

**Eric Lidji:** Today is October 8, 2018. I'm Eric Lidji with the Great Allegheny Passage Oral History Project. I'm speaking to Bill Atkinson at his office in downtown Cumberland, Maryland. We'll be talking about a little bit about the section of the trail from Cumberland to the Mason-Dixon Line. So, the way I've been starting a lot of these is so many people seem to be rooted really deeply in the area.

**Bill Atkinson:** Mm-hmm.

**Eric Lidji:** So, can you tell me a little bit about your growing up in rural Maryland and any outdoorsy stuff that you might...

**Bill Atkinson:** Outdoorsy stuff, yeah. Some of the interesting things – I did grow up in Allegheny County, lived here my entire life. Have been, now, with the state for over 29 years, so never really left the area. I actually grew up on the hillside of Big Savage Mountain. And, one of the areas we played as a kid was what we called "the tracks." And, it was the railroad tracks that is now the Great Allegheny Passage. The Big Savage Tunnel – we used to play in there, have parties in there when we got a little older. You know, the party was out at "the tracks," so we would go out to "the tracks." So, growing up I was familiar with that area, always had a lot of good times out there, it was a lot of fun. You know, it was really different, though, when we were out there running around playing, we always made sure we kept care of everything. We didn't want to get kicked off there...

**Eric Lidji:** Yeah.

**Bill Atkinson:** ...because the railroad was still running. This was back in the early 70s and 80s. So, the railroad was running while we were there, because it was always who could stand in the Big Savage Tunnel when the train comes through. And, there was little offsets in the tunnel where people would actually... Workers, when they were working on it, when trains would come, they would step back into the tunnel, so that the wind and everything wouldn't knock them over. And so, ours would

– how far in could you go when the train was coming by and not get too scared to do it?

**Eric Lidji:** How far did you go?

**Bill Atkinson:** Usually like one or two. Yeah. I never made it very deep into there. It was a little intimidating when those trains come through there. It was a little noisy and they were coming at a high rate of speed. By then, they weren't steam engines.

**Eric Lidji:** Right.

**Bill Atkinson:** I can't imagine being in there when it was steam, and soot, and dust, and dirt flying everywhere.

**Eric Lidji:** Do you remember the last ride?

**Bill Atkinson:** I was not around for the last ride. I was here, but I was not part of that and not aware of what was going on with that last ride at that time. I really didn't get involved with the trail till 1989. That's when I started with the state; that's when that's first feasibility study was being done. I was an avid biker at the time. So, my colleague, when I got hired, said, "Look, you like to bike, why don't you take this project on?" So, that's how I initially got involved with it, is when the feasibility study was being done by the National Parks Service.

**Eric Lidji:** So, you say they said, "You're a biker, take this on." Was this something that Cumberland saw as like a good thing? Was it hoisted on them – the feasibility study? I mean, what was the attitude?

**Bill Atkinson:** Yeah, I think back then, it was kind of "pie in the sky." It was kind of like, "Oh, we're going to build this trail." And, if you look at the original feasibility study, it literally said we're going to build a trail from Cumberland to Confluence. The original National Parks Service study in 1989 – that's all the further it talked about. So, I think people are kind of like, "Yeah, right. Who's ever going to do that? Nobody'll ever ride it." I don't think it was embraced in the very beginning. It really didn't get

embraced more into the 90s when we really got into, "Hey, this could really work. And oh, by the way, it's going all the way to Pittsburgh." And, now you can go Pittsburgh to D.C., Cumberland is right in the middle. I think it took till then, till we really kind of thought that it could go. Politically, other than the Speaker of the House at the time, Cass Taylor, the majority of politicians thought it was just a crazy waste of money, and that they did not see recreation as economic development.

**Eric Lidji:** And, this opinion is just on the Cumberland to Confluence?

**Bill Atkinson:** The original opinion, yes.

[Crosstalk]

**Eric Lidji:** So, even that was "pie in the sky."

**Bill Atkinson:** We knew that was "pie in the sky." But then, we wouldn't have went to Pittsburgh. You know, people were still like, "Nobody's ever going to ride a bike from Pittsburgh to Cumberland. You people are crazy. This is not going to work. Nobody's going to want to do it. And, oh, by the way, how're we ever going to find the money to do this? Nobody's going to fund a project that's building a bike trail."

**Eric Lidji:** Yeah.

**Bill Atkinson:** So, it really wasn't looked at as a viable project in the very beginning.

**Eric Lidji:** When you grow up in a rural community like this, were there any projects that were crossing county lines, crossing state lines, that involved Cumberland?

**Bill Atkinson:** No.

**Eric Lidji:** You were setting model for a project like that?

**Bill Atkinson:** There wasn't. No. I mean, this area was built on the industrial revolution. We had Kelly Springfield Tire Company, we had

Celanese, we had PPG Glass. We had major manufacturings. We were at a crossroads. This is where the national road began. The first federally-funded highway in the country began in Cumberland. So, we were very much a manufacturing, hardworking, Appalachian community. When those all left, when those plants slowly closed, one after another, one after another, we really went into a tailspin that we're still actually trying to get out of. But, it really was not any thinking of anything beyond your borders, like how can we survive and what can we do? Nobody was thinking the bigger, broader picture.

**Eric Lidji:** And, that survival was not tied to other places or other...?

**Bill Atkinson:** No, it wasn't tied to anything, but what can we get in our county to make us back? How can we get Kelly Springfield back? You know, that was always the big talk of the town, is, when are we going to get the next big manufacturing?

**Eric Lidji:** Before we go forward, just to go back a little bit.

**Bill Atkinson:** Yep.

**Eric Lidji:** Were you aware of the Joe Kupec hike in – the college students who did this hike along the trail, or what is now the trail?

**Bill Atkinson:** Yeah, I had heard of it, but I did not know about it at the time. We did a lot of hiking and walking on the trail. We actually biked it a couple of times when it still had railroad ballast on...

**Eric Lidji:** Wow.

**Bill Atkinson:** ...just to try to see to see whether it's a feasible project or not. But, I didn't know about that until after the fact.

**Eric Lidji:** Okay. So, the next thing I have is January '92 with the Allegheny Highlands Trail Maryland Committee. Do you something before then?

**Bill Atkinson:** Nope. Nope.

**Eric Lidji:** Okay.

**Bill Atkinson:** That's not what happened. The county commissioners actually stepped up a little bit and formed a committee. They appointed people to the committee. I was not one of the original appointees. I was appointed a year or two after it was started. But, they finally said, "Okay, let's take this study and look at it further, and see if this really is feasible. And, if it is, how do we get there?" And, I think around that time is when... The study wasn't anymore looking at just Cumberland to Confluence, it was Cumberland to Pittsburgh, which made more sense politically.

**Eric Lidji:** Okay. So, if there was so much skepticism in '89, what changes over those three years?

**Bill Atkinson:** Election years.

[Chuckle]

And, again, you know, the industry had all closed and they were looking for other things. Tourism was one thing that we did have going for us. The Scenic Railroad was up and running at the time, and it runs from Cumberland to Frostburg, so it was already attracting some tourists. We had some other outdoor activities that were attracting tourists. So, the commissioners at the time saw this as another tourism attraction that maybe could help stimulate the economy.

**Eric Lidji:** And, what would it hurt to form a committee?

**Bill Atkinson:** And, what would it hurt to have it looked at in depth a little further?

**Eric Lidji:** Okay. The next thing I have is 2001, so let's talk a little more about the 90s from what you remember.

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- Bill Atkinson:** Yeah. In 1995 is when the Maryland Transit Administration acquired the right-of-way of the railroad section which runs from Cumberland to Pittsburgh.
- Eric Lidji:** Okay.
- Bill Atkinson:** So, the state, then, now owns that piece of land. So, the only piece we didn't own was the Moran section which was Frostburg to the Mason-Dixon Line. There was a small piece we need to acquire that I'll talk about later in Cumberland, called the Wharf Branch.
- Eric Lidji:** And, when you say "we," you mean the state of Maryland?
- Bill Atkinson:** The state of Maryland, yeah. So, we had to acquire a piece of the Wharf Branch from CSX Transportation. And that, in itself, was a story.
- Eric Lidji:** So, I think on the Pennsylvania side, it's always counties that own the trail.
- Bill Atkinson:** Yes.
- Eric Lidji:** Was there a reason why Maryland decided to do it from the state level?
- Bill Atkinson:** The Mass Transit Administration ended up taking over the right-of-way because the Scenic Railroad was running a steam engine. They needed some funding for the tracks – maintenance, upgrades. So, it was easier for the state, then, to take over ownership and put money into a state-owned piece of property. That ended once we built the trail. The county is now the owner of the trail itself.
- Eric Lidji:** Okay.
- Bill Atkinson:** So, it did end up getting transferred from the state to the county, but originally it was owned by the state of Maryland.
- Eric Lidji:** Were there any consequences to that?

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**Bill Atkinson:** They ended up – because they own it – they have maintenance of it. So, the consequences – the deal was the state come in and said, “We’ll put up the money to build the trail. You all are going to take over ownership and maintain it.” And, the county agreed, screaming, and crying, and yelling.

[Chuckle]

Because I do remember Hank Parke one time saying... And Hank, from Somerset County – great guy – I remember him saying this. Then he said, “You know, as hard as it is to build this trail – when it’s done, it gets really difficult. Because it will get built, and we’ll find the money, and all these hurdles will get overcome, but maintenance is forever.” And, he’s right.

**Eric Lidji:** Yeah.

[Chuckle]

**Bill Atkinson:** We still struggle with maintenance.

**Eric Lidji:** Okay, so the state takes it over in...

**Bill Atkinson:** In ‘95.

**Eric Lidji:** ...’95.

**Bill Atkinson:** In ‘97 Mackin Engineering is hired to do an alignment, review, and a needs assessment to see exactly where would the alignment go, how would it go. So, we got some funding available through the state, and some federal funds to help look at that alignment and what would it be to do that. And, it’s funny – at that time, their estimate was \$3.7 million to build it.

**Eric Lidji:** From where to where?

**Bill Atkinson:** From Cumberland to the Mason-Dixon line.

**Eric Lidji:** \$3.7?

**Bill Atkinson:** Yeah, it ended up about eight. So, you know, '97 to 2004 when we started construction, prices went up a bit.

**Eric Lidji:** Yeah. So, you're doing all this as an employee of the Department of Planning?

**Bill Atkinson:** Yes. My role in this whole project – once I got put on the committee for the feasibility study and then, again, eventually ended up on the Allegheny Highlands Trail Maryland Committee, was to be that liaison between all the state agencies that were going to be involved with this, since I was in the region. And then, also, to be that liaison with the State of Pennsylvania so that we could coordinate things with that. I was then put on the ATA board to coordinate with them, what they were doing in that. So, my role as the Department of Planning, and one of the things that we would do at the Department of Planning is we are community-based, and we are here to help whatever we need to do to help the community. So, this project was assigned to me to take this and see it through, and to make sure it was coordinated with federal highway administration, state highway administration, the Maryland Department of Transportation, Pennsylvania, ATA, and to coordinate all of that, so it became my project. Although, I will say, Rich Harris at Allegheny County was the one who did all the paperwork for everything because the county ended up having to write all the grants and getting all the funding and doing all that. And, Rich Harris – without him doing all of the dirty work, nothing would have happened.

**Eric Lidji:** Huh.

**Bill Atkinson:** He really did a lot of the grant writing, the applications, the putting together... And, I have a spreadsheet I will send you. This is all the different places that funded it.

**Eric Lidji:** Wow. It's about a dozen...

**Bill Atkinson:** Yeah. So, there's about a dozen different pots of money we pulled together to build this trail.



- Eric Lidji:** So, does your involvement mean that this was already a priority coming down from the governor?
- Bill Atkinson:** It was a priority coming down from the governor thanks to Speaker Taylor.
- Eric Lidji:** Okay.
- Bill Atkinson:** At the time, Cass Taylor was Speaker of the House. Cass Taylor is from Cumberland, Maryland. So, to have someone from our area be the Speaker of the Maryland House is a very rare instance. And, the story with Cass is that when we started getting into building this trail and what it was going to cost, and all this, I get a call from Speaker Taylor, and says, "I will need you to come talk to me about this project. I know you're leaving it up to the state. Come to my house, meet me there on the front porch, we'll have some iced tea, and we'll talk." So, I literally, as a state employee, I'm going to the Speaker of House, his house – real house in Cumberland – to sit on his front porch and we sat and we talked. And, I explained to him how, when I went to Ohiopyle for a weekend and saw all the amount of people there biking, and riding the trail, and the money that was being spent, and how the studies across the country were saying that this really was becoming not just recreation, but economic development. And, that it brought not only people here that were spending money as tourists, it brought people who were bringing their business here, and industry here because you have this trail that's going to be this great thing that's going to go from D.C. to Pittsburgh. He understood it and he got it, and he bought into it. So, with his leadership pushing at the state level, we were able to get that commitment of the government saying, "Yeah, let's move this project forward, keep going with it. What's it going to take to get us there?"
- Eric Lidji:** So, it's just luck that he happened to be the Speaker at the time?
- Bill Atkinson:** It just what's happened to be that he was the Speaker at the time and carried a lot of, you know, the political power in order

to convince. And, that he was open-minded enough to hear the pitch of why this was just not building an \$8 million trail, that this was, economic development. And, again, run into him now in the streets and he's like, "Man, we really hit that one, didn't we? Really got that one right." And I said, "Yeah, it really has been everything we said and more."

**Eric Lidji:** Do you also, at this time, have a portfolio of other non-trail things that you're doing as...?

**Bill Atkinson:** Oh, yeah, yeah. This is just one project out of maybe a dozen at any given time that I have to work on, yeah.

**Eric Lidji:** Wow.

**Bill Atkinson:** Yeah, it was just one piece of my job. Although it took a lot of my time but, you know, a lot of work, but like I said, when you saw the impact it made when they had it at Ohiopyle... And, it's like, "You can't really get there from here." Cumberland, you'd be able to see the trail from the Interstate. How much more business could we get off of it?

**Eric Lidji:** Yeah. You said it took a significant amount of your time. Could you estimate a percentage?

**Bill Atkinson:** No.

[Laughter]

**Eric Lidji:** Okay.

**Bill Atkinson:** More, probably, than my bosses would have liked.

**Eric Lidji:** So, around this time in '95, that's also when the ATA gets started, right?

**Bill Atkinson:** Yep. The ATA gets started.

**Eric Lidji:** Okay. So, it's all kind of starting to come together.

[Crosstalk]

**Bill Atkinson:** All coming together, everybody's kind of... The energy is starting to build.

**Eric Lidji:** Okay.

**Bill Atkinson:** I mean, I think everybody starts to see what Linda Boxx and those early people that took that original ride saw, that this really could be a game-changer for a lot of places through Western Pennsylvania and Western Maryland, to bring in not only tourists but to bring in business. And, I think that was the time that synergy really started to take hold and take place. And, like I said, then we've got, you know, some political behind us. I will tell you, our section would not have got built if it wouldn't have been for the money that came from Pennsylvania. The first money that came to build the trail in Allegheny County came from Pennsylvania – \$1 million.

**Eric Lidji:** The state of Pennsylvania?

**Bill Atkinson:** It came from... There was a line item budget in the transportation enhancement by Congressman Shuster, and it was a \$6 million line item that was just a line item for building, again, the trail from Cumberland to Pittsburgh. So, we were included in that, even though it was a Pennsylvania... Thanks to the generosity of Linda Boxx again, going, "Look, we're building a trail, and you guys in Maryland are kind of struggling. We can't quite get footholds. We've got political backing, but nobody wants to fund it." The ATA voted that Maryland would be \$1 million of that \$6 million. And, then we took that to our governor, Governor Glendening, at the time and said, "Look, we have \$1 million to start building this trail, but we have to give it back if you don't match it." And, that was the start of, really, our campaign to funding the trail. It came from the ATA, Linda and Pennsylvania's Shuster who had a line item budget for transportation to build this trail.

**Eric Lidji:** Is it rare for one state to give money to another?

**Bill Atkinson:** It is absolutely unheard of, and I'm not sure those folks in Pennsylvania even know that to this day that they gave us a million dollars.

[Laughter]

**Eric Lidji:** All right, so what happens in the latter half of the 90s?

**Bill Atkinson:** Yeah, '97, so we get Mackin, '98 there's a proposal put together, then...

**Eric Lidji:** And, Mackin is a...?

**Bill Atkinson:** Mackin is a consultant.

**Eric Lidji:** Okay. Oh, okay, yeah.

**Bill Atkinson:** They're actually out of Pennsylvania. And, they did a lot of design and trail engineering for the Pennsylvania sections.

**Eric Lidji:** And so, that's the feasibility of the...

**Bill Atkinson:** So, that the feasibility of it. Once it became feasible, we said, "Yeah, this can be built." The county put out a proposal for somebody to design it and engineer it. Mackin was chosen also to do that. That was in early '98. Ninety-nine, they submitted a 30% design to our state highway administration, and things got real interesting. Mackin Engineering did a lot of work in Pennsylvania. And apparently, the design guidelines for building things in Pennsylvania and in Maryland are quite different. The 30% drawings were rejected by our state highway administration because they didn't meet Maryland guidelines – they were built for Pennsylvania guidelines. And, even though some of it did meet our guidelines, they were really upset over it. Really threw the whole project backwards. We, at one point, literally put Mackin on hold for a year while we tried to sort things out before we could bring them back to refinish it. And, of course, by then they had all this other work. So, it took them two to three years to design something that

should have taken less than a year. All because of that one hiccup that we hit.

**Eric Lidji:** What kind of standard? Are we talking, like, width, or...?

**Bill Atkinson:** It had to do more with compactions, and drainage, and, like you said, the width. What types of gravel you have to – need, and how much do you have to have? A cross-section, stuff like that.

**Eric Lidji:** For a trail?

[Crosstalk]

**Bill Atkinson:** For a trail.

**Eric Lidji:** A bike trail.

**Bill Atkinson:** Maryland, at that time, did not have trail standards, so it was built to road standards.

**Eric Lidji:** Oh. Okay.

**Bill Atkinson:** Yeah. Cost a little more to do that way.

**Eric Lidji:** If the county had taken over, would it have been different?

**Bill Atkinson:** No.

**Eric Lidji:** Okay. So, it was just – if you're going to...

**Bill Atkinson:** Because we were getting federal and state money to do it, the state highway administration had to approve everything. Interesting stuff with all our bridges – you know, we have several bridges. We have two tunnels – the Brush and the Borden. The Brush Tunnel, we share with a Western Maryland Scenic Railroad. It is a steam engine, so it has soot and smoke coming out of it. The 900-and-some foot-long tunnel is a shared right-of-way. We were put on hold for a year to do a risk management study of how could we go around that tunnel

or another way to avoid being in that tunnel with a steam engine. The funny thing about it is I was there, filmed it, for our transportation people so they could see it. It, literally, takes 12 seconds from the time the train enters the tunnel till the tunnel is clear – 12 seconds. And, they were afraid about people getting stuck in the tunnel with the smoke. The tunnel is seven, eight miles from the City of Cumberland. When that steam engine leaves Cumberland, you hear it. It doesn't sneak up on you. You know, you hear this locomotive coming. If you're in that tunnel when that train gets there, it's your own fault, it really is. There's no way to do it, I mean, unless you try to be in there when it comes through.

**Eric Lidji:** Yeah. You know, part of what we're talking about, in a way, is like the Maryland section is this tail on this much longer...

[Crosstalk]

**Bill Atkinson:** Absolutely.

**Eric Lidji:** If it had been flipped, do you think that Pennsylvania would have been the one that was having these delays in Maryland?

**Bill Atkinson:** No. I mean, I think part of it was we were a small section of it. Pennsylvania can build it without us. However, it's not a nationally-known trail if it doesn't include these 25 miles.

**Eric Lidji:** Right.

**Bill Atkinson:** No, I just think it was the state had not really been a part of building long-distance trails that crossed state lines and county lines, and those type of things. And, I just don't think at the time, you know, government is in silos, that it was having to go through every single silo to get approval for every... State highway administration did the trail surface, but the Department of Transportation's bridge people did the bridges. And, their tunnel people did the tunnel. And, they weren't the same people. So, every time you submitted something to the bridge people, you had to explain the whole reason what you were doing. And, then when you went to the tunnel people,

you had to tell them the whole reason why you were doing everything, because they weren't talking, they weren't the same people.

**Eric Lidji:** Yeah.

**Bill Atkinson:** So, I think that's part of the reason it took us... I will say, because of this trail, Maryland changed the way they review trails. They know to have trail guidelines now. And, they've done other things to make it easier in building trails. So, we kind of broke the mold, so to speak. So, again, it takes you longer when you're trying to recreate something that has never been done before.

**Eric Lidji:** Yeah. So, when did all the...

**Bill Atkinson:** It was frustrating. So, it all comes together. We do that; we go through, we set up the different sections we're going to build. And, we finally get to 2004 to actually go to construction. In between there, from 2000 to 2002 is when we discussed things with Don Moran and his land acquisition. We knew all along that Moran Coal Company owned the section basically from Frostburg to the Mason-Dixon line. He had always a biker, very friendly. Was a local guy, you know, didn't have an issue with helping on a local project. He always said, "Just come to me whenever you get to that point where you need my property." And, that's when we sit down, did some negotiations with him, went to the state. He was not liking the deal with the state as much as he liked dealing with our local trail group. So, the negotiations took a little longer because of that. But, it ended up getting done. We got the land and got his piece. And, then also, between 2001 and 2003, what we found is, we thought we could run along the Scenic Railroad all the way from Cumberland to Frostburg. But, there's a section of the Scenic Railroad in the city limits of Cumberland that they have two tracks in case they need to move a train or something. There was no room for the trail. So, we had to go above them a little bit. And, there was an area that was called the Wharf Branch, and that was owned the CSX Corporation. It used to be part of the Western Maryland. And, what it was, it

was the connection to Western Maryland to another train. So, there was just a big loop here in this ground that they could connect these two tracks together. We had to acquire that. CSX is not always the easiest place to deal with. But, they actually had some local folks in Baltimore. We had worked out the negotiations, we had the property appraised. I'm not happy with the appraisal amount because they said it was commercial property. We just didn't think it was. Anyway, long story short, we come up with a number, we're ready to settle. CSX closes the Baltimore office. Everything goes to Florida. Takes us a long time for somebody in Florida to pick this project up and get it back on the table to even get it reviewed again, to get them to sign off on it. They did not want the property. I mean, it wasn't like they wanted to hold onto it. They were a willing seller to get rid of it. And, it was Secretary Porcari of our Department of Transportation who finally picked up the phone and called CSX directly and said, "We want to get this project done. We need to get it moving, and we want to buy this property." And, he took money out of his own budget to buy that property.

**Eric Lidji:**

The Secretary?

**Bill Atkinson:**

The Secretary of Transportation. So, big, huge support came from our Department of Transportation when Secretary Porcari became Secretary of our transportation. That's when we saw things starting to change. That's when we started to get money coming in. That's actually when we changed Maryland's formula. Maryland's federal formula for funding was 50/50, even though the feds allow it to be 80/20. For this project, he changed the policy for this project to make it 80/20.

**Eric Lidji:**

And, the 80 is on which side?

**Bill Atkinson:**

The 80 is on the federal and stateside, so we only had to come up with 20%.

**Eric Lidji:**

Why would the state ever do 50 if they could do 20?

**Bill Atkinson:**

The local person had to do 50.



**Eric Lidji:** Yeah.

**Bill Atkinson:** So, the state would say, we've got \$100,000, but we're only going to give you 50% of that, and you have to come up with the other 50%.

**Eric Lidji:** "You" meaning Allegheny County?

**Bill Atkinson:** "You" meaning Allegheny County. So, what it did is it stretched Maryland's money further. But, what it did was put the burden back on the local jurisdiction, or whoever was trying to fund the project. This flipped it the other way and the state was able to put up 80% of it. The county and others only had to put up 20%. So, it made a huge difference.

[Crosstalk]

**Eric Lidji:** And, this was Porcari?

**Bill Atkinson:** Porcari, Secretary Porcari.

**Eric Lidji:** Why was he interested in the project?

**Bill Atkinson:** Because one of his high-ranking officials, Sylvia Ramsey, was good friends with him and was an avid biker, and who had been working on this project since the early 90s when I was on with the project, so her and I got to become friends. And, because of Sylvia Ramsey, you know, talking to him again, telling him what we were trying to do, convincing him that this wasn't just building a recreational trail – this was economic development, this was something good for Western Maryland and the state as a whole. So, there was some key people that really made this at least keep moving through the hurdles.

**Eric Lidji:** Yes. So, I want to make sure I understand one thing. There's the piece of the Western Maryland that becomes decommissioned?

**Bill Atkinson:** Yep.

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**Eric Lidji:** But, it sounds like there's another piece that is still being used as a railroad. And, this is the Scenic Railroad?

**Bill Atkinson:** That's the Scenic Railroad section, yes.

**Eric Lidji:** And, it's the line, it's just that at a certain point it stops becoming...?

**Bill Atkinson:** It's the same line. What it was is the one line went towards Pittsburgh, the other line went the opposite way. So, they had to be connected sooner or later. So, this Wharf Branch was, literally, where these two trains tracks – one going south, one going north – had a switch, basically, where they could switch and go from one to the other.

**Eric Lidji:** And, north is decommissioned, and south is continuing to run?

**Bill Atkinson:** South is continuing to run.

**Eric Lidji:** Okay.

**Bill Atkinson:** But, they didn't need the connection anymore.

**Eric Lidji:** Because of the north part?

**Bill Atkinson:** Because the north wasn't running anymore, they didn't need to get onto those tracks anymore. So, they would decommission that. The tracks were gone, everything was there. I mean, the tracks weren't even there anymore. But, we were able, then, to acquire that piece, and that was the last little piece of land. And, it was only like .5 acres. It wasn't a large piece. But, it allowed us to do a little loop around and back down.

**Eric Lidji:** And, so the trail actually follows the working railroad, of the Scenic?

**Bill Atkinson:** Yes.

**Eric Lidji:** And, the reason why it couldn't go in that [inaudible 0:27:10.4] part is because the part where the bike trail would normally be was taken up by a second...

**Bill Atkinson:** Correct.

**Eric Lidji:** Okay. That makes sense.

**Bill Atkinson:** Yeah, the Western Maryland was always a dual track.

**Eric Lidji:** Okay.

**Bill Atkinson:** That's why the trail fits alongside of the existing railroad. There were two tracks there. But, again, that was part of our risk management. It was like, "Guys, if two trains could pass on this right-of-way, we're pretty sure a train and a bike can pass. But, we also, during our risk management we had to have all the bridges and culverts that we went over – we had to have them inspected to see if they could handle the load.

**Eric Lidji:** Of a bike and a train.

[Laughter]

**Bill Atkinson:** Yeah. Yes.

**Eric Lidji:** Well, the straw that broke the camel's back.

**Bill Atkinson:** It was just one of those – bite your lip and keep moving forward.

**Eric Lidji:** I had one here in 2001. The Trail Town Corridor Program – is that during this time, as well?

**Bill Atkinson:** Yeah. Trail Town started in 2001. Again, that was ATA. You know, the brainchild of that, again, is Linda. But, see, the whole idea behind it was we worked really hard as we were looking to design and build this trail – that our signage was consistent, that our parking lots were the same laid out, that everything was seamless to the user. No matter what county

you were in, or what state you were in, the trail was seamless. So, we were doing a very good job of identifying the trail and the towns, so that you knew when there was a town, you knew where you could get off, what was in the town, and all that. What we hadn't done, and found that we needed to do was we had yet to connect the trail user to the town businesses. So, thus was the Trail Town idea. We're telling all these people to get off the trail and into these towns. Well, now what do they do? So, now we have to get a program or some way that we can get not only the business, but the users, to understand that, you know, there are people coming that are going to bike in and what are their needs, and what do that want? And, also the users – hey, there's a lot of businesses here that want you and would welcome you. So, that to me, was the big building of what is the Trail Town. Unfortunately, at the time, the ATA was still so much involved with the building the trail, we didn't have the wherewithal to take on the Trail Town Program, and that's how it ended up being part of The Progress Fund, who came along and said they would take that program on.

**Eric Lidji:**

What did it mean for Cumberland in this three-year period before you had any building of the trail?

**Bill Atkinson:**

We really didn't get involved in the Trail Town Program till like June of, I think it was 2009. Yeah. Yeah, so we were a little behind everybody. Again, our first construction was October 8<sup>th</sup> of 2004. And, then we built, we had ours in three phases, and we built ours 2004, 2005, 2006. So, once we got past all of those hurdles and all that engineering, and all that design, and we're ready to build, we built trail. We built a section every year. We built Frostburg to the Mason-Dixon line first, for no other reason, but that was just the easiest part to build. But, it was nice that we were to the Mason-Dixon line before Pennsylvania. Not that there was a race or anything, but...

[Chuckle]

**Eric Lidji:**

A little bit.

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- Bill Atkinson:** A little bit of a bragging right – you know, we were there first. And, then we just built from Frostburg to halfway down, which is Woodcock Hollow, which is our trailhead, and then from there down to Cumberland. So, once we got through all of that long process, we were able to put trail and build trail in a real quick fashion.
- Eric Lidji:** So, what is this from?
- Bill Atkinson:** That is from the first grand opening of our construction of our trail.
- Eric Lidji:** Did they give those out to everybody?
- Bill Atkinson:** Yeah. Yep.
- Eric Lidji:** Okay.
- Bill Atkinson:** The bandanas, the ribbon, and then we did – actually, my office did the little card that was given out.
- Eric Lidji:** Okay.
- [Chuckle]
- Bill Atkinson:** We didn't have a lot of money, so... Yeah, so that was – actually, my sister framed that for me, because I'd spent so much on this trail to get us done with that.
- Eric Lidji:** Yeah.
- Bill Atkinson:** That was our first groundbreaking – was October 8th in 2004.
- Eric Lidji:** That's great. So, that's the Frostburg to Mason-Dixon section?
- Bill Atkinson:** Yep.
- Eric Lidji:** Okay. And, then, let's talk a little bit about the Hurricane Ivan stuff.

**Bill Atkinson:** That wiped us out? It did. That section that was built – we had a culvert that overran and washed out part of the trail.

**Eric Lidji:** You mean it took out macadam and everything?

**Bill Atkinson:** Well, it's the crushed limestone part – it took it out. But, what came of that was the county engineer, Kevin Beachy, who was in charge of getting this project built, and actually saved us a \$1 million by changing orders through the whole construction process – literally saved \$1 million. But, what happened with that, though, was what we found was we had culverts going underneath of the trail. And, of course, you're on a mountain, there's a lot of water that comes up. The culverts were two pipes side by side. Well, they would both get inundated at the same time. What ended up happening was Kevin redesigned it and put one bigger pipe, and then so many feet above it, put another pipe. So, that if one would fill up, it could fill up for a while, and then get to the second pipe. It was a total redesign in the field that after that bad situation actually became a good thing, and we actually designed more like that. So, that we changed the whole design process because of that.

**Eric Lidji:** Was it disheartening before that solution?

**Bill Atkinson:** It was disheartening when it got washed out. We had just built it, you know, and then all of a sudden it closed because this one whole section kind of collapsed. And, it was on an area that dropped off to the side, so, you know, half the trail is gone. You can't drive it. We opened the trail and then had to close it until we could come in and fix it, and, you know, put a railing up and everything else. But, yeah, it was a little disheartening that we were moving, building trail, and – oops, look what happens when Mother Nature says, "Wait a minute."

**Eric Lidji:** Were there any other hiccups during the building process, during those three years?

**Bill Atkinson:** You know, there really wasn't. Our biggest thing was getting it designed, especially when we share it with the railroad right-of-way. And, when did we have to have a fence, when could

we not have a fence? There was a difference in surface, of course, but the trail is a couple feet below the railroad, and then it transfers from that nice crushed limestone into a bigger gravel, and then into the ballast that's on the railroad. So, we really have it separated. In the tunnel, there is a fence so that you don't cross over – through the tunnel.

**Eric Lidji:** Yeah.

**Bill Atkinson:** But, again, the tunnel's 900-and-some feet. You can see end-to-end, and it has lights in it. So, we had more issues with getting that design down and perfected. Once we started construction, like I said, Kevin Beachy, the county engineer was able to work with the local contractors and actually save \$1 million in designing and changing things as they went along.

**Eric Lidji:** Did you have celebrations or things like that at each point that these sections were built?

**Bill Atkinson:** Absolutely. Every time we broke ground, we had all the politicians we could think of there.

**Eric Lidji:** Was that an important part of the process?

**Bill Atkinson:** It was. I mean, Senator Sarbanes on the federal level, in the beginning, was a huge supporter. So, it was really good to have him there cutting ribbons. Again, that's what they want to do. So, it was big to have that. Every time we started a new section, we had a groundbreaking. Every time we finished construction, we had a celebration. And, so those three years, there was quite a few ribbon-cutting celebrations, shoveling dirt, all kinds of things. Our first, actually, construction, was building a piece called the Frostburg Trail, which is the switchback that gets you from down below the City of Frostburg up to the city. And, we built switchbacks there. That had to hurry up and get built because the federal funding was running out on the timeline. We actually threw shovelfuls of snow that day to break ground for that one.

**Eric Lidji:** I've seen that picture. That's a good picture.

**Bill Atkinson:** But, that was one that, again, we didn't start construction till the spring, but you had to, literally, be under contract, and signed, and break dirt. And, we didn't want to lose that money for the Frostburg Trail and the Frostburg trailhead. So, we literally had all the politicians there with shovels and we had probably three to six inches of snow on the ground. They all just used snow.

[Chuckle]

**Eric Lidji:** What's the mood in Cumberland and Frostburg – not the politicians – but just that kind of community experience?

**Bill Atkinson:** You know, there was a large group of supporters. Our trail group had a large number of people in it. We did a lot of fundraising. Mike Fetro, a local gentleman, took over our fundraising, come up with a great idea. As he went to these large companies and small companies, and he said, "We want to build this trail. We need your help." And, "How about you give us \$1,000 a year for five years or \$3,000 a year for five years?" He got Potomac Edison, which is our power company, to give \$45,000 over a three-year period. So, what he did was he didn't ask for all this money up front. But, what it gave us was a three-year period while we were doing construction and fundraising. And, we knew we were getting a certain of money in. So, we were able to raise a couple hundred thousand dollars to put in towards the matching funds needed for that project, just because he came up with this unique way of, you know, going to a small business, say, "Hey, I know you can't afford to give me \$500. How about you give me \$100 for the next three or four years?" And, people signed on to that.

**Eric Lidji:** Yeah.

**Bill Atkinson:** So, we got a lot of support from that. We got a lot of people that were in it. But, there was always that larger section that was very skeptical about, "Why are we spending \$7 million and \$8 million to build a trail? We should be using that money to do other things. We should be using that money to attract



businesses.” You know, there’s always that – that they think... What they don’t understand is that money was set aside to build trails. You couldn’t use that to build a building. The way the pots of money were set up, there are four specific uses.

**Eric Lidji:** Are those criticisms coming just from the Tom, Dick, and Harry in Cumberland? Or, is that from Cumberland City Council and Frostburg City Council?

**Bill Atkinson:** More from the citizens...

**Eric Lidji:** Okay.

**Bill Atkinson:** ...that are going to the mayor and council and saying, “Why are you wasting federal and state money to build this stupid trail that’s going to do anything?” I will tell you, there have been probably two to three dozen of those people that I have now run into and said, “Wow. Am I glad you did this. I use it every day. I see people on this all the time. I’ve talked to people from all over the world on this trail. Man, this is really a great investment. I’m really glad you did this.” So, I think it’s come full circle that just about everybody now has liked it. It’s one of the better things in our community.

**Eric Lidji:** Yeah. So, after the Maryland section gets built, which is what about 2000 and...?

**Bill Atkinson:** We go ‘04, ‘05, and ‘06. We’re finished pretty much in 2006 – building.

**Eric Lidji:** So, does your role switch at that point?

**Bill Atkinson:** My role kind of somewhat ends, except for we had got a grant funding in 2009 for me to transition from doing a lot of this construction work to doing part of my job now was going to be to coordinate the Trail Town Program for Maryland. So, we had a grant funding from 2009 to 2014 that helped offset my salary and let me, then, get the Trail Town Program up and running in the City of Frostburg and the City of Cumberland.

- Eric Lidji:** And, is that just the business side, or are you also doing the art side, as well?
- Bill Atkinson:** Both, yes. We did art side, we did business side, we worked with the businesses, again, on identifying, you know, how they could get people off the trail – what would they do. And, then, what was it – 2011 – we created, literally, the trail-friendly certified business.
- Eric Lidji:** And, what is that?
- Bill Atkinson:** That was a program that we came up with that we found... Businesses kept saying, “Yeah, we get trail people we know, we know, but you’re not getting what they want, what they need.”
- Eric Lidji:** What does that mean?
- Bill Atkinson:** They would say, “Oh, bikers come in.” They’d be, like, “Yeah, yeah, sit down.” There was nothing ever special done. There was no, you know, special menu. Bikers want different things when they eat. When they come in off the trail if it’s raining, they’re dirty, they’re muddy, there’s no accommodations that takes care of them. The hotels, you know, “Where do I store my bike? Where do I clean my bike? You tell me you want me to take it in my room, but it’s full of mud.” Like, “You don’t want me to take it my room now, it’s full...” So, they were accepting that the trail users were coming in and they wanted their business. But, they didn’t understand the needs of the trail user. And, the user was frustrated in that, “Where were these businesses that did understand me?” So, we thought, “You know, we need to bring these two together, so we created this certified trail program and we come up with a list of criteria to the business owners. And, we went to the business owners, said, “Look, you all, and your people who work for you need to know this criteria. Basic stuff – where is the trail, what is the trail, you know, where do I get on the trail, where’s the next town? Just basic data, you don’t have to know everything about it, we can give you some fact sheets, but everybody has to be trained to know this stuff. And, when you do that, we’ll

give you a certificate to put in your window that says, "Certified trail-friendly." Then we will educate the trail user and say, "When you're out, and when you're in the town, look for certified trail-friendly. These are people who have made the extra effort to understand your needs and give you things that you want. And, we would ask you, please, to support them." So, that was the whole crux of the certified trail-friendly program. We were able to get with hotels to build trail packages, that they were, then, advertising on the ATA website. The Fairfield Inn did some great things. Got with them. And, you know the little hand towels that you use? When they wear to a certain degree in hotels, they throw them away. So, we got them to store them in a box. And, when people would come, when they built the Fairfield, they put an outside hose and everything there. They gave them away to dry your bike off. So, you could clean your bike and dry... Simple things, nothing major. But, their trail package – they gave you a free towel, they gave you little things that welcome you. They had special pricing for you, you know. So, it was little things of teaching the hotels and the B&Bs and that, you know, what does the biker need? They want a secure place to secure their bikes. So, if you're a B&B, you need to kind of think about that. Can you get them under your porch and lock them, or where do you put them? The hotels, I mean, they love to take them into their room. So, we really work hard with putting together packages of things that we could do. And, what we found was there was more businesses being touched by the trail than we ever dreamed of.

**Eric Lidji:**

Huh.

**Bill Atkinson:**

There was art places selling art. So, the hotels started to advertise – where are the art galleries. There were people buying art. People were buying furniture – homemade furniture – and having it shipped. Our county started a program and says, "You shop, we ship." And then, made these yellow and black signs we put in businesses just to remind that person. Found one – never would have thought of this one – florist guy tells me he's getting business from the trail. I'm going, "A florist shop? Now, that one's a stretch." He said, "Yeah," he said,

“I’m getting calls from people who were either having a special anniversary, or it’s a birthday, or some other reason, and they’re asking to have flowers delivered to the hotel they’re going to be in. So, again, back to the hotels and say, “Hey, how would you like to partner with these guys and put that on your package, then you can add that to the package and everybody makes out. So, it was all about how do we get the biggest bang for our buck and giving the trail user what they wanted?”

**Eric Lidji:**

Was anybody resistant to this?

**Bill Atkinson:**

There was a few that were less enthusiastic about it. But, you know, we started with the low-hanging fruit. We started with the hotels, we started with the B&Bs, we started with the bike shops, we started with the restaurants. I mean, that’s the big ones. And, that’s what we started with, and then we started to try to grow it from there. And then, like I said, you go to the business meeting – and I would go to the Frostburg businesses meeting, the Cumberland business, the Chamber, and preach this. “Guys, they want this. They want that.” And, you would start getting’ the florist guy go, “Hey, I get business off that,” or the arts guy go, “Yeah, I’ve had a couple people in there buying my art. So, then it got really easier to do and pulling in more and more businesses. And, the friendlier you made it, the easier you made it for that user, the more they spent, and that was the whole idea. And, then the flip side of that is when you get somebody like, Williams Stained Glass, who rides the love and falls in love with the architect in downtown Cumberland. He’s from Pittsburgh, he does stained glass. He now has a shop right down below us. Right in downtown Cumberland, he now has a shop here because he loved the area so much. That’s the other side of economic development the trails bring to your town. They’ll bring industry, they’ll bring business. Businesses will locate here because you have a trail. Doctors will come here because you have that quality of life, that trail.

**Eric Lidji:**

Right.

**Bill Atkinson:** In rural areas, they're the tough things to get. But, this helps us to get that from that economic standpoint. Our economic development office uses a trail map when they're talking to business or industry coming. And, then they say, "Oh, everybody has great quality of life." You know, I've never been anywhere that's said, "Don't come here. Our quality of life sucks." They say, "Ours really does, and here's why – because your people who come and work for you have access to this world-class trail, and it brings in business."

**Eric Lidji:** And so, were you also doing the murals that are along the trail?

**Bill Atkinson:** We worked with mural, we worked with the Arts Council. Both Frostburg and Cumberland are considered arts and entertainment districts by the state, as well as Main Street programs. And, right now that's where our Trail Town Program is located now within our Main Street Program. They run the Trail Town Program that way. So, working with the art entertainments, we'd really help them write some grants, get some money, come up ideas with different murals, different art, décor, and everything else that we wanted to do.

**Eric Lidji:** But, that was being handled outside of the department – that was no longer the Department of Planning?

**Bill Atkinson:** That was just me coordinating them getting things done, and knowing that we wanted to put art and stuff like that along the trail.

**Eric Lidji:** Okay. So, 2014 is when you really shift out of the project?

**Bill Atkinson:** Yeah.

**Eric Lidji:** Okay.

**Bill Atkinson:** My roles changed with the Department of Planning. My mentor I've worked with for many, many years retired. I was put into his position, and the majority of my time now – probably 80% of my time now – is managing the Appalachian Regional

Commission Program in the state of Maryland. It's the three western Maryland counties. We get a pot of money from the federal government through the Appalachian Regional Commission to do economic development. When that shifted, the time that I had to spend on this project has shifted.

**Eric Lidji:**

Yeah. Were there any moments along those, however many years it was, that feel like they crystallized the accomplishment to you?

**Bill Atkinson:**

I think it's when I run into those people that were the naysayers that were always against it, you know, and say, "Wow, I'm glad you built that." Or, when you ride it and you run into people from the Netherlands, or Germany, or even from California or Australia. I remember one, a couple years ago Senator Ben Cardin, who is an avid biker, rides the C&O Canal all the time down at D.C. when he's down that way. I get a call from his local rep and he says, "Look, the senator is coming out for the weekend. He'd like to ride the trail Friday and say from Frostburg to Cumberland. It's 15 miles, it's about a 1-1/2% grade downhill. He rides all the time, be no problem. He just wants to ride the trail, see what it's like. He's heard all about it." He, literally, came with no press, no PR, no nothing. It, literally, was him wanting to ride the trail because he had heard so much about The Great Allegheny Passage. We're riding and we run into 12 students from Princeton University who – they're a senior class – every year as part of their leadership building, ride the trail together and camp out from Pittsburgh to Cumberland. And, he met them – without us having laid anything out. But, you know, to have a senator of high standings to just say, "I want to ride your trail because I've heard so much great things about it." It's pretty cool.

**Eric Lidji:**

Yeah. One thing I'm noticing that I don't remember if we talked about was the interpretive marker at the Mason-Dixon line. Were you involved with that?

**Bill Atkinson:**

Yes.

**Eric Lidji:**

Where is that then?

**Bill Atkinson:** Wow. First of all, we built trail into Pennsylvania. We found out because Mackin Engineering designed our trail, their engineering firm designed theirs. And, they both met at the same place. They both had it at the same place. Unfortunately, that isn't where the Mason-Dixon line was.

[Laughter]

It's not far off. So, the first part of that is, literally, do we want to go with that? This is where two engineering firms said the Mason-Dixon line is. So, it looks good – straight line across – is that good enough? And, you know, the ATA, the conversation comes, is it good enough? And, maybe it isn't. Maybe we really need to know where does it really cross? Where is that Maryland/Pennsylvania line, because nobody can really answer it. So, we contract it out and literally had it surveyed. And, it wasn't where everybody said it was, and it didn't cross in a straight line, it crossed at an angle. So, that started it. I'm like, "Well, okay, now we know where it is. Now, what are we going to do?" And, there was a long conversation and a lot of conversation about what should be there. Should it be just small, or should it be this big...? And, we decided on this somewhat parked area with the seating areas with the Mason-Dixon name, and then, of course, the big markers with the Calverts and the Penns, which was the big dispute with that line. So, yeah, I think it was a long time, but it was a lot of discussion of how big it should be, or should it just be something small. But, we felt that that was a very important part of American history, and it's a big part of Maryland and Pennsylvania, so we thought it was something that should be celebrated, you know, in a good way, not in a way that kind of separated us, but how we came together.

**Eric Lidji:** Yeah.

**Bill Atkinson:** You know, the whole idea that the crossing the trail with the links that were used to, literally, link together that Mason and Dixon used to come up with that line, so...

**Eric Lidji:** There's something ironic about the most famous surveyed line in the country being off from wherever they thought it was.

**Bill Atkinson:** Yeah. Well, because it's perfectly on with what Mason and Dixon has. Their alignment was perfect. It was everybody else in interpreting the railroad stuff and everything that had locked...

[Crosstalk]

**Eric Lidji:** Oh.

**Bill Atkinson:** So, Mason and Dixon were perfect. They were right on the money. It was us who, with all our technology, got it wrong.

[Laughter]

**Eric Lidji:** So, looking back at this project, why do you think that this ambitious thing was able to come to fruition?

**Bill Atkinson:** Well, other than Linda, of course... No, I think it was the ATA, in itself. I mean, I think the brainchild, 1) wanted to do this, but 2) knowing enough that you needed to bring all the partners together on a regular basis to figure out how we were building it and to just go ahead and let it be segmented for a while. I focused on building my 25 miles. Somerset County concentrated on building their piece. Everybody focused on building their piece. But, also at the same time, knowing we were connecting to that next piece. So, I think that umbrella organization of the ATA really brought all that together and brought us all on the same page, got us all talking, and all understanding that, yeah, we have some differences, and this and that, but we all want the same thing. And, if this trail isn't seamless, and isn't going from Pittsburgh to D.C., it really is just a nice trail.

**Eric Lidji:** Yeah.

**Bill Atkinson:** But, if it goes all the way, it becomes a game-changer. And, as you see, it is a game changer. When you go to these small



towns – I mean the greatest thing that happened when they built the steam engines that had to pull through these mountains, they could haul all the wood or coal, whatever they needed, they couldn't haul enough water. So, about every 15 miles they had to stop to get water. Every 15 miles, a town grew up. As a biker, every 15 miles is a nice stop. So, you know, it just really made this kind of come through. And, I think Linda always saying that – George Washington's vision was to connect the rivers in Pennsylvania to the Chesapeake, and that's what the C&O was going to do. It didn't make it, but we were able to make it for him by connecting the two together.

**Eric Lidji:**

Yeah. Was there anything else we need to go over?

**Bill Atkinson:**

I don't think I have anything, off the top of my... I had all my notes. No, that's it. Like I said, really, the people – Speaker Taylor, Sarbane, Secretary Porcari, and then it was Secretary Flanagan of Transportation, Governor Glendening, Governor Shafer, those are the big six. Sylvia Ramsey, who was my counterpart at the Department of Transportation. Without those people, and then your local people, your Larry Brocks, your John Taylors, and people who were locally involved – without the people and the passion, it doesn't get done. And, that's the key to any project getting done is you've got to have a group of people who are passionate about getting it done and are willing to just keep plugging away. We always said this is a three step forward, two step back, but we were still making progress.

**Eric Lidji:**

Yeah.

**Bill Atkinson:**

So, you have to have those people that are passionate about getting it done to get it built. And, I think with Linda's leadership and the ATA – that organization in itself, I don't think it happens without that. It definitely doesn't happen without Linda, but the ATA made a big part of, getting her idea of pulling everybody together. It doesn't happen without that, without that synergy, and without everybody helping each other and pulling together. I mean, PA giving Maryland a million bucks, I mean, it's unheard of. So, those type of things

really make it. And, it is very satisfactory to say you were part of that. You know, that a part of my legacy as a planner in the State of Maryland is helping to get this trail built.

**Eric Lidji:** Yeah. All right. Thank you so much.

**Bill Atkinson:** Thank you.

[end 0:54:06.6]

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