

Trail a tribute to Hurricane Canal

By [Deseret News](#), Jun 1, 2001, *Joanne Rideout correspondent*

HURRICANE — These days, this small southern Utah town is a green oasis in a red-rock desert. Cottonwood, pecan and fruit trees offer welcome relief from the summer heat, throwing dappled shade on lush grass.

Gardens abound. A century ago, however, this bustling community was uninhabited desert, with no water in sight.

Shortly after the turn of the 20th century, visionary thinking and backbreaking effort brought water to the Hurricane Valley, via a little-known structure called the Hurricane Canal. Today a new hiking trail commemorates the builders and allows visitors to appreciate an unusual aspect of area history.

In the late 1800s, pioneers struggled to survive on the banks of the unpredictable Virgin River east of what is now Hurricane and were looking to escape devastating flash floods that threatened their daily existence. Prospects looked bleak until they devised a solution that would change the community's future. Their idea was to build a canal that would divert water from the turbulent river to a wide valley six miles away.

Using mostly pickaxes and shovels, in 1893 they began forging a winding aqueduct along sheer cliff sides, carving tunnels through solid rock, and building wooden conduits across steep gullies. Eleven difficult years later, river water finally reached the Hurricane Valley. The canal builders had made a new town possible.

The venerable canal transported water for 80 years, then was replaced by a pipeline, and fell into obscurity. About two years ago, history-minded Hurricane residents settled on the idea of a hiking trail that would memorialize pioneer efforts and trace the original canal route.

Today, thanks to Americorps volunteers, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the town's enthusiastic support, the historic Hurricane Canal Trail is complete. It officially opened last September, but volunteers finished the final trail section in May. The trail's story is one of good will, hard work, and cooperation — some of the same ingredients that made the original canal a reality.

Laura Thomas is chairwoman of the Historical Hurricane Canal Trail Committee, a group of 18 residents who launched the project. Thomas applied for a grant from the state of Utah and approached Americorps, the domestic branch of the Peace Corps, for help. Utah State Parks and Recreation gave the committee a \$39,000 grant. Americorps donated labor through their National Civilian Community Corps, a program that recruits 18- to 24-year-old volunteers to

assist in community improvement projects. The committee also received assistance from the Utah Humanities Council.

Hurricane High School students and others contributed many hours of physical labor, along with the Americorps teams, to help construct trail, clear brush and restore parts of the canal. Local citizens also donated money to the effort. Donations and grant monies covered the costs of a hired trail supervisor, numerous informational plaques that dot the trail, and other expenses.

Thomas said one of her favorite parts of the project was meeting young people from all over the country. The Americorps volunteers, their willingness to work hard, and their spirit of cooperation deeply impressed her.

"The town is very grateful," she said. "It's been a great experience to work with the Americorps students." "They have a desire to serve the communities they work in," she said. Volunteers hailed from as far away as New York, New Hampshire and Maine.

Local businesses contributed meals and food, and Americorps volunteers, who camped out at an area RV park during their stay, were treated to home-cooked dinners in local families' homes twice a week. During the past year, Americorps sent three teams of about a dozen volunteers, and each team worked 40 hours a week for six weeks.

The BLM also became a partner in the project, since parts of the trail and some trail access roads cross BLM land.

Cimarron Chacon is a BLM landscape architect who coordinated with Thomas on the canal project. She said the canal trail is composed of two separate routes. One short section follows the canal through Hurricane for about a mile. The other starts as a rim trail that winds along the top of the mesa, and then drops down into the canyon to follow the original canal route.

The rim trail offers spectacular views of the canal, Zion National Park, the Pine Valley Mountains and Hurricane. Mountain. Bikes and horses are permitted on the rim trail but not on the canal route segments.

An unusual aspect of the Hurricane Canal Trail is that most of it crosses private land, unlike most trails elsewhere that traverse government property. Thomas said three local families gave easements to allow trail construction. The Washington County Water Conservancy District permitted trail construction within the river canyon.

Chacon said the canal trail would eventually connect with a countywide network of non-motorized, hiking, biking and equestrian trails, scheduled for completion in 2003, which will offer visitors and residents many options. "It's a great opportunity that's different from the parks, a lovely alternative to the structured park environment."