

# White Oak Rail-Trail dedicated on National Trails Day!

By Peggy Pings, National Park Service, Rivers & Trails Program

On June 6, 2008 over 80 people gathered at the former White Oak RR Depot to celebrate the official opening of the 7.5-mile White Oak Rail Trail. Beth Ferguson Gardner, master of ceremonies, worked closely with the City of Oak Hill and Fayette County while she led the rail-trail conversion project as a community volunteer.



After the ribbon-cutting by community leaders, a group of bicyclists and walkers enjoyed the new asphalt surface in the 90 degree heat. The mayors of Fayetteville and Oak Hill, James Akers and Bill Hannabass, engaged in a friendly race back.





In addition, the adjacent Bud Hill Memorial Trailhead was dedicated by Mayor Bill Hannabass, Bud's wife Penny and his two sons. Bud had worked pro-bono on deed research for the acquisition of the old rail line, tracing the convoluted ownership from the early White Oak to Norfolk-Southern Railroads.



The White Oak Rail Trail passes through the middle of Oak Hill. Around 1990, the rail line was abandoned. The Oak Hill Trail Foundation was formed in 1997 with the vision of preserving the corridor intact for trail use. Today, there are three schools, and a community park along the trail.

The project moved forward when the NPS-RTCA answered the call from Don Grunenberg, President of the Foundation. In October 2000, Peggy Pings, Outdoor Recreation Planner with the NPS-Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program, helped Don set up a community meeting and tour of the corridor. Together with community members, RTCA assisted with developing the project vision and concept planning, and then helped guide the project implementation.



A team of Landscape Architecture students, Josh Rine, Andrea McPherson and Steve Gergely, from WVU volunteered to choose the Oak Hill Rail Trail for their senior thesis. They visited the community numerous times, participated in community meetings, and prepared color renderings of what the trail could be for the community. This work was completed by May 2001 to meet their graduation requirements, but due to busy schedules, it took two years to get copies into the community.



Old Whipple Company Store



Old Glen Jean Bank

Soon, additional rail lines came up for abandonment or reuse. The rail-trail group coordinated with business leaders who were interested in an excursion and industry train from Whipple to Glen Jean using the CSX corridor. However, the tracks had already been removed and the business leaders decided against reuse.

The White Oak Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society had formed in 1996, acquired the Depot in Oak Hill, and had been working hard to stabilize and improve the building.



4/02



10/02

In 2002, abandonment proceedings began for the two rail sections from Carlisle to the depot and on to Oak Hill Junction. The community worked through all the rail-banking paperwork, conducted deed research, had the corridor appraised, led the negotiations with the railroad, and applied for and received Transportation Enhancement and Recreational Trail grants as well as other funding. RTCA created a PowerPoint slide show and helped present the project to the Corridor L Tourism Conference, the Recreational Trails Advisory Board, and the Oak Hill Moving Ahead group in 2002.



Plateau Action Network came forward as another interested partner in 2002, due to the reclamation work they were doing in the Summerlee area to clean up acid

mine drainage. They had \$450,000 in federal and state funds for the Wolf Creek Watershed. They acquired wetland property adjacent to the trail project for an acid mine drainage treatment site. They envisioned reuse of the New River company store as a museum or school.



Meanwhile, Martha Ballman with the WV Trails Coalition worked with the community to write an Appalachian Regional Commission FlexiGrant, and then led a series of community workshops about rail trails in 2003. During this time, the community made the decision to give the trail the official name of White Oak Rail Trail, to honor the historical name.

In July 2004, the community celebrated the approval of their Transportation Enhancement grant. In June 2005, the Notice to Proceed was received from the WV Division of Highways for the acquisition phase. The on-the-ground work could now start.

In March 2008, the WV State Trail Conference was held in Oak Hill to recognize this new trail. Two miles of asphalt trail have been constructed; while 5.5 miles remain to be paved. Community members have set their sights on extending the trail from Whipple to Glen Jean where it will meet up with the National Park Service headquarters for the New River Gorge National River.

This is one more story of rail trail acquisition and development. Lessons learned: patience, perseverance, partnerships, and keeping your eye on the prize.



**2002**



**3/2008**



**6/2008**

**Trailhead and trail under development on Virginia Street.**