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The Appomattox River Improvement Companies

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the Degree of Master of Arts.

-- George M. Volley. --

The Susquehanna River improvement companies
The Appomattox River Improvement Companies.

The clearing and extending the navigable waters of the Appomattox River is a story that runs over two hundred years. It begins with the Middle Colonial period and continues until after the war between the states. And in its history may be seen the early program of internal improvements in the state.

The Appomattox river rises in the foot-hills of the Blue Ridge Mountains and flows east into the James. It serves the middle Southside* Virginia as the main waterway and especially the counties of Amelia, Powhatan, Dinwiddie, Prince George, and Prince Edward on the south side, and Chesterfield, Goochland, Cumberland, and Buckingham on the north. The principal towns which it touches are Farmville and Petersburg.

The planters in these counties adjacent to the Appomattox grow quantities of tobacco, wheat, and corn. This section has always been predominantly agricultural and many large plantations may be found in it.

The earliest action on the part of the General Assembly of the State to clear the river was in 1741. In May of that year, it passed an act which authorized the clearing of the James and Appomattox rivers so the inhabitants of Amelia, Goochland, and Albemarle could bring their tobacco down these rivers. This act authorized the removal of all the mill-dams, stone-hops, and ledges used for catching fish.

In 1782 the Assembly again passed an act for the removal of obstructions and mentioned specifically mill-dams and fish-hedges. The movement, however, for an organized company to open and extend the navigable waters of the Appomattox had its beginning with the idea entertained by George Washington that an opening of the rivers of Virginia would serve to unite the state politically as well as economically.** Marshall, Jefferson, and other far-sighted Virginians saw the need of communication with the western counties and the possibilities of these counties once transportation had been provided them.

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* Southside Virginia includes those counties south of the James River, west of tidewater, and east of the Blue Ridge Mountains.
** In 1784, due to the efforts of Washington, Jefferson, etc., the James River Canal and Potomac companies had been chartered by the General Assembly. These were the first river improvement companies in the State.
At the meeting of the General Assembly in 1787 the inhabitants of the counties adjacent to the Appomattox presented petitions for the clearing and extending the navigable waters of the river. These petitions asserted that the State was improving many rivers and that such action was public-spirited; that the value of the land adjacent would be increased; that the lands adjacent might be made more advantageous at the small expense; and that a large number of the inhabitants would be benefitted.*

The plan advocated by the petitions was to have private subscriptions to a company under the control of trustees appointed by the General Assembly. The petitions did not ask for state aid, but for sanction by the law of the State.

The movement was opposed by some in these counties who presented petitions against it. These called the project a visionary scheme, a chimerical project, and said that it was too expensive, and that the attempt would prove abortive. The real objection was, however, that there was a scarcity of money due to the failure of Congress to meet its requisitions. It was also learned that the expense of such an undertaking would call for a burdensome tax and that this was unreasonable in a time of "Common Calamity".

The State had, in the past decade, encouraged the building of mills on the river and it was felt that if these had to be destroyed a grave injustice would be done the mill-owners. However, these petitions suggested that, if the improvement should be made, canals with locks be built around the mill-dams.

The committee of Propositions and Grievances to which the petitions had been referred reported** in favor of the project and by December 18, 1787, both Houses had passed an Act providing for the organization necessary to open the river.

* The idea was also entertained of having the river cleared of fish dredges etc. so that the natives could enjoy fishing as a sport. This was ridiculed by those opposed who called it a wasteful pastime for slothful gentlemen.

** The committee had heard the evidence of one Joseph Michaux, later a trustee of the company, who testified that on the 10th, of June in 1762 or 1763, he had come from Rutledge's ford down the river to examine it. He went as far as Atkinson's mill which was five miles below Petersburg. He estimated the distance as about 100 miles between Rutledge's ford and the mill. Michaux also reported that the river was at times low, but that there were only mills to obstruct it.
David Anderson was also examined and stated that in April of 1774 he had examined the river with one John Bigger. They said that there were few falls and that the only task was to remove the mills.

John Morton of Charlotte County had also gone down the river at different times in canoes and testified that there was enough water from October to July for any loaded batteaux. He also said that he had found no dangerous fall from Rutlidge's #60Atkinsons.

(Pp. 33-34 Journal of the House of Delegates 1787-88)
This Company was "to improve and extend the navigation of the Appomattox River from Farmville, through Petersburg, to Tidewater, a distance of more than ninety miles."*

This bill as passed by the Assembly of 1787 is an interesting work. Its introductory paragraph states that such a work would be of great benefit and public utility and that many persons were willing to subscribe money to effect it.

The act gave in detail the powers and duties of the trustees in acquiring the necessary land, making contracts for cutting canals when such were needed, contracts for erecting the locks, caring for the collection of tolls, and taking subscriptions.

The trustees appointed by the Assembly were:


The said trustees of the company were incorporated as the Appomattox trustees and were empowered to sue as such.**

The last section of the act provided that the owners of the mills on the Appomattox above Banister's mill should, within eighteen months, erect "good and sufficient locks through their dams or on canals convenient and proper around these mills so as to procure an easy, safe, and expeditious passage for loaded canoes, boats, and batteaus, both up and down the Appomattox. The locks and dams mentioned must be in good condition and constantly attended by a able and capable man.

The plan adopted by the trustees, however, after the first several years of work was to have two companies in the development of the river improvements. The first company, called the Lower Appomattox company, began with the river at the point it flowed into the James and came up to Petersburg.

The second, or Upper company, took up the work at Petersburg and continued to Farmville. These companies were under the same trustees, but otherwise worked separately, having different presidents, and making different reports.


** W.W Hening— "Statutes at Large XII" pp. 591-595.
In short, the waters of the Appomattox were to be made navigable from Banister's mill below Petersburg as far up the river as might be deemed practicable so as to have a sufficient depth and width of water to navigate boats, batteaus, or canoes capable of carrying six hogsheads of tobacco.

The work of clearing and opening the river was not begun as soon as the State thought it should have been and so in 1790 John Morton, John Archer, and Edward Munford, Gentlemen were appointed as trustees to carry out the work as outlined in the first act.*

These trustees at once let contracts for the erection of locks, dams, warehouses, and so on. In 1792, there was legislation which made it lawful for the Appomattox company to collect tolls when it should have made the river capable of navigation in any season from Broadway to Pocahuntas bridge in any vessel drawing nine feet of water. **

The principal source of income was to be the tolls collected. In 1792, however another source was added. At that time the Assembly authorized the trustees to lease or sell the water passing through the canals or to lease any land owned by them.

By this act, also, navigation was to be opened below Banister's mill and the sale of mill seats was forbidden except between this and Atkinson's as it was feared the volume of water in the river might be affected unfavorably.***

* Hening XIII p. 153
** Ibid page 668. Broadway was a point on the river below Petersburg. Pocahuntas Bridge was some miles below Farmville.
*** Francis Eppes, John Royall, Neil Buchanan, Roger Atkinson, Jr., and Edmund Harrison were added as trustees. They were to receive six shillings a day as compensation.

Also once every six months at one or the other of the courts of Amelia, Prince-Edward, or Cumberland there should be filed a full and fair statement of the receipts of the company together with an account of the disbursements and expenditures "in and about the business of their appointment".

The State had at first taken 100 shares in the company, but later increased this until it had invested $12,500. in the Upper, and $16,000. in the Lower.
However, the available funds were not enough and the Legislature passed an act enabling the company to borrow money from the State. The first loan to the Upper company was for $2,500, and was paid directly to Colonel Pride, the Treasurer.

The Company encountered another expense at this time in the form of payments for sites and warehouse buildings. The first and largest of these was at Petersburg. It was built by one John Jas. Thweatt at a cost of approximately $15,000 and was used for the storage of tobacco and flour.

In 1812, reports were made to the Governor by R.N. Venable for the Upper company, and James Campbell for the Lower.

Venable wrote: "The canal is taken out of the Appomattox on the south side of the river, is supplied with water altogether from the river and extends five miles and a half to the town of Petersburg. The canal runs on a level from the place it leaves the river four miles, crossing several large bottoms on banks of earth thrown over small tunnels - the canal then descends 28 ft. by 4 locks, built entirely of stone -- from thence it runs on a level to the town of Petersburg where a basin is formed. The canal above the locks is about 110 ft. above the tide water, at the basin 82 ft. The locks in the clear are 10 ft. by 62, as well as I now recollect; they ought to have been 14 by 75. But the managers were induced to make them the size above stated from the difficulty of obtaining funds."

Venable's report stated that the canal was 16 ft. wide at the bottom and 23 ft. at the top. There were no reservoirs as the water from the river was judged to be enough for navigation. The bed of the river was used for 120 miles above Petersburg. Thus the principal part of the labor was in the canal and locks around Petersburg.

The tolls as yet did not exceed $1,200 a year and great amounts had been spent in the work. Boats carrying from 40 to 75 barrels of flour could pass down the river, but no full loads could be hauled.*

Progress on the Lower Appomattox as reported by Campbell had been unfortunate as the contractor had just about completed the work and the company had paid for two-thirds of it when it was destroyed by a freshet. However, the work was progressing slowly and it would be finished.

President Campbell stated that the canal would facilitate the intercourse of the people it served, add more strength to the state, and add value to the crops by lessening the costs of transportation.

Campbell also remarked that his neighbors on the Roanoke River wanted this cleared from the Falls down to where it entered the Appomattox. This, however, never seems to have been done.*

These expenses and little income discouraged the men backing the project and in 1820 their chief concern was to pay the debts of the company.

However, by November 30, of 1821 the financial condition of the Upper company was:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tolls for the year</th>
<th>$3,187.34</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Debts</td>
<td>17,361.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The articles hauled that year were flour, wheat, corn, tobacco, salt, with an upload of coal and shells.**

The 1824 report of the Upper Appomattox company showed a capital of $61,100, with capital in works as $86,789.61 and tolls amounting to $5,174.94, lease on water $2,000.

Also the following had been hauled, and gives an idea of the imports and produce of the people of Southside, Virginia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>10,795</th>
<th>barrels of flour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40,519</td>
<td>bushels of wheat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3,134</td>
<td>hogsheads of tobacco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>bushels of corn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4,676</td>
<td>bushels of salt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>435, 225</td>
<td>pounds of goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>341</td>
<td>tiers of lime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>casks of distillate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>empty boxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>bushels of coal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the report of the articles being hauled, it can be seen that almost everything the planters along the Appomattox produced and used was shipped on the river. Tobacco, wheat, flour, and corn went down, with goods and merchandise coming up.

* Ibid.
** Ibid 1821 p.22. The report was signed by Archer, Venable, and Morton.
In 1830 the Second Auditor of Virginia made a report as to the condition of both the Lower and Upper company. As can be seen from this, the company was not direct paying concern, but rather was a actual loss to the subscribers. Their returns, were, however, in an increased value of land, better and quicker means of transportation, and travel.

This report of the Second Auditor is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Capital Stock</th>
<th>State's additional interest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower Appomattox</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
<td>$16,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Appomattox</td>
<td>$61,100</td>
<td>$12,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No dividends and no tolls.

The Upper Appomattox company was in little better financial condition. The capital stock was $61,100, with the State's additional interest $12,500. There had been tolls collected but no dividends paid. The tolls for the year were $3,255.63 and rents $1,550.

The president of the Lower company, Albert Stein, made a detailed report in which he said that the works, though built of the most simple material, had produced the desired effects, that they would require little repair, and that with the exception of a few "fences", little work was necessary to secure seven feet of water.

In 1850 this company was operating two cotton mills in addition to the hauling. The tolls were $10,285.50. The report of the Upper company in 1861 showed progress.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Capital Stock</th>
<th>State's additional interest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower Appomattox</td>
<td>$67,350</td>
<td>$48,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tolls, rents, etc.- from the commencement had been $249,555.06
The old improvements, etc.- $133,778.09
The New- $122,379.29

Mr. Samuel Davies Morton, Treasure of the company, added a very interesting letter to the report. He said:


"I am not able to furnish a map of the improvement. I am not aware that one has ever been made.

The length of the improvement is about 95± miles.

Mode of construction and keeping in repair, is by
dams and locks.

The average cost per mile is about $2,880., including expenditure of every kind from commencement to 30th. September 1851."

The produce, etc., hauled during the year ending on
September 30, 1851 showed:

- 5472 1/2 Barrels of flour
- 24,632 Bushels of wheat.
- 1,686 Hhds. Tobacco.
- 96 Hhds. stems
- 102 Kgs. tobacco
- 8,334 1/2 Boxes tobacco.
- 1,650 Pounds of goods.
- 9,888 Bush. salt
- 843 Tierses lime
- 70 Tons Iron.
- 19,485 Bush corn
- 32 Hhds. spirits.
- 1,374 Bbls. Spirits, etc.
- 66 1/2 Hhds. Molasses
- 359 Bush. Coal
- 234 1/2 Bbls. fish
- 84 Bbls. tar.
- 7 Loads of timber
- 62,150 Shingles
- 64 1/2 Loads of wood
- 250 Bush. flux seeds
- 382 Empty bœs
- 20 Tons casting
- 2 Tons Stone
- 1,500 Laths
- 6 Mill stones

List of Salaried Officers, as given by Mr. Morton,
Samuel W. Venable, superintendent, salary $500. per annum.
S.D. Morton, treasure, clerk and collector of toll's, salary $1,000. per annum.
Hohn Michaels, lock keeper, salary $150. per annum, and 10 barrels of corn and 500 pounds pork.
34-----------------Tons Pig Iron
702-----------------Cu. Ft. plank.
79,750-----------------Pounds of Hay.
168-----------------Bush Peas.
54-----------------Bbls. Beef.

The total amount of tolls collected was $6,928.71.*

From this report it can be seen that the iron industry in Virginia was assuming proportions of importance to the State and that the linen industry must have developed as flax seed was hauled. Also the company was rendering a greater degree of usefulness to its patrons as a more numerous variety of articles was being carried. Shingles and lathes were also being manufactured in quantities and there were other indications of the progress being made in the State's industries.

About this time the lower Appomattox company petitioned to the State Legislature for permission to sell its stock to the town of Petersburg as it did not have the funds to remove obstructive bars from the river. The company listed the balance on hand as $1,565.90 and the total tolls as $4,837.60. Joseph Bragg was President.

On March 28, 1861 the report to the Board of Public Works shows that vessels drawing six feet of water could not pass over obstructions below Petersburg and further stated that the city took over the private stock and the State's share which brought only $588.82. The funds on hand were divided pro rata among the shareholders. **


** Letter from the Acting Secretary of War in 1907.

Since that time the United States government has seen that the river has obtained to a depth of twelve feet up to Petersburg. The city has spent $600,000, and the Federal government $722,998.30 to dredge the river.

The commerce on this part of the river is in barges, sailing boats, and small steamboats. The city owns a dredge and still operates it at intervals.
The war between the states interfered with the activities of the canal and it never resumed its former work after the cessation of hostilities. It dragged on in an unequal fight with the railroads. These railroads were thriving for by 1860, there were 1,350 miles of roads in Virginia. Those immediately affecting the two Canal Companies were: Petersburg Railroad to Weldon, N.C., Richmond and Danville road, and the Southside road. They provided a quicker means of transportation and were generally more satisfactory than were the boats on the river.

In 1873 the Assembly passed an Act which permitted the State to sell its interest in the Upper Canal company to the Superintendents of that company. In 1877, Senator Hinton, President of the company, asked for and obtained permission to have the credit of the company extended.*

In the session of 1881-82 the further question of the indebtedness of the company to the state was taken up. Also acts were passed to allow it to increase its capital stock and to allow it to independently widen its canal between certain points. The first allowed the company to increase its capital stock if it paid its debt to the state and used the money to operate mills, manufactories, and the general purposes of the company.** The second provided for the enlargement of dams and locks for a canal forty feet in width and with a uniform depth of five feet from Clementown to Petersburg.***

* Senate Journal and Documents 1877, pp. 290, 424, 361, 306. The Senate in 1878 investigated the charge that Mr. Hinton, President of the company, and a large shareholder, had used bribery to obtain the passage of the bill for the sale of the bonds. The committee appointed to investigate this cleared him, however.

The Senate at the session of 1878-79 also appointed a committee to look into the claims of the State of $9,500 and interest against the company. It was found that the State had not delivered all the stock and that it had additional security in collateral belonging to the company. The company in 1879-80 made satisfactory arrangements with the State in the shape of bonds to take care of the $9,500 and $3,665.41 in interest.


*** Ibid pp 491-492. Other legislation was in 1888 when all the several acts for opening the river were re-enacted into one. Also an act was passed to facilitate the transfer of shares, and changed them from real to personal property.
By 1893 the traffic on the canal had fallen in quantity and the company asked the Assembly for permission to use its water power to light the city of Petersburg. This permission was granted and in that year 165 double arc lamps were put on the streets. In 1896 this number was changed to 200.

The history of the company in recent years is closely bound up with that of the Virginia Electric and Power Company. In 1899 the trustees leased their property to the above company for $300,000. With this lease went all the rights and privileges of the company. The company owns and controls the Appomattox river a distance of seventy miles above the city to Farmville. It owns the canal starting from about seven miles above Petersburg and running to within the city. This enables the company to develop a large amount of power out of the surplus water flowing through the canal. It owns a corn-mill, a cotton-mill, and flour mill within the city.

The stock of the Upper Appomattox company is 611 shares of original stock and 1200 of new stock. The Virginia Electric and Power Company owns 532 of the old stock and 969 of the new. Seventy-nine shares of the old has not been heard from in 40 years and the new is practically worthless as it only pays dividends on the tolls collected.
I. Virginia Statutes at Large, compiled by W.W. Hening, 13 vols.


IV. Petitions of Powhatan, Amelia, Buckingham, Cumberland, and Prince Edward counties to the General Assembly, 1787. Manuscripts in the Archives Department of the Virginia State Library.


VI. Virginia. Board of Public Works. Reports.


XI. Southside Railroad and Development Company Booklet. 1907.

XII. Upper Appomattox Company Field Books for 1825, 1832, 1835 in manuscript. The Archives Division of the Virginia State Library.