

RIVANNA RIVER HISTORY

The Rivanna River is the northernmost of the James River tributaries, originating in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, and was long designated as the North Branch of the James. Eventually, the North Branch was given its own name: River Anne. The name honored Queen Anne (1665-1714), monarch of England, Scotland, Ireland and of the American colonies, on which she never set foot.

A granite extrusion shoved up three million years ago through the metamorphic crystalline rock of today's Fluvanna. The junction of the branches of the James occurs where both streams broke through the granite wall¹. Forty one and a half miles west, in the Blue Ridge foothills, two smaller rivers converge. These are the north and south forks of the Rivanna itself.

When the territory was mapped by the English in 1607, Rassawek, a Monacan village, already stood at the confluence of the Rivanna and the James. The Monacans, a Siouan people, customarily forsook old fields worn out by cultivation and cleared forest land by girdling trees and burning over the ground before planting. They used shells and decayed fish as fertilizer. The Monacans suffered repeated attacks by the Iroquois from the north, and by the time Europeans established settlements here, the Monacans had left the banks of the Rivanna and gone west.

The earliest European settlers, like the tribal peoples who preceded them, continuously cleared forest land to create new fields when the soil of earlier fields was exhausted. Near the river they felled red, white, black, and scarlet oaks, hickory, yellow poplar, maple, and pure stands of tall, straight pines.

Game was pushed inland, away from the settlements. Laws providing closed season on deer were enacted in Virginia before 1700, but local law enforcement was nil.² The annual migrations of rockfish, herring, and shad to sprawling grounds in mountain streams went on until dams built in the James west of Richmond at the start of the nineteenth century barred the way.

Settlement patterns established along the Rivanna in the early eighteenth century were to last until the second half of the twentieth. Enterprising planters claimed large tracts of the rich ground along the rivers. For example, a 6,000 acre patent for the Rivanna property now known as Carysbrook was accorded to Miles Cary in 1727. Satellite communities developed around the big plantations. Less affluent settlers and families who arrived later to the territory established smaller farms on the uplands.

Colonial governors of Virginia re-interpreted an early law granting settlers "50 acres per head right" to allow men of means to buy multiple headrights at five shillings each, payable to the colonial treasury. One result was to encourage the importation of African captives to establish and maintain huge agricultural operations. The owners of large plantations along the rivers became dependent on slave labor.

Tobacco was at first the main crop for trade, to the degree that tobacco itself constituted a currency. As tobacco depleted the soil, new fields were cleared.

¹ Wm R. Brown, "The Piedmont Province," *The James River Basin, Past, Present and the Future*, Virginia Academy of Science, 1950, p. 48f.

² Virginia Academy of Science, op. cit., Ira N. Gabrielson, "Conservation," p. 3.

Thomas Jefferson grew up on the Rivanna at Shadwell, and later wrote this account of an accomplishment of his youth:

In 1763 (I was then not quite of age) learning that a canoe, with a family in it, had passed and repassed several times between Buck Island creek in Albemarle and the Byrd creek in Goochland, and that there were no serious obstacles between Adam's falls (now Magruder's) I went in a canoe from Mountain falls (now Milton falls) to Adam's and found this section of the river could be made navigable for loaded boats by removing loose rock only. I set on foot a subscription and obtained £200. Dr. [Thomas] Walker [of Castle Hill] our representative, got inserted, in the act here cited, a nomination of 11 trustees, with authority to do what was necessary for effecting the navigation of this river, from the mouth upwards. Roger and George Thompson, then living on the river, undertook and executed the work, and on what was then done the river was navigated habitually for 35 years before anything more was done to it.

In 1769, seeking election to the Virginia House of Burgesses, Jefferson cited "clearing...the north branch of James River" among his qualifications.³ Thus the Rivanna launched a far-reaching political career.

The dam, mill, and half-mile race built by Peter Jefferson at Shadwell in 1757 was washed out by a flood noted in eighteenth century accounts as "the great freshet of 1771." Thomas Jefferson rebuilt the complex on a larger scale and later adapted his mill race for use by bateaux. Timberlake and Magruder, who owned Union Mills downriver, bought Jefferson's mill and canal a few years after his death and in 1845 incorporated the "Monticello Manufacturing Company" here.⁴

The first state tobacco inspection station west of Richmond was established at the confluence of the Rivanna and the James in 1785. Rivanna warehouse, as it was called, brought tobacco growers from a wide region, spurring local development. Flat-bottomed bateaux became the cargo boat of choice, replacing double dugout canoes lost in the flood.

Besides sweeping mills away, flooding low grounds, and ruining crops, the great freshet prompted a heavy turnover in lands. One new name to appear on Fluvanna County records of the time is that of David Ross, Scotsman, trader, and miller, who became a major supplier of war materials to the American side in the Revolution. David Ross contributed the land on which the Town of Columbia was chartered in 1788, near the site of the earlier settlement, Rassawek.

The following year the Town of Milton was chartered at the head of navigation on the Rivanna, five miles below Charlottesville. Henderson's Warehouse was built there the same year and Nicholas's Warehouse soon stood across the river on the north bank. Milton became the shipping center of Charlottesville. At Bernardsburg, now the site of Lake Monticello, a state tobacco warehouse opened in 1802.⁵

³ *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, The Jefferson Memorial Association of the United States, Washington, D.C., 1903, Vol. I, p. 256.

⁴ W.E. Trout, III *The Rivanna Scenic River Atlas*, Virginia Canals and Navigations Societies, 1992, p. 2.

⁵ Trout, op. cit., p. 13.

Martin Ferry (later Ross's) was established at Columbia in 1745. It was in fact two ferries, one over the James and one over the Rivanna. Rates were three pence for a man and three pence for a horse.

Fords were made by submerging a rock-filled crib over the river where it was consistently shallow. Bryant's Ford was set up in 1757 near the place Rivanna Mills would later stand. The old unpaved track to Bryant's Ford is known locally now, through a linguistic evolution, as the "Blindfold Road." Napier's Ford served travelers near the original Fluvanna County Court House and, further north, the Martin King Road crossed the Rivanna near Union Mills Dam. East of Moore's Creek, the Three Chopt Road crossed the river at Secretary's Ford, named for John Carter, the King's Colonial Secretary. Moore's Ford, where US Route 250 now enters Charlottesville, was replaced in 1801 by the Free Bridge.

The Reverend Mr. Walker Timberlake, Methodist, established a merchant mill on the Rivanna in 1813. The village of Palmyra, which grew around it, was chosen by the public referendum as the new location of the Fluvanna County seat. In 1835, Joseph Martins *New and Comprehensive Gazetteer of Virginia* provides this description of Palmyra:

Seat of justice...situated on the Riana River, 14 ms. from its junction with the James. Besides the county buildings which are of brick, and have been recently erected, it contains 14 dwelling houses, 1 Methodist house of worship, 1 merchantile store, 1 tavern, 1 merchant, grist, and saw mill, 1 woolen factory, 2 carpenters and cooper. A handsome and permanent bridge is erected across the Rivanna. This village is thriving.

By the 1820's wheat had replaced tobacco as the main cash crop grown in the Rivanna watershed. Mills were paramount to local life and commerce. Grist and saw mills established north of Columbia on property acquired in 1798 by Jane Ashlin, the first miller there, were to remain in use under various names (Ashlin's, Stillman's, Rison's, and finally Rivanna Mills) until the twentieth century.

Upriver from Palmyra, the village of Union Mills had developed as a commercial center around a mill established in 1796 by John Bowie Magruder and Sarah, his wife. In 1835 a cotton factory there employed a hundred people, its twelve water-powered looms producing "substantial cloth," as the *New and Comprehensive Gazetteer* reported.

The Charlottesville Woolen Mills Dam, of solid stone, is the only canal dam still left intact on the Rivanna. It was preceded by a wooden dam, constructed in the 1830s. The place was called Pireus, brashly inviting comparison with the port of Athens. The mill was in use from the 1830s through the 1950s.⁶

The Rivanna Navigation Company, a private corporation, was chartered in 1806 to improve the navigability of the river. In 1814, the Virginia General Assembly "authorized William Wood, owner of Wood's Mill on the Rivanna near Columbia, to take over the improvement and maintenance of the navigation from below Milton to the James, and to change tolls for its use."⁷ Under Woods' direction, the Navigation

⁶ Trout, op. cit., pp. 12 ff.

⁷ Trout, op. cit. p. 20

Company began to straighten and deepen sluices and to build wing dams to direct water flow into the sluices. They built wooden dams at Bernardsburg, Broken Island, Strange's, and White Rock. Despite these improvements, at the times of low water boats still had to reduce their loads or wait for rain.

In 1830 the Rivanna Navigation Company abandoned wing dams and sluices and began efforts to provide a complete slack water navigation: each dam and lock would back water to the next dam and lock. Locks of this period had an average lift of seven feet and a standard width of eight feet. The bateaux using them were seven feet wide.

Pre-existing dams, built at the top of falls to power mill turbines, posed problems. Law required that a lock be provided in association with every dam. These locks, however, often discharged boats into turbulent water immediately below the falls. Besides, during dry spells there was sometimes not enough water to run a mill and water the navigation channel as well. The Navigation Company now proposed to build a series of short canals to convey boats around the millponds to deeper water up or downstream.⁸

First watered in 1840, the James River and Kanawha Canal extended from Richmond to Columbia. There, it was conveyed over the Rivanna by a three-arched aqueduct 280 feet long, built of granite quarried at Cobb's Falls in Cumberland County.⁹ At mid-century, the James River and Kanawha Canal Company agreed to construct a four and a half mile canal between Columbia and Rivanna Mills. This canal, called the Rivanna Connection, was to include two locks and two walk-through culverts. In exchange, the Rivanna Navigation Company would build seven new locks, six miles of canal, twenty miles of towpath and, at Carysbrook Farm, a new dam. Engineer John Couty directed construction for both companies.

St. Andrew's Lock, in Columbia, where the James River and Kanawha Canal and the Rivanna Navigation Company systems joined, had miter gates facing opposite ways to impede the flow of water from either direction. It is Virginia's only junction lock,¹⁰ today almost buried in silt. The canal section between Columbia and Carysbrook remained in use until 1908.

A towpath, completed in the 1850s, allowed horseboats on the Rivanna. "Huge canal freighters, up to 93 feet long and 14 ½ feet wide...towed by mules and horses" could get as far as Charlottesville by the 1870s.¹¹

The Rivanna Navigation Company built five dams and six wooden locks on the Albemarle stretch of the river.¹² The Civil war had ended only recently, and the railroad era was beginning: given the times, construction on this section was more frugal and less durable than the earlier work.

In the 1930s, after Union Mills had closed and trains had replaced the canal boats, people still used the canal towpath as a footpath. Pleasant and Richard Mills, from the

⁸ Minnie Lee McGhee, "The Rivanna Navigation Company," *Fluvanna County Historical Society Bulletin*, #5, 1967.

⁹ Ellen Miyagawa, "The James River and Kanawha Canal in Fluvanna," *Fluvanna County Historical Society Bulletin*, #33, April 1982, p. 13.

¹⁰ McGhee, op. cit., Trout, op. cit.

¹¹ Trout, op. cit., p. 4

¹² Private communication, Minnie Lee McGehee, author, November 1995.

Union Mills neighborhood, left home before daylight each day to walk to jobs at a riverside brickyard in Charlottesville. The walk took two and one half hours.¹³

In 1901 most of Fluvanna and Albemarle counties was open farm land. The internal combustion engine had not replaced draft animals on the farm; feeding the draft animals required a lot of farm land. Since animals could work even the most fragile soils, the fertile land on the Rivanna flood plain was planted in row crops and subject to erosion.

During the first half of the twentieth century, people stopped farming in some of the upland areas where, in general, soils had become less and less productive. Men left to be soldiers and did not return to farming. However, some of the farmers who remained on the land in the Rivanna watershed as elsewhere in Virginia began to use legume crops and crop rotation as a matter of routine to improve the soil. When machines took on some of the farm labor of people and animals, the heavier equipment made planting and harvesting a gamble along the rivers due to the fragility of the alluvial land. Permanent vegetation was then allowed to grow along the stream beds, and soil erosion decreased, a benefit farmers did not fail to recognize.

Around the middle of the 20th century the Federal and State governments were encouraging landowners along the river to install drainage systems in the flood plain to make farming less of a gamble. These old drainage systems have mostly collapsed, leaving regular linear depressions in these fields- evidence of mankind's last effort to row crop these fertile but fragile soils.

Some farms have been able to maintain open grass land in the Rivanna flood plain, but for the most part woods have reclaimed the lands adjacent to the Rivanna River. Trees with light, winged seeds (pines, maples, sycamore, tulip poplar and ash) were the first to re-appear in a rapid reforestation. Deciduous trees, better adapted to this fertile environment, soon took over. A trip along the Rivanna today will show walnut as a dominant tree with paw paw, spice bush and other specialized scrubs becoming established under the "timber" trees.

Compiled by Lindsay Nolting and J. Stephen Pence for the Rivanna Conservation Society, February 1996.

¹³ Jake Martin of the Union Mills neighborhood provided this recollection. He further recalled working as a boy of nine or ten at Chase Cox's chicken farm on the river where the Lake Monticello Golf Course is now.