

'It's a Wonderful Symbol of America'

A VFW Life member and Bronze Star recipient spearheaded a multistate, 1,300-mile trail system that connects all 9/11 memorials

Jun 20, 2022

When President Joe Biden signed a law on Oct. 13, 2021, that designates a 1,300-mile trail called the September 11th National Memorial Trail, it served as the culmination of two decades of planning for David Brickley.

Brickley, who heard the news while on a business trip in Austria, fused his gratification with the memory of the project's genesis in the wake of one of America's darkest days.

In September 2001, Brickley served as director of Virginia's Department of Conservation and Recreation. He was to join a 13-state conference on trails and greenway infrastructure from Sept. 15-18 in Arlington, Virginia, when the Sept. 11 attacks happened.

"When 9/11 hit, we had a conference call among ourselves, and it was agreed to proceed with the conference, partly as a reflection that we couldn't be beaten down," said Brickley, who was awarded the Bronze Star during his deployment to Vietnam in 1969.

Brickley, a Life member of VFW Post 1503 in Dale City, Virginia, welcomed the multi-state representatives into a conference room at the Crystal City Marriott by having his park rangers pass out small U.S. flags at the entrance.

"I wanted to establish a mood of resiliency and patriotism in the wake of these senseless terrorist attacks," Brickley said. "At the end of the conference, I said we needed to find a way to merge our love of trails and greenways with this horrific event that happened just days before and just blocks from where we were meeting."

With overwhelming support, Brickley formed the 9/11 National Memorial Trail Alliance, a Prince William County nonprofit, a year later. The goal of the Alliance was to create a multi-state trail system that linked all three September 11 memorial sites — the National September 11 Memorial in New York City, the Flight 93 National Memorial in Somerset

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County, Pennsylvania, and the National 9/11 Pentagon Memorial in Arlington.

“We have had tremendous support from local and state governments ever since,” Brickley said. “Our volunteers are the backbone, and they come from all backgrounds, which includes the mother of a beautiful daughter lost in the Flight 93 crash and a New York City firefighter who survived the collapse of both towers [of the World Trade Center.]”

Brickley’s vision took the form of a triangle on the map, which linked all three sites in what runs 1,300 miles long altogether. In order to actualize the vision, however, Brickley had to find answers for several concerns.

From finding ways for the National Park Service to manage the multi-state trail to linking other existing trails and historic areas together, Brickley sought help from local and state governments in order to materialize the concept. With help and support from Virginia Sen. Charles Colgan and later Gov. Ed Rendell of Pennsylvania, concerns became possibilities for Brickley.

“I wrote to Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, and his chief of staff called me back and said, ‘The governor really loved the idea, because it could be the state’s longest trail, crossing the mountains to Pittsburgh,’” Brickley said. “He even provided initial funding toward our project.”

After laying out the blueprint for a trail system, the next task was to find a link between the Flight 93 crash site and the West Allegheny Passage, which is part of the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail, extending from Pittsburgh through West Virginia down into Virginia.

The link needed to encompass a 21-mile gap, which led to Brickley’s partnership with CSX Corp., a U.S.-based holding company focused on rail transportation and real estate, among many other ventures.

It was Brickley’s brother-in-law, Ben Swecker, who discovered an abandoned railroad corridor owned by CSX Corp., that could shorten the gap.

“We didn’t have funds when we started to negotiate to buy the land,” Brickley said. “I wrote CSX Corp.’s CEO Michael Ward a letter to remind him that 2016 would be the 15th anniversary of 9/11. Then I asked him if it wouldn’t be a wonderful gesture to donate 12 miles of the corridor.”

A month after the letter was written and sent, Brickley received a response from Ward, who was glad to help the cause by having CSX Corp. donate all 12 miles of the land toward the project.

After more than 16 years to find land and piece together the trail, Brickley’s next step was to

seek designation as a federal trail to protect and solidify the land's purpose in the future.

Through his connections, Brickley had U.S. Reps. Gerald E. Connolly (D-Va.), Brian Fitzpatrick (R-Pa.) and Don Beyer (D-Va.) introduce a bill to make the 1,300-mile trail a federal landmark in 2020. The bill subsequently passed in the House of Representatives with a vote of 423-0, which was then followed by the Senate's unanimous consent.

"It was a great example of what can happen when both political parties work together," said Brickley, who has since remained with the Alliance as its president emeritus. "In this case, the goal led to this system that connects five states and is a multi-use, on-road and off-road trail to honor the heroes of 9/11, as well as show the resilience and perseverance of Americans since the founding of our country."

Though Brickley remained in Austria during the signing of the bill into public law by Biden on Oct. 13, he professed his appreciation for the President's interest and involvement with the Alliance.

"Biden spent over an hour with our Alliance members talking about trails and greenways," Brickley said. "He was engaging and understood how important it was to remember those heroes of 9/11 and ensure their memories are never forgotten."

Now that the September 11th National Memorial Trail has earned federal designation, Brickley added that the next step is to continue working with the National Park Service in making the trail 100 percent off-road.

Today, the trail remains 50 percent off-road, allowing those who venture along it the options to drive, cycle or hike. Since 2001, hundreds of thousands of people have ventured on the trail, according to Brickley, with a few hundred people completing the full 1,300 miles.

"We've been greeted by the communities along the trail, and it really shows a sense of patriotism," Brickley said. "It is still a work in progress, but our goal is to eventually have an entirely off-road trail. It'll probably take decades, but it's open now, and it's a wonderful symbol of America."

This article is featured in the 2022 May issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.