for a more enjoyable experience.



Rowland appreciates that there are no steep hills. “Since it’s an old train track, everything is a pretty sloped grade,” he said. “There are long gradual hills but nothing real extreme, at least where I run.”

He has run the trail during extreme heat and in the snow. “This place has been really dear to me over the years,” Rowland said. “It’s beautiful with a new look for every season.”

Family Affair

Wayne “Benjy” and Margaret VanLandingham of New Albany have been riding bikes on the trail since it opened. Their children rode some when they were younger, and now they’ve added a third generation. “I got a pull-behind wagon for my bike so our 3-year-old grandson Daniel and 1-year-old grandson Owen can ride along,” Margaret said. “We usually ride about 20 miles at a time. It’s fun to ride from New Albany to Ecru and stop to get a snow cone before going back.”

Their rides used to be after work or on weekends, but now that both are retired, they try to ride at least four mornings a week. They often ride the 26 miles between New Albany and Pontotoc and their adventures have taken them over the entire trail, although not in a single ride. They have ridden the trail so often that now they plan accordingly.

“You always want to go up the inclines with fresh legs, but you can fly down it,” Margaret said. “It’s so much fun because it just energizes you.”

The VanLandinghams like the sense of community the trail offers. Adults and children with a library card can check out a bicycle at the Union County Library to ride on the trail. A church in Ingomar offers bottled water on weekends for donations only.

“The Algoma Whistle Stop has swings and a grocery store, and there’s Seafood Junction,” she said. “We haven’t done it yet, but we plan to park there, ride, and then eat dinner afterward.”

They delight in seeing a variety of people on the trail — from families with young children to cycling clubs. “The trail is very well maintained and family-friendly,” Margaret said. “We enjoy talking to folks at the rest stops.”

Margaret also appreciates the frequent road crossings near the trail. “Anywhere along the trail, you can get someone to pick you up if needed,” she said. “One time, I had a flat tire on my bike. Benjy was able to ride back to the car and come pick up me and my bike.”

The VanLandinghams trained on Tanglefoot Trail before tackling the Appalachian Trail until it was closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Until it reopened, they were regulars on the Tan-

glefoot. “We knew we had to stay active before we could go back and finish the Appalachian Trail,” Margaret said. “The Tanglefoot helps us build endurance.”

Running and Relaxation

Chris and Niki Chiles have used the Tanglefoot Trail since moving to New Albany from Virginia six years ago but now visit more frequently. Since February, Niki runs there four days a week, and Chris bikes along once or twice a week. Their children (Cameron, Christian, and Lilly) occasionally join, too. “Sometimes I’ll run for 30 minutes and sometimes I’ll go up to 10 miles — five out and five back,” Niki said. Chris has made the whole trail in 10-mile increments by starting at a different community each time.

The best part, according to Niki, is not having to worry about traffic. “I like the challenge of running the hills and the flat areas, and I like the change of scenery

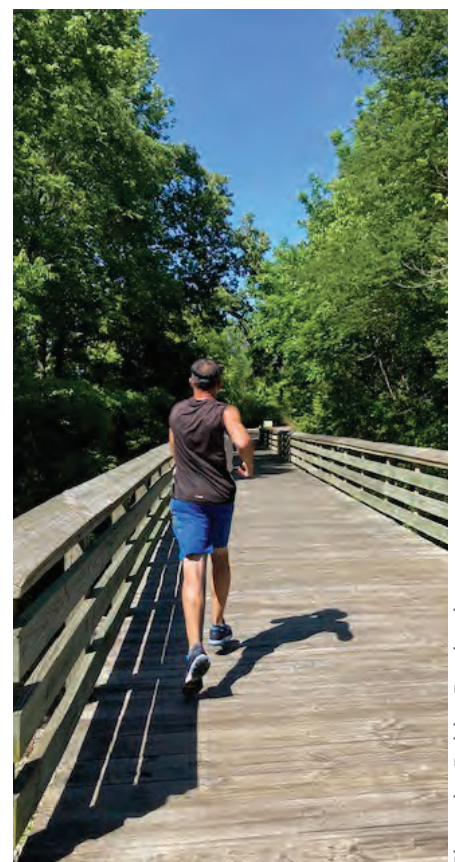


Photo by Robby Rowland



— the trees, open fields, and a little taste of neighborhoods and each community,” she said. “Sometimes I’ll stop on a bridge and watch the streams. It’s very relaxing. It’s also nice to see families getting out and being active together.”

National Accolades

Praise not only comes from locals but also prestigious groups like the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, the nation’s largest trails organization, which inducted Tanglefoot Trail into the Rail-Trail Hall of Fame in 2019. It was cited as a stunning example of the ways that federal funds, strategic investments in trails, and regional partnerships can deliver powerful results.

“The trail has only one employee — a superintendent — and very limited equipment. Every mile marker, bridge and warm-up structure has a sponsor,” Kelley said. “It is truly a partnership. The local counties and municipal governments have put their arms around it and endorsed it — from off-duty deputies patrolling the trail with radios and golf carts to loaning equipment and even personnel when needed — like to clear trees after a storm, to allowing their trustees to help pick up litter.”

With such a storied past, who knows with technology what the trail could morph into over the years to come? “There is great foresight in developing the trail for recreational use immediately,” Kelley said, “and wisdom in perpetually preserving that corridor for generations to come.”

Deborah Roberts is a freelance writer for Mississippi Outdoors.

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What is the Recreational Trails Program?

Congress first authorized the **Recreational Trails Program** in 1991 and in January 1992, Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks (MDWFP) was designated as the agency to administer it.

“Federal-aid funds are distributed each year through a competitive grant process,” explained Terry McDill, outdoor recreational grants administrator for MDWFP. “The Recreational Trails program is a reimbursement program. Project sponsors must complete the project and pay associated project costs prior to requesting reimbursement.”

Since 1993, the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) has awarded more than \$28.4 million encompassing 331 trail projects in Mississippi. The projects are in every area of

the state and include walking/jogging trails, exercise/fitness trails, biking trails, equestrian trails, hiking trails, canoe trails, skate parks, off-road motorcycle trails, ATV trails, and other similar projects.

Each year the Federal Highway Administration notifies the states of Recreational Trails Program appropriation, and funding varies from year to year.

“The Recreational Trail Program offers Mississippians and visitors to our state the opportunity to experience the benefits of outdoor recreation at their own schedule and pace,” McDill said.

An interactive map indicating individual trailheads across the state is available at mdwfp.com.