

Private Equestrian Trail Systems: Viable Options for Fragmented Landscapes

By Chelle Grald for Equine Land Conservation Resource

Many parts of the U.S. do not have the luxury of access to large tracts of public land for recreational trails. In some areas, equestrians find themselves in competition for access to public trails due to the expanding number of trail users representing various recreational user groups. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a growing demand for outdoor recreational activities. A trend that will continue. Private trail access is an important relief valve for equestrians seeking the peace and tranquility that most equestrians are seeking when they take to the trails.

Private trail systems are by nature unique. They are a reflection of their reason for being -geography and ownership. Still, there are strengths and challenges common to most. In this article we take a closer look at three well-established and successful private trail systems in the Eastern U.S. nestled in the communities of Southern Pines, N.C., Tryon, N.C. and South Woodstock, VT. For each of these private equestrian trail systems, we will explore how it was formed, who it serves, logistics of rules and maintenance, questions of liability, and conflict resolution. To learn more about this topic, a link to a recorded webinar, presented by American Trails and the Equestrian Land Conservation Resource focusing on these three communities is provided at the end of this article.

The Walthour-Moss Foundation – A Neighborhood Jewel



The Walthour-Moss Foundation of Southern Pines, North Carolina, offers its equestrian residents 4,200 acres of peaceful trails, 365 days per year, at no cost. Photo Walthour-Moss Foundation.

In Southern Pines and Vass, North Carolina, this 4,198-acre tract of land offers several hundred miles of trail. The land was either given in parcels to The Walthour-Moss Foundation, a 501(c)(3) charitable land trust, or purchased with funds raised in several campaigns over the past forty-two years. It is the only nature preserve in the state and one of the few in the entire country with a stated mission designating it as a place for equestrian activity. Pedestrians are also welcome. Foundation lands are open to the public 365 days a year, sunrise to sundown, at no cost. The Foundation is funded primarily from private donations. Every fall, it conducts an annual campaign to raise funds for land stewardship, accessibility, trail maintenance, and operations.

The very horsey community of Southern Pines had the foresight to see that this gem known as the Walthour-Moss Foundation was all the more valuable when it was set in the midst of a neighborhood network of trails that allow everyone to access it from horseback. So, each of 80 neighbors deeded a linear right-of-way (easement) to the Foundation along their back fence line or down their farm path that allows fellow riders and walkers to enjoy a peaceful hack to the trails. These easements run with the property forever. In return, the Foundation gives the landowner a tax benefit when applicable, public thanks and a lovely plaque posted on the trail acknowledging their neighborly generosity. The community effect is powerful – property with an easement becomes more valuable, and nobody wants to break the link in the chain. This is a very practical model for a trail system for any community that has a large, central tract of land with trails surrounded by farms and homes. It works in Southern Pines because the community is like-minded in their support of equestrians.

The neighborhood connector model used by the Walthour-Moss Foundation is wonderfully self-sustaining from a maintenance perspective. Each neighbor keeps their own small link in the chain clear, although the Foundation will help landowners upon request. This allows the trail system to branch out and grow without becoming a maintenance burden. The Foundation maintains the trails within the central tract with volunteer help. Three times a year, the trails are closed for volunteer workdays.



The trails are not generally marked, but there are both online and paper maps, and 911 location markers on the fire lanes within the forest. There are public trail heads that riders can access from the road, but the neighborhood trails are intended to be used primarily by residents.

Eighty neighbors to the Foundation have provided right-of-ways to the trails, forming a permanent and safe way for riders to hack to the trails from their farms. Photo Walthour-Moss Foundation.

All riders sign an annual risk/release waiver as a condition for riding in the Foundation. The Foundation also carries insurance from Chubb Conserve-a-Nation. The policy lists the number of easements held. North Carolina's recreational land use statute and equine activity statute limit liability for Landowners who freely share their land.

Riders are asked to carry a cell phone and be aware of the 911 location markers along the trail in order to describe their location. Protective headgear is strongly recommended. Motorized and unmotorized vehicles are prohibited, with the exception of horse drawn carriages. Drones and dogs are not allowed. Firearms, smoking, camping, boating, fishing, littering and alcoholic beverages are off limits.

Foundation Executive Director Landon Russell reports that conflicts among users and landowners are very infrequent. If they happen, they are quickly resolved by speaking to all parties to find the best way forward. They have had to print signs reminding users not to trot along paddock fence lines and to be respectful of private property.

Learn more about the Walthour-Moss Foundation at <https://walthour-moss.org/>

Foothills Equestrian Trails Association (FETA) – Landowner-Driven



In Polk County, North Carolina, otherwise known as the Tryon area, lies another truly successful private trail system built and nourished by the community around it. Although FETA is also in North Carolina, its community has taken a completely different approach to private trails as compared to Southern Pines. Their trails are exclusively for the landowners and their guests and equine only.

FETA's private trail system is in the Tryon area of North Carolina. Photo courtesy of FETA.

Formed in 1993 by a group of Hunting Country landowners to preserve and jointly administer the historic equestrian trails in the area, FETA has about 125 miles of single purpose equestrian trails, all on private property. There are about 200 landowners in the system. Approximately two thirds of the trails are protected by trail easements.

FETA is a nonprofit. Members must live or board their horse in a prescribed geographic area. At one time membership was open, but demand forced FETA to limit membership in 2001, grandfathering current members who were out of the area. Annual membership dues pay for trail maintenance, administrative costs (postage, printing, tags, newsletters, etc.) and social gatherings. Members must be either mounted on a horse or driving a carriage to use the trails. Members may bring a guest along if they have signed a Guest Release Agreement.

FETA's approach to trail closure is rather unique. Each morning, a group of Landowners decides if the trails are in good enough condition to ride. Trails are typically closed when they are too wet. Members are expected to call the trail hotline each day prior to riding. During rainy periods trails may be closed for a week or two at a time. Riders who need to exercise their horses daily need to have properties large enough to ride at home or trailer to a place where riding is allowed. Due to the terrain and clay soils in the area, they have taken a very proactive approach to this topic.

In order to maintain privacy and discourage non-member access, FETA takes a 'native guide' approach to learning the trail system. They do not publish maps of the trails. Members learn the trails from other members. They try to match up new members with nearby members to show them the trails in their area.

Landowner appreciation is approached comprehensively. They hold an annual Landowners Appreciation BBQ in the fall, send a thank you card to Landowners at Christmas and remind members in their newsletter that all the trails are on private property and that riding is a privilege, not a right. Landowners are voting members in the association.

FETA has a trails chair on the board of directors who oversees trail maintenance. They have a contracted worker that works on the trails a couple days a week. Volunteers pitch in for bigger jobs and they have funds to hire in contractors when needed. Trails are marked with yellow arrowed signs. Trail name signs are also posted so riders can tell us where they spotted an obstacle or where they are if they need assistance.

About half of FETA's annual budget goes towards liability insurance. Members and Guests sign a release. North Carolina's recreational land use statute and equine activity statute limit liability for Landowners who freely share their land.

Rules of the trail are designed to promote rider safety and protect the Landowners and their property. They are detailed and cover all the bases. To see them all, check out their website. Helmets are required and minors must be under adult supervision.



FETA's trail markings are both shown here. Yellow diamonds show trail direction and wooden markers identify trail names. Photo by Pernilla Dale.

A current coggins for each horse must be shown. Each member is given a tag which must be on the left side of the horse's saddle and plainly visible. They also have a parking decal which must be on their vehicle when they park at a trailhead. Guests sign a release and drop it in a mailbox provided at the trailhead. Members are responsible for their guests. Riding etiquette is spelled out and riders must stay on trail. FETA is smart to remind everyone that landowners reserve the right to refuse permission to use their trails to any Member at any time for any reason, and that landowners can use their own trails at any time for any purpose.

Rare conflicts are handled by the FETA board of directors. Here's where the tag comes in handy: If there is a problem on the trail, the Landowner or rider gets the FETA tag number of the offending party and provides it to the board with a description of the issue. Membership can be revoked for rule infractions. What FETA has built has created a strong demand for property on their trail system. This in turn, just like Walthour-Moss, results in a stronger trail system as new landowners self-select to live in a place where they do not have to compete with non-equestrian users for trail access.

To learn more about FETA, go to <http://www.fetatrails.org/>

Green Mountain Horse Association (GMHA): A Land Sharing Ethic



*The Green Mountain Horse Association of South Woodstock, Vermont, is the birthplace of competitive distance riding.
Photo Spectrum Photography.*

GMHA was founded in 1926 when a small group of riders decided to promote the use of horses, provide facilities for horse shows and activities, and develop and maintain bridle trails in Vermont. Since then, it has grown into a membership-based nonprofit that offers equestrian events including several endurance, competitive trail and pleasure rides on its legendary 400-mile trail system that covers the four towns surrounding its South Woodstock, Vermont facility. The first 100-mile competitive trail ride was held in 1936 by GMHA based on the US Cavalry tests and still thrives to this day as a 3-day, 100-mile CTR sanctioned by ECTRA. The Vermont 100 Endurance Ride is also held on this same trail system.

GMHA's trail system grew organically, sort of like Ben & Jerry's ice cream! In Vermont in the 1920's, horses were still a major form of transportation. GMHA mapped and connected the roads and trails already in existence. They created a guidebook, published each year, that enabled users to do point to point rides, staying at stables and inns along the way. As time went by, many of the roads became paved and highways bisected the landscape. The trail system is a patchwork of bridle paths, ancient roads and logging trails connected together by picturesque dirt roads. Most of the trails are privately-owned, with some town-, state- and federally owned properties sprinkled in. There are over 100 landowners.

Because the trails are a mosaic of interconnected roads and private property, trail use varies a lot across the system. It is all up to the landowner. Along with equestrian, most trails allow pedestrian and mountain bike use. A few allow motorized vehicles. GMHA has permanently marked loops available for members to follow from their facility and a second trailhead. Membership dues provide

access to the facility with stabling, access to member's loops and discounts on organized ride fees. You must either be a member of GMHA or be entered in an organized event to ride the trails.

Maps are available to members for the permanently-marked loops only. All of the trails are mapped using a GIS system, which GMHA uses for planning routes for organized trail rides, but these maps are not available to the public to protect landowner privacy. Many of the trails are used only for specific events. This keeps things fresh and special for GMHA's organized rides – the portfolio of options makes sure that the routes are never the same. Locals, of course, know the trails nearby and use them by private permission from the landowners. Vermont has a strong land-sharing ethic. User-landowner conflicts are extremely rare. GMHA asks all members and the local equestrian community to stay off the trails entirely from November 1 until Memorial Day weekend every year.



GMHA's trail system is an interconnected patchwork of dirt roads and privately-owned fields and trails, with some public trails sprinkled in. Photo GMHA.

Landowners grant permission to GMHA for equestrian access by signing a form that clearly identifies the trails to be used and the dates when they will be used. The form is updated as needed each year and can be revoked at any time by the landowner. A decade ago, GMHA recognized the need to begin conserving trails with linear easements. The South Woodstock area of Vermont was becoming a popular vacation home destination and a lot of properties that had been in the same family for decades were beginning to change hands. Since then, they have established easements on 14 properties and discussions continue for more.

A few of GMHA's trail landowners are also riders, but most just appreciate horses and the strong tradition of horses on the landscape of Vermont. They are sharing their land because they like to see their trails kept open and the character of the community enriched by horses. GMHA shows appreciation by good stewardship first and foremost. Landowners also are invited to the annual 100-Mile Banquet. Riders are encouraged to write personal thank-you notes when they participate in organized trail rides, which are sent to the Landowners.

Because the trail system is a mosaic, the maintenance also follows this pattern. Some landowners prefer to do their own. Others work alongside GMHA, and some are happy to have GMHA take it over. In some cases, multiple user groups work together. The local snowmobile, running and bike clubs all contribute to the maintenance of shared trails. When projects get large or expensive, they will team up and each contribute funds and/or labor to get the job done. GMHA has an earmarked trail fund for large projects that was established by the organization and continues to receive donations from members.

GMHA's member's loops are marked with numbered arrows. The historic 100-mile trail is also marked with arrows. Otherwise, the trails are unmarked. Event-specific arrows and ribbon are put up the week before events and removed the week after throughout the season as events come and go.

Members, volunteers and event participants are all covered by GMHA's insurance. Landowners are covered and can request to be listed as additionally insured on GMHA's policy. Of course, everyone signs a waiver which holds Landowners harmless. Vermont has robust Landowner Liability and Equine Activity statutes.

GMHA's rules are simple: stay on trail and respect landowner privacy, do not litter, wear a helmet at all times, no dogs, stay off the trails Nov. 1 to Memorial Day, and be courteous to everyone. If there are conflicts with landowners, they are usually related to off-season trail use causing damage, a.k.a. muddy footprints. In those situations, conflicts are handled quickly and personally, with GMHA's trail manager reaching out to the Landowner and if the offender can be found, making sure that they apologize. GMHA will then repair any damage if necessary. The trails are used for many other organized events throughout the season, such as 50-mile mountain bike races, ultra-marathons, and jeep tours. GMHA stays in touch with the non-equestrian event organizers to ensure that there are no date conflicts and that trail markings are different enough to not cause confusion for equestrian users. The trails are very popular for events, particularly during fall foliage season.

Of the three trail systems we've seen here, GMHA's is the most diverse and the largest. It is really more of a community asset, widely shared. For their part, GMHA is a good steward of its use and a strong promoter of the trails within the community. Equestrians and trail users of all types enjoy this area of Vermont, and the realtors will attest to the appeal of property with trail access. The challenge for this community is that all users must come together to keep such a large system vibrant. Right now, the trails allow enough elbow room for all users to share.

To learn more about GMHA, visit: www.gmhainc.org

You can learn more about the above private trail systems in a webinar presented by Equine Land Conservation Resource and American Trails entitled *Successful Models in Developing and Maintaining Successful Private Equestrian Trail Systems*. This webinar features representatives from the three trail systems focusing on the history of developing their trails, stewardship and current issues and trends in maintaining their existing trail systems. The webinar can be viewed at [Webinar Recording: Successful Models in Developing and Maintaining Private Equestrian Trail Systems : ELCR](#)

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Helpful Resources:

1. "Assuring Equestrian Access: Easements Assure Access to Equestrian Haven in North Carolina" [Assuring Equestrian Access: Easements Assure Access to Equestrian Haven in North Carolina : ELCR](#)
2. *How to Create & Sustain a Private Trail System* (webinar) [How to Create & Sustain a Private Trail System : ELCR](#)
3. "Private Lands and Open Trails" [Private Lands and Open Trails : ELCR](#)
4. *Successful Models in Developing and Maintaining Successful Private Equestrian Trail Systems* (Webinar) [Successful Models in Developing and Maintaining Private Equestrian Trail Systems : ELCR](#)