



NORTH CAROLINA  
**RAIL-TRAILS**

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*“Connecting people & communities”*

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AL Capehart: Photo © Nancy Pierce

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## REFLECTING ON 25 YEARS OF NORTH CAROLINA RAIL-TRAILS

*Photo and interview by Nancy Pierce*

For NCRT’s 25th anniversary, I sat down with co-founder, past president and valued advisor AL Capehart, at his home. He reflected on his passion for turning old rail beds into pedestrian and bicycle paths, NCRT’s achievements, trials and purpose going forward, and his current career as Santa AL.

With multiple university degrees (BA in history, Masters in both Divinity and Guidance Counseling, PhD in Psychology,) AL had a varied career in the Triangle region including human resources management, teaching and a small business offering

handy person services. He led NCRT as a volunteer for 20 years until the first executive director was hired in 2010. AL lives in Pittsboro with his wife and NCRT co-founder Carolyn “CR” Townsend.

**Tell me about the beginning of NC Rail-Trails:** In the 1980s I was invited to represent bicyclists on a group trying to create safe bike routes from Durham to Research Triangle Park. When we discovered the abandoned rail corridor that’s now the 22-mile American Tobacco Trail, (ATT) we thought we had invented rail-trails!

**Had you invented rail trails?** Close. When

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Reflecting on 25 years of North Carolina Rail-Trails *continued from page 1...*

railroads were deregulated in 1980, rail companies quickly began to abandon unprofitable corridors. The national Rail-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) formed in 1986 to protect thousands of abandoned rail corridor miles nationwide for recreational use. A representative from RTC visited when we were forming NC Rail-Trails and told me “there’ll never be a rail-trail in North Carolina”.

**Whew! Why not?** North Carolina law is unfavorable for rail-trail conversion in that abandoned rail easements automatically revert to adjacent property owners. Most NC corridors are easements. In other states, particularly in the north, more corridors are owned fee simple and thus could be sold entirely, or state law considers public trails use to be consistent with the original transportation purpose.

**We need some levity!** Tell us about Santa AL. For various reasons, I grew a beard in the early 1990s and people kept telling me I looked like Santa Claus. For extra income, I inquired about playing Santa at malls and events, and I have been doing it ever since.

**It’s clear from your 2013 book “Behind Santa’s Smile” that you take your role seriously. What’s the central message of Santa AL?** Santa’s job is to help people continue to believe and have hope. Belief is the source of action.

**Aha! Is there a message there for rail-trail advocates?** They said we couldn’t do it, but vision and aspiration leads to hope and hope leads to action. Today we have about 20 rail-trails in North Carolina, with more in the works. NCRT lent a helping hand to all of those.

**But quite frankly AL, there are parks and trail systems all over the state have long trails on the ground and in the works.**

**Why bother with rail corridors, especially when many available segments are just a mile or two long?** Rail corridors, actually go somewhere. They connect communities. A mile trail can get people out of their cars for short trips. A long trail like the ATT in Durham, Chatham and Wake counties allows folks to bike or walk for errands, socializing, or going to work and school.

There’s some perception out there that trails aren’t safe. That tiresome “rail-trail as crime corridor” myth just isn’t true. Multiple studies (including NCRT and NC State University’s just-completed study of the ATT) have shown their safety. In fact, in high-crime areas the safest place to be outside is on a rail-trail, and in low-crime areas there is no increase of crime on trails.

**What’s a highlight of your tenure with NCRT?** The Dunn-Erwin Rail-Trail is the feather in our cap. Early on, the NCRT board didn’t want to become a land trust but I fought hard and prevailed. That land trust status allowed NCRT, in 1999, to do the first federal rail bank in North Carolina, the

abandoned Aberdeen and Rockfish Railroad corridor. Now it’s the 5.5 mile Dunn-Erwin Trail, connecting those towns by trail to the Cape Fear River Park. It’s Harnett County’s pride and joy.

**What disappoints you?** After all this time, we still don’t have anything really grand across the state to show for all our work. We’ve driven thousands of miles, spent hundreds of volunteer and executive director hours on deed searches, grant writing, meeting with local officials. Some projects just fizzle.

**Why?** Can you give us an example? On September 15, 1999 we were on our way to meet with the Pitt County Commissioners with all our ducks in a row for the Coastal Carolina Rail-Trail (Stokes to Pictolus). It started to rain and within a half day, Hurricane Floyd devastated the entire region. Rebuilding took all the energy and resources they had, and to this day the Coastal Carolina Trail still needs vision and hope.

**What gives you hope for rail-trails in North Carolina?** People now understand the positive economic impact trails have on a community. That wasn’t always true. People who erected “vanity fences” to separate their properties from rail-trails are now cutting gates in those fences.

**Any advice for rail-trail advocates?** Remember the “Element of Five”: If you have five people with vision and hope, you can do it.

## SPARTA: WHERE RAIL HISTORY AND TRAIL FUTURE MEET



Community members in Sparta, NC (Alleghany Co.) are taking a unique approach to building a rail-trail in their town. The Elkin & Alleghany Railroad was originally chartered to connect Elkin and Sparta via two alternate routes near the turn of the 20th century, but neither was ever completed. The Sparta trail group is working to rediscover the corridor and build a trail in the spirit of the railroad that was never built. Ideally this future trail would connect with the Elkin & Alleghany Rail-Trail coming up from Elkin as well as connecting with the Mountains to Sea Trail and Stone Mountain State Park. Stay tuned for more news from this dedicated group of creative volunteers in Sparta! Pictured here is Gaby Carter, reviewing old railroad property records at the Register of Deeds.

*Photo courtesy of community organizer Iboya Pasley.*

# TRAIL NEWS AND NOTES

The town of **Summerfield (Guilford Co)** has awarded a design contract for the first phase of their segment of the A&Y Rail-Trail route to Stewart Engineering. Design is anticipated to take one year.

The proposed **19-mile Ecusta Trail** between Hendersonville and Brevard has gained expanded community support and endorsements this year from local governments, tourism authorities, chambers of commerce, and nonprofit groups, as well as a tax appropriation to fund future construction of the trail. Watco, the owner of the corridor for the proposed trail, recently granted a perpendicular easement across their tracks for the Cherry Street Greenway Extension in Brevard that opened this summer. NCRT remains optimistic about the future of the Ecusta Trail project and we are encouraged by the growing community support for the concept.

The **Town of Erwin (Harnett Co.)** has finalized the long-awaited easement necessary to build the Dunn-Erwin Rail-Trail/Cape Fear River Trail Connector project. The route will be constructed with RTP Grant Funds, and is scheduled for completion in February 2016.

The **City of Winston-Salem** will build a rail-with-trail project parallel to a preserved rail line in the Wake Forest Innovation Quarter, pending design retooling to reduce costs and a second construction bidding process. The rail-with-trail will connect with a second phase of new trails to provide a bicycle/pedestrian corridor between downtown and recreational sites.

## THANK YOU TO ALL OF THE VOLUNTEERS WHO WORKED HARD TO MAKE NCRT EVENTS POSSIBLE THIS YEAR! WE COULDN'T DO IT WITHOUT YOUR HELP!

Melinda Beaver  
Nick Bonnaud  
Dayyan Bullock  
Amanda Cina  
Dave Connelly  
Mike Fink  
Michael Fink  
Gretta Geheb  
Robert Hunnings  
Renea Hunnings  
David Johnson  
Klugh Jordan  
Anna Keyte  
Alex Matthews  
Michael McFadden  
Ron Moeller



*Natasha Staley and Anusha Penumarti  
volunteering at Toast to Trails.  
photo © Emily Herbert*

Deb Moeller  
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Anusha Penumarti  
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Eric Shen  
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Andrew Slatter  
Natasha Staley  
Mara Thomas  
Caro Vitacca  
Kristi Wagner  
Joey Wendle  
Leah Yngve

## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Happy 25th Anniversary to North Carolina Rail-Trails! In 2015 we have provided resource, referral, and support to a dozen communities across NC that are pursuing rail-trail projects, and anticipate great things in 2016 and beyond as these and other projects develop.

One of our core values at NCRT is CONNECTION – we seek to connect people and communities through rail-trails that take people where they want to go, and provide tangible opportunities for them to connect with their neighbors and with neighboring communities.

In this season of giving, we invite you to help connect our work with the communities that need our help by making a special financial gift to NCRT in celebration of our first 25 years, and in support of a bright rail-trail future for NC. Thank you for celebrating with us!

– Emily Herbert

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\* 919.399.5214;  
execdirector@ncrailtrails.org



Photos © Nancy Pierce



## The 5th Annual Ales for Rail-Trails

5K 232 runners and walkers joined us in Durham on Oct. 11 for the 5th Annual Ales for Rail-Trails 5K. The weather was spectacular and we all had a great time, all while raising thousands of dollars to support rail-trail development in NC! Many thanks to Bull City Running Company and Fullsteam Brewery for partnering with us to make this event a success. Cheers!

Check out [WWW.NCRAILTRAILS.ORG/EVENTS](http://WWW.NCRAILTRAILS.ORG/EVENTS) for upcoming events, and save the date for the 6th Annual Ales for Rail-Trails 5K Run at Fullsteam Brewery and Ellerbe Creek Trail in Durham on October 9, 2016.

# SUPPORT NC RAIL-TRAILS

Want to make sure that rail corridors are preserved and rail-trails are created for public use and enjoyment today and for generations to come? Join NCRT now and invest in the future of rail-trails across our state. Already a member? Share your love of rail-trails with a friend or family member by encouraging them to join or giving a gift membership.



### NC Rail-Trails Membership Form

Mail this form and your donation to: PO Box 62182, Durham NC 27715, or join online at [www.ncrailtrails.org/donate](http://www.ncrailtrails.org/donate).

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- Check** (Please make check payable to NC Rail-Trails)
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Card #: \_\_\_\_\_ Security Code: \_\_\_\_\_

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- Online** at [www.ncrailtrails.org](http://www.ncrailtrails.org) – Click “Donate”

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## LOOK FOR US IN YOUR WORKPLACE GIVING CAMPAIGN!



NCRT is a proud member of EarthShare NC, a coalition of 30 NC environmental nonprofits that partners with businesses to bring more people and resources to the work of the Member nonprofits and strengthen conservation across the state. You can support

NCRT (SECC #1111, CFC# 61822) or EarthShare NC (SECC #1100, CFC #15322) through your workplace giving campaign! If your workplace does not have an EarthShare NC giving campaign, see [www.earthsharenc.org/partners](http://www.earthsharenc.org/partners) to find out more. Thank you!

