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## A Hike through History: Students Explore the Appalachian Trail

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# A Hike through History: Students Explore the Appalachian Trail

## **Abstract**

Hiking is a great way to get outside, commune with nature, and connect with the surrounding area. A few weeks ago, I had the pleasure of hiking one of my favorite sections of the Appalachian Trail in a manner that was completely different than I had ever before experienced. Instead of dressing in my usual 21st century hiking attire, I, along with several others, opted to take things back about 154 years and dressed as a Union soldier would have in 1862.

*[excerpt]*

## **Keywords**

Gettysburg College, Civil War, hiking, Appalachian trail

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### **A Hike through History: Students Explore the Appalachian Trail**

*By Laurel Wilson '19*

Hiking is a great way to get outside, commune with nature, and connect with the surrounding area. A few weeks ago, I had the pleasure of hiking one of my favorite sections of the Appalachian Trail in a manner that was completely different than I had ever before experienced. Instead of dressing in my usual 21<sup>st</sup> century hiking attire, I, along with several others, opted to take things back about 154 years and dressed as a Union soldier would have in 1862. Organized jointly by the Civil War Institute, [GRAB](#), and members of the [26<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania College Guard](#), the hike's purpose was to be a learning experience and a fun way to get outside. The hike provided the members of the 26th Pennsylvania College Guard, which is the Civil War reenacting club on campus, the opportunity to experience what it actually felt like to march for many miles as soldiers did. The trip proved that there is no better way to gain an understanding of what it was like for men to march through such steep, rocky, and unforgiving terrain than to go out and hike through it yourself. It was also a great opportunity for the 21<sup>st</sup> century folks who joined us to ask questions about the soldier experience during the war and the Civil War in general.



Photo credit: Kevin Lavery

One of the more interesting things that we did on this hike was sample both 21<sup>st</sup> century hiking fare (GU, which is an energy gel, and freeze dried meals) and 19<sup>th</sup> century soldier's food (hardtack). For the purpose of experimentation, most of us decided to put GU on top of hardtack for our lunch atop Weaverton Cliffs. My personal conclusion from this experiment was that neither GU nor hardtack are terribly appetizing on their own but are not too bad when they are combined.

The section of the Appalachian Trail we hiked is one of my favorites for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it winds through the same terrain that was negotiated by soldiers during the Battle of South Mountain. The other main reason this section of trail holds a special place in my heart is that it is one that I have hiked a total of three times before as part of a 40 mile trek with the Girl Scouts of Eastern Pennsylvania.

The experience of backpacking with 21<sup>st</sup> century equipment versus 19<sup>th</sup> century soldier's gear is both strikingly different and surprisingly similar. To start, a Civil War soldier's uniform is much hotter and far more uncomfortable to wear for a long hike than 21<sup>st</sup> century hiking attire, as a soldier's uniform was not exactly designed for comfort in the way modern hiking clothing is. The shoes that Civil War soldiers wore, called brogans, were probably the most complained-about article of clothing on the hike. They have no cushioning or tread to speak of, making them both

uncomfortable and slippery to walk in. Those that wore brogans expressed their sympathies for members of Stonewall Jackson's "Foot Cavalry," who often marched far more than twice the six mile distance we covered in a day.

At the end of the day, everyone was equally tired, whether they went with 19<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century gear. Everyone also seemed to have learned at least something about the Civil War and what the soldiers likely experienced during it, which was the initial goal of the hike. It was a great way to bring together students in order to talk about and experience Civil War history in a unique way. While this hike was something none of us had ever tried before, it will almost definitely be an event that occurs again, possibly as soon as the coming spring semester.

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