THE NORTH RIVER NATIVATION

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My purpose here is to inform the reader about a long forgotten navigation system that operated in Rockbridge county in the mid 19th century before being discontinued with the coming of the railroad and eventually the arrival of the automobile. How and why was an elaborate canal system extended into the far western section of Virginia? How did Lexington and Rockbridge county benefit from it? Was it their main trade route to other towns and ports along the southeastern coast of America or did it eventually fail because of the impracticality of the canal system, and the disuse of it? These questions and others await possible solutions.

The waterway has always been a cheap means of transportation. Attention was early directed to the outlet afforded by the James and North rivers. A petition of 1810 states that the North river has been cleared out, and it asks that the county court be given the authority to levy not more than two hundred dollars a year to keep the channel open. An Act of 1811 gave the necessary authority, but roused the wrath of certain of the inhabitants. They say the benefit was not general, and declare many of the people knew nothing of the measure until it became law. 1

The clamor continued but for three years the state did nothing to quell it. In the meantime the James River Company did considerable work improving navigation on North River, one of the principal tributaries of the James which joins it just
above Balcony Falls. Had North River been dammed and a suitable reservoir established, it would have solved the water problem on the lower James. The best reason the company had for not doing so was that twenty miles up North river was the important town of Lexington, the center of a rich agricultural region which it hoped to connect with James River Navigation.2

Sluice navigation from Richmond to Balcony Falls was open in 1816 and to Buchanan in 1827, but the James River and Kanawha Canal, incorporated in 1831, did not reach Balcony Falls until about 1850, nor Buchanan until 1851. During the intervening third of a century the batteau was used in moving produce from Rockbridge to Tidewater. This craft was a narrow boat about ninety feet long, and it was propelled by poles. In the center was a canvas awning eight to ten feet long. Three negroes made a crew. As cargo, seventy-five barrels of flour could be taken on. If tobacco were the load, the hogsheads—seven to ten in number lay lengthwise with the boat. It was comparatively easy to go down stream, but since it was difficult to "shove back", after getting above the smooth waters in the lower James, the batteau was sometimes disposed of at Richmond.3

During the reign of the batteau, boat building was quite a business at several places in the county. The leading boat captains were John Hamilton, Samuel McCorkle, and Elisha Paxton. It was during this period that cedar grove, as the head of navigation on North river, was almost the met-
-ropolis of Rockbridge. After the coming of the canal it fell in utter decay. 4

By a majority of 217 in a total vote of 615, this county subscribed $15,000 to the North River Navigation in an election held June 1st, 1850. A further subscription of $29,950 was carried August 23, 1851, 687 citizens voting for it and 385 against it. At the close of the war of 1861 the interest on the principal of $26,115.44 amounted to $2,856.75. 5

From Glasgow to Lexington the canal was built in sections, arriving at East Lexington in 1852. As each section was opened to travel, a warehouse was built. The first one above Bal­cony Falls was at Miller's, half way to Buena Vista. Another was at Thompson's several miles further on, and a third was at the mouth of the south river. Until a warehouse ceased to be a terminal it was a very important place. Goods were wagoned on to Lexington and more remote points in the county. The canal boat would stop anywhere to take on or put off freight. The crew would even help a farmer to thresh, so as to secure the moving of his wheat. Freight was paid to the owner of the boat, and a toll to the canal company. In 1885 more than 7,000 tons went down the canal. This included 18,879 barrels of flour, 7,500 bushels of wheat, and 2,226 tons of pig and bar iron. In 1860 the freight to Richmond on a barrel of flour was sixty cents. In 1853 there went down 150,000 bushels of corn and sixty thousand gallons of whiskey. 6
In all, there were six canal dams on the two rivers. There were five locks on the James, within the limits of this county, and fifteen on North river. 7

In 1858 the James River and Kanawha Company bought the North River Navigation, which took it up that stream twenty miles to Lexington. Getting to Lexington cost the company $273,000, very little of which was ever earned back. But the mainline was immensely profitable. In addition to the packets, 195 freight boats were using it in 1854. 8

The first packet boat to reach Lexington arrived November 15, 1860. These passenger conveyances made three trips a week. The packet was drawn by three horses, a shift being made every three miles. The speed of four miles an hour was much more rapid than that of the freight boat. 9

In the first years of the Civil War the James and Kanawha canal was used extensively by the Confederacy for moving troops and supplies, but being located at almost the center of the battleground that Virginia became, it could not escape the ravages of war. General Sheridan and his Union cavalry swept around west of Richmond in March, 1865 and spent a week destroying its weigh locks, dams and buildings. When Richmond was burned on April 3rd of that year, all company books and records were lost. 10

Prior to the war, in 1859, a railroad from the capital to Lynchburg had been completed. To meet this competition the canal company reduced its tools drastically and the packet boat
companies cut their fares by forty percent. Thus you could
make the forty-four hour journey from Richmond to Lexington,
meals and lodging included, for $5.25. Or you could go by
rail to Lynchburg, catch a packet there and be in Lexington
in twenty-four hours, but at twice the cost. Not that many
people were in that much of a hurry.

According to Henry Boley, who wrote *Lexington in Old
Virginia*, men would occasionally jump off and walk or alongside "to stretch their legs". For sleeping quarters, on the
packet boats, one half the boat was given to the ladies and the other to the men. Berths were in three tiers, folded up
by day and suspended by leather straps when not in use.

A fine description of travel on the canal boats is
given by Albert Steves, of San Antonio, Texas. In 1934 he writes,

"One of the most picturesque were the canal boats on
Old North of which have never been surpassed in beauty and interest, as approaches to Lexington. They afforded magnificent
scenery for travelers. Well do I recall these wonderful trips
up and down Old North River and the James and the sounding of
the driver's bugle for the opening and closing of these locks. I believe in the trip were encountered about sixty of
these locks. In the winter months, when the old freezes were
on, there was not much travel on the packet line and the
raising and lowering of the water in North river, by the pack-
ets going through the locks, caused skating above the locks
to be much interferred with. Yet, it was a common occurrence
for us to skate eighteen or twenty miles down the river, as
we walked around the locks and there was usually snow on the
ground".

A dear lady of Lexington delighted in telling of her
honeymoon trip from Lynchburg to Lexington." It was a summer
night and they sat on the top of the boat all the way, in the
moonlight." In later life she traveled extensively, yet she claimed that this was the loveliest trip of her life. 12

No figures are available on the longevity of the packet boats but the John Marshall was the last survivor of the James River boats. For years it lay rotting at the river's edge, Lynchburg's Riverside Park, regarded with reverence for its historic past. It was honored particularly, for that day in May, 1863, when, draped with crepe, a military honor guard standing at attention on deck, it had borne the body of General Stonewall Jackson home from Lynchburg to Lexington. 13

At war's end the James River and Kanawha company was still solvent and able to pay the interest on its dept, but in 1877 when the Great Flood of November washed out everything, the canal was so badly damaged that it was first thought to be beyond repair. After $200,000 had been spent on redoing it, the Richmond and Alleghany Railroad bought the canal and other assets of the James River and Kanawha Company and the latter ended its unhappy existence.

According to Harold G. Moulton, who wrote Waterways versus Railways, the ability of the railways to extend their lines to every point of the compass, to develop a very network of branch and spurs lines which can carry traffic from the most out-of-the-way source to any destination whatsoever, cannot be matched by any system of waterways that could be developed. In the report of the Windom Select Committee the following was stated, "railway transportation is preferred
for grain in bad condition, since it sustains less injury when shipped in that way than by canal. In the case of flour, these considerations are still important. Expeditious delivery of flour is a very frequent demand of shippers; and barrels of flour are often broken open if rough weather is encountered.

Bagby, in his Canal Reminiscences, gives this picture of the old travel system.

"And now the canal, after a fair and costly trial is to give place to the rail and I, in common with the great body of Virginians, am heartily glad of it. It has served its purpose well enough, perhaps, for its day and generation. The world has passed it by as it has passed by slavery. Henceforth, Virginia must prove her metal in the front of steam, electricity and possibly mightier forces still. The dream of the great canal to the Ohio, with its nine mile tunnel, costing fifty or more millions, furnished by the General Government & revolutionizing the commerce of the United States, much as the discovery of America and the opening of the Suez Canal revolutionized the commerce of the world, must be abandoned along with other dreams."

The Ben Salem Lock

On the following pages are photographs of the Ben Salem Lock approximately four miles outside of Lexington on route Sixty traveling towards Buena Vista. The Ben Salem Lock is typical of those of the North River Navigation. Only a line of rubble remains of the dam, but the lock is still in very good condition. Between its limestone walls once passed canal boats up to fifteen feet wide and one hundred feet long.

There was no canal at this point, the lock only served
to raise or lower boats through the nine and a half foot drop created by the dam, after which the boats continued along the river, drawn by mules on the bank. From inside the chamber you can see the two pairs of gate recesses, each about eight feet long, which held the gates when open, and the curved stones at the downstream end of each recess, against which the gate post rubbed while operating. The top of the gate post was held by a metal strap around it, bolted to the top stones of the lock. 16

The gates were of wooden beams and planks. When shut these formed a V pointing downstream so that the water pressure against them would push them together and against the lock, making a water tight seal except for the inevitable few cracks which spurt picturesque waterfalls. Built into each of the gates was a smaller wicket or sluice gate, operated by a lever, which let water in or out of the chamber. If a boat was coming downstream, the lower (downstream) pair of gates would be closed and the lock full of water; the boat would enter the lock and the upper gates closed. Then the sluice gates in the downstream gates would be opened to let the water out, the boat sinking rapidly to the lower level until the lower gates could be opened and the boat sent on its way. The lock was the machine of the canal; its source of power was gravity, and it was easy to use and repair—surely an elegant invention. 17
Figure 1: Looking from the downstream end of the lock.

Figure 2: Two pairs of gate recesses, from the upstream end of the lock.

Figure 3: Close-up of eight-foot long recess and curved stone.
Figure Four: Looking upstream on the Maurey River above Ben Salem's lock.

Figure Five: The end of the lock facing downstream on the Maurey River.

Figure Six: A look at the outside wall of the lock.
Somewhere next to each lock on the landward side was the lockkeeper's house; from here the lockkeeper and his wife would listen for the conch-shell horn or bugle blown by the captain of an approaching boat. The lockkeeper's house was typically a rude frame shack; none in Virginia have survived, except for a stone one near Richmond.

The North River Navigation, although a part of history, can be traced by car today beginning, as the map indicates, on route eleven all the way to Balcony Falls, outside of Glasgow. All along this route are ruins of the dams and locks, relics of this system of transportation of a bygone day.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


FOOTNOTES


3 Morton, *op. cit.*, p.166

4 Ibid., p.167

5 Ibid., p.167

6 Ibid., p.168

7 Ibid., p.169


9 Morton, *op. cit.*, p.169

10 Drago, *op. cit.*, p.80

11 Ibid., p.81


13 Drago, *op. cit.*, p.80

14 Ibid., p.83

15 Boley, *op. cit.*, p.169


17 Ibid., p.108

18 Ibid., p.109