Take a look... at the map of Middlebury and you will see that we are blessed with an abundance of public lands to the east of the village and Otter Creek. These are largely the gifts of three forward-thinking conservationists: Joseph Battell (Battell Woods & Chipman Hill 1915), Eleanor Means (Means Woods, 1977) and Willard Jackson (Wright Park, 1985), who inspired the eventual creation of the Trail Around Middlebury (TAM) in 1989.

The Middlebury [Area] Land Trust was new, having been incorporated in 1988 following the completion of Donna Goodman’s Master’s Thesis “A Land Protection Study for the Town of Middlebury”. I had been hired as the “Coordinator” for the fledgling organization. Our work focused on reaching out to large landowners in Middlebury (primarily dairy farmers), to explain how the land trust might be able to assist with the long-term conservation of their farms to benefit their businesses as well as our community’s continued viability. I sat around many kitchen tables listening and learning from these intrepid Vermonters about Vermont agriculture and how we can share one mission for mutual gain.

At the same time, I was living in Middlebury and started walking over Chipman Hill every day. I literally never saw anyone on the hill and could not believe that this incredible resource was so underutilized. As a young natural resource planner I was learning about Frederick Law Olmstead and the creation of New York City’s Central Park and Boston’s Emerald Necklace and had an ‘ah hah’ moment on Chipman Hill one day — thanks to the gifts of three visionary conservationists Middlebury was almost halfway to having our own Emerald Necklace! By joining the already-conserved lands with a continuous trail we could encourage local recreation, build awareness around existing conservation areas and build support for the continued conservation of land on which to build our own ‘Emerald Necklace’.

After convincing the board that it was a good idea to expand our mission to include a trail, we had a naming contest as well as a logo contest. Once the name was chosen, Al Stiles carved the logo on a piece of Luan and the trail was born.

The first sections of trail were developed and blazed through the existing public lands. At its inception, some people had concerns about having the trail near their homes or about providing permanent easements for the trail across their property. At an early select board meeting, the public works director at the time spoke against it – concerned that a trail would be a haven for criminal activity. Chief Hanley, who was then new to his position, spoke up in support of the TAM, based on similar past experience. Eventually, the board was swayed to support the idea.

We had many hurdles to overcome along the way – crossing private property, the Otter Creek and the railroad (twice). Sometimes it seemed like an impossible task. We started reaching out to all of the various landowners to plant the seed while developing the trail on the already publicly owned lands to the east.

In 1996 I moved temporarily to Oregon. I returned three years later to a christening of the new bridges at Belden’s Falls. One day while hiking in Wright Park I ran into a friend who said, “Do you know about the TAM? It’s the greatest!”

How lucky we are to have a community worth hiking and biking in and to have had so many people involved in supporting the TAM over these many years. We now have our very own Emerald Necklace!

Contributed by Amy Sheldon
MALT’s first Executive Director, 1989-1996