

The Last Mile

By Debra Weiner | NEWSWEEK

Published Jan 15, 2010

From the magazine issue dated Jan 25, 2010

It's been 250 years since the French and Indian War, when George Washington, a young colonial officer, made his way from the eastern seaboard past the forks of the Ohio River, where Pittsburgh now stands. It was a dangerous journey and a miserable return trip—shot at by Indians, knocked off his raft into the icy Allegheny River—lasting 78 days. Today Washington's route (or close to it) has been tamed, turned into the 334-mile Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Towpath—Great Allegheny Passage. Starting in Georgetown, the C&O—GAP rolls across Maryland and through Pennsylvania's Appalachian Mountains to create the longest unpaved bike path in the East. Yet unlike Washington, you won't be able to complete the tour no matter how warm the weather (or how nice the natives). The British are standing in the way.

Not all of Great Britain, mind you. Just a company named Candover, a \$3 billion private-equity house in London whose empire controls a snippet of land 7 miles outside of Pittsburgh, without which the path can't be completed. The plot happens to be the home of Sandcastle, a water park, situated not far from where British forces were routed while attempting to capture strategic Fort Duquesne in 1755. No one—not the company or the county—say there's anything sacred about a water slide. But for some reason, Sandcastle won't relinquish an iota of real estate. "This corridor was the lifeline to opening up the center of our country. The bike path is a symbol of that, but by getting truncated, it erases the critical piece," says C&O National Historical Park volunteer historian Karen Gray. "It's like the Washington Monument without its capstone."

True to its wartime heritage, converting this tract into a bike trail has been a long battle. The federal government purchased the obsolete C&O Canal during the Great Depression, but in the 1950s there was a move to pave it into a parkway. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, an avid outdoorsman, helped quash that plan by leading an eight-day march of the entire route. A subsequent proposal to dam the Potomac River would have flooded much of the towpath. Finally in 1971, it became a national historical park.

Although roughly 90 percent of the GAP lies on abandoned rail beds, the rest has been pieced together from nearly 40 different parcels, each with its own thorny tale. A Maryland coal and timber operator agreed to exchange his land for a state-owned

ADVERTISEMENT

plot until he discovered that the Allegheny woodrat, a candidate for the federal endangered list, foraged there. In Pittsburgh's industrial outskirts, a vital section of the trail contained a defunct U.S. Steel coke-oven gas pipeline. Negotiations went on for years before the brownfields were cleaned up and the company's new CEO—a cycling enthusiast—transferred ownership.

Nothing, however, has proven as challenging as securing a right-of-way through Sandcastle. Discussions with family-run Kennywood Entertainment, which originally owned Sandcastle, began in the early '90s, but safety, liability, tax disputes, and other sinkholes—only some of them metaphorical—kept getting in the way. Two years ago, the amusement park was taken over by California-based Palace Entertainment, whose Spanish parent company falls under the aegis of Candover. For the record, the British firm knows nothing about what's happening at Sandcastle, relying on Palace to handle the C&O-GAP conflict. A Palace senior executive says that talks are "moving forward," but they need to wait for the railroad company, which owns a crucial sliver of land next to the park, to get on board. The railway's spokesperson says it's still not clear which specific property county officials are interested in. The county's response: negotiations are delicate. And somewhere, poor George must be gnashing his wooden teeth.

Find this article at

<http://www.newsweek.com/id/230735>

© 2010