Historic Context of the Roanoke Rapids and Gaston Dams

Cultural resources are known to exist within the Lake Gaston and Roanoke Rapids Lake project area (Appendix B). Human occupations have been documented archeologically to date from as early as 9500 BC, the Paleoindian period, through the Archaic, Woodland and protohistoric periods, up to the early eighteenth century. Euroamericans entered the area in 1715 and soon established plantations above the floodplain of the Roanoke River.

The earliest occupations documented in the project area (i.e. Halifax, Northampton, Warren Counties, North Carolina and Brunswick and Mecklenburg Counties, Virginia) are represented by a small number of isolated Paleoindian Clovis artifacts found in surface contexts. No radiocarbon dates or stratified sites are associated with this time period. In the Piedmont of North Carolina and Virginia, the transitional late Paleoindian/Early Archaic are represented by Hardaway-Dalton points, eared projectile points with vestigial fluting. Sites associated with Clovis and Hardaway-Dalton points are relatively few and far between.

By contrast, the North Carolina Piedmont contains evidence of a high density of Archaic sites. The Archaic Period is subdivided into Early, Middle, and Late subperiods. Early Archaic sites (8000 - 6000 B.C.) are distinguished by the presence of corner-notched, side notched and bifurcate based projectile points. Sites of this subperiod demonstrate a preference for highly siliceous microcrystalline lithic sources. Subsistence focused on the exploitation of Holocene plant and animal resources, especially white-tailed deer, hickory nuts, and acorns. Settlement patterns included use of both floodplains and inter-riverine uplands in a seasonal round based on the availability of resources and presumably on a social system that included base camps during fall and winter months and foraging camps over the balance of the year.

Middle Archaic sites (6000 - 3000 B.C.) are characterized by a distinctive series of projectile point types. Particularly concentrated in the Roanoke River basin is the Halifax projectile point type. At this time, a greater diversity of tools were used suggesting that a broader spectrum of hunting and gathering and, consequently, a more varied diet was typical. In addition, a variety of local stone sources were used for manufacturing tools.

Late Archaic sites (3000 - 1000 B.C.) are again distinguished by characteristic tool types (e.g. Savannah River biface and Gypsy stemmed projectile). Hunting and gathering continued as a subsistence base until limited horticulture began to be practiced in the North Carolina and Virginia Piedmont. The proliferation of small sites and variety of projectile point styles and tool types including ground stone tools suggests that the overall population had grown by this time. Smaller territories were associated with various populations that began to exchange non-utilitarian objects.

Soapstone vessels, grooved stone axes, elaborate ground stone tools and ornaments, and native copper are associated with many Late Archaic sites.

The following cultural stage recognized in the North Carolina and Virginia Piedmont is the Woodland Period. The hallmark of the Woodland Period is the presence for the first time of ceramics among the tool kit. Early Woodland ceramics are characterized in the Piedmont of North Carolina by the Badin Series, pottery typified by a dense, hard paste with sand temper and cord or fabric-impressed exterior surface treatments. Small stemmed project points such as the Small Savannah River and Gypsy Stemmed are thought to be contemporaneous with the Badin Series ceramics. The major mode of subsistence during the Early Woodland was hunting and gathering. However, the bow and arrow is an additional technological innovation distinguishing Early Woodland from the Late Archaic subperiod.

Middle Woodland sites are marked by a change in ceramics to those of the Yadkin and Uwharrie Series. Middle Woodland ceramics are manufactured of fine sand tempered ware with plain, simple-stamped, fabric-impressed, cord-marked, or net-impressed exteriors. Differences in ceramic type are defined based on vessel shape, temper, and exterior treatment. Often they are associated with particular varieties of triangular projectile point types. During Middle Woodland times, the floodplains were used for settlements while uplands were used for hunting and gathering activities. During this period, some prehistoric peoples constructed mounds, a practice that continued into the Late Woodland subperiod. Such practices have been interpreted as indicative of complex social behavior.

Late Woodland Piedmont sites (A.D. 1200 – European Contact) tended to be located on broad, fertile floodplains along the major waterways, along the floodplains of minor streams, and in the uplands on broad toeslopes overlooking the floodplains. Distinctive ceramic types typify this cultural subperiod, primarily defined based on patterns of exterior surface treatment (simple stamped, cord-marked, cob-marked, and check stamped impressions) and temper (primarily sand tempered until the historic period when crushed quartz temper became more common). Coe referred to these ceramics as the Vincent Series and later Clements Series. Horticulture was an important element of the local economy. Corn, beans, squash, and fruit were grown although hunting and gathering continued to be important components of local subsistence. Site density indicates that population growth was a factor at this time.

The earliest historic period sites within the project area are attributed to the Occaneechi who had settlements along the Roanoke River in the mid-seventeenth century. The Occaneechi controlled European Trade with Native Americans in the area, acting as middle men and controlling the types of trade goods that were brought west, e.g. firearms and metal tools were not distributed to other Native American groups. After 1676, the Occaneechi left the Roanoke River basin moving to the Eno River. Consequently, after this time

Virginian traders began to exchange goods directly with the Virginia - North Carolina Piedmont tribes.

European settlement in what became Halifax, Northampton, and Warren Counties, North Carolina and Brunswick and Mecklenberg Counties, Virginia began during the period between 1720 and 1730. With few developed roads, the area remained home to small subsistence farmers who earned money by producing household crafts rather than by producing agricultural goods for market.

The Revolutionary War had little impact on the project area. Following the war, some improvements were made to local roads and to the Roanoke River to facilitate transportation. The Roanoke Navigation Company was funded by both the Virginia and North Carolina legislatures in 1817. One of the local improvements was the construction of a canal and locks around the falls of the Roanoke at Weldon. The canal was completed in 1834. Soon after completion, some of the lower locks were damaged by flooding but were never repaired.

As the transportation network in the region improved, tobacco became an important cash crop. The Raleigh & Gaston Railroad, from Emporia, Virginia to Raleigh, North Carolina, was under construction in the mid-1830s. The portion from Emporia to the Roanoke River was completed first, by 1838. The community of Gaston, North Carolina was established at the southern end of this line, on the north side of the Roanoke River. The line was soon thereafter extended to Henderson, North Carolina. By 1840, a railroad linking Wilmington, North Carolina to the Roanoke River at Weldon, North Carolina was completed. Consequently, Weldon became a major market and transportation center for the middle Roanoke River area, and cash crops became more important to local farmers. However, by 1860, southern Virginia and northern North Carolina remained primarily rural with barter still a common form of exchange.

The local economy was greatly disrupted by the Civil War. Railroads that ran through Weldon were the lifeline of the Confederacy. Supplies and troops were transported by rail throughout the theater of the Civil War. The major military target in the area was the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad's bridge over the Roanoke River. Union forces attacked the bridge in July of 1863 but the Confederate forces were successful at protecting this target. No major engagements occurred in the vicinity of the Lake Gaston and Roanoke Rapids Lake areas but the farms were generally untended during this period.

Farming slowly revived as the major industry in the project area during the Reconstruction Period. Major cash crops included cotton, corn, and tobacco. Due to impacts from plant disease and poor commercial conditions, tobacco's importance to the local economy diminished. By 1920, cotton was the major crop. By the twentieth century, local farms were typically smaller (less than 100 acres) and owner-operated and tenant farms were well represented within the five counties that make up the project area.

By the early 1950s, following two world wars and the Great Depression, the local labor force was diminished. The presence

of factories in local cities further drew labor away from farms as many young people chose factory work over farming for their life's work. Growth of industrialization in the area was encouraged by the construction of Roanoke Rapids Lake and Lake Gaston in 1955 and 1960, respectively. These facilities were built to produce hydroelectric power for the region.

History of Roanoke River, Canal, Locks and Dams

The Roanoke River flows approximately 400 miles from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia to the Albemarle Sound in North Carolina. Named for the Roanoke tribe of Native Americans, the river drops 114 feet in elevation in 13.5 miles as it passes from the Piedmont to the Coastal Plain in North Carolina.

Native Americans referred to the Roanoke as Moratoc or "river of death" because of its tendency to flood. This flooding deposited rich and fertile soil for the plantations that developed along the Roanoke in the 1700's.

Over the years, farming along the Roanoke increased and so did the need for to getting tobacco, cotton and other goods to market. In 1784, George Washington said river transportation could "open a wide door and make a smooth way for the produce of that Country to pass to our markets …" Knowing this, Virginia Gov. Patrick Henry signed legislation in 1783 for Virginia to make transportation improvements on the Roanoke. North Carolina followed suit in 1784.

This led to the establishment of the Roanoke Navigation Company canal and locks. In 1824, a nine-mile long canal was developed on which bateaux — up to 65 feet long — were used to transport produce and other goods. At the peak, about 353 bateaux were in use, carrying goods estimated at about $6 million per year.

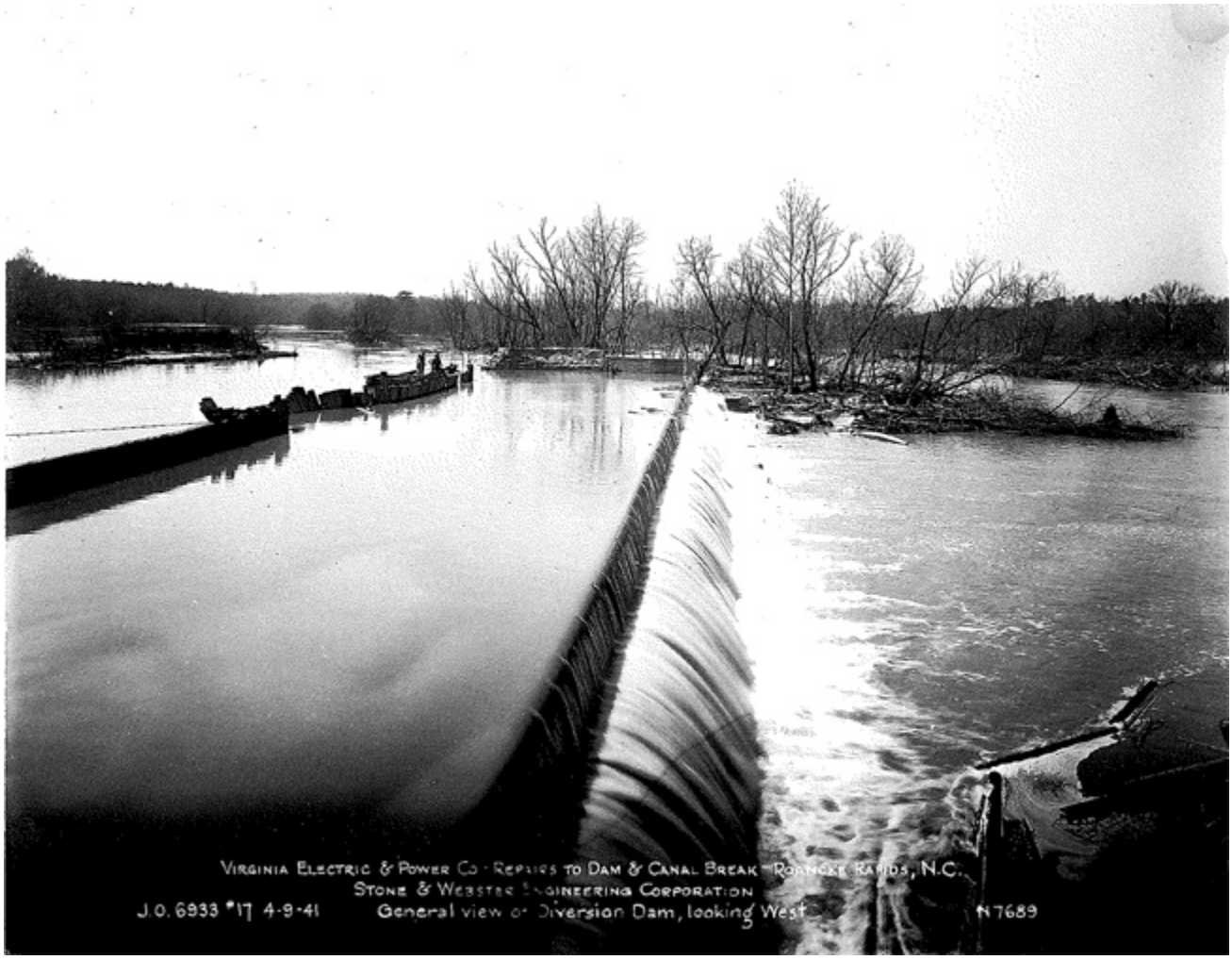
With the advent of railroad transportation, the navigation canal became unprofitable. However, the same severe change in elevation that required the construction of the canal was valuable for the production of hydro-mechanical power and hydro-electricity. In 1882, the Roanoke Navigation Water Power and Manufacturing Co. purchased the old navigation canal. In time, a corn mill, grain elevator and cotton mill were built. They used hydro-mechanical power from the canal. By 1900, electric power plants were built at the locks in Roanoke Rapids and Weldon.

At about the same time, Major Thomas Emry, the "Father of Roanoke Rapids," established what would become the Roanoke Rapids Power Co. Emry built a power canal eight-tenths of a mile long that helped start the city of Roanoke Rapids. This opened the door to textile and paper mills that employed hundreds. In 1909, the Roanoke Paper Manufacturing Co. opened. It would become the first Kraft Paper Mill in the United States. The mill still operates today, drawing about 24 million gallons of water a day from the old power canal.

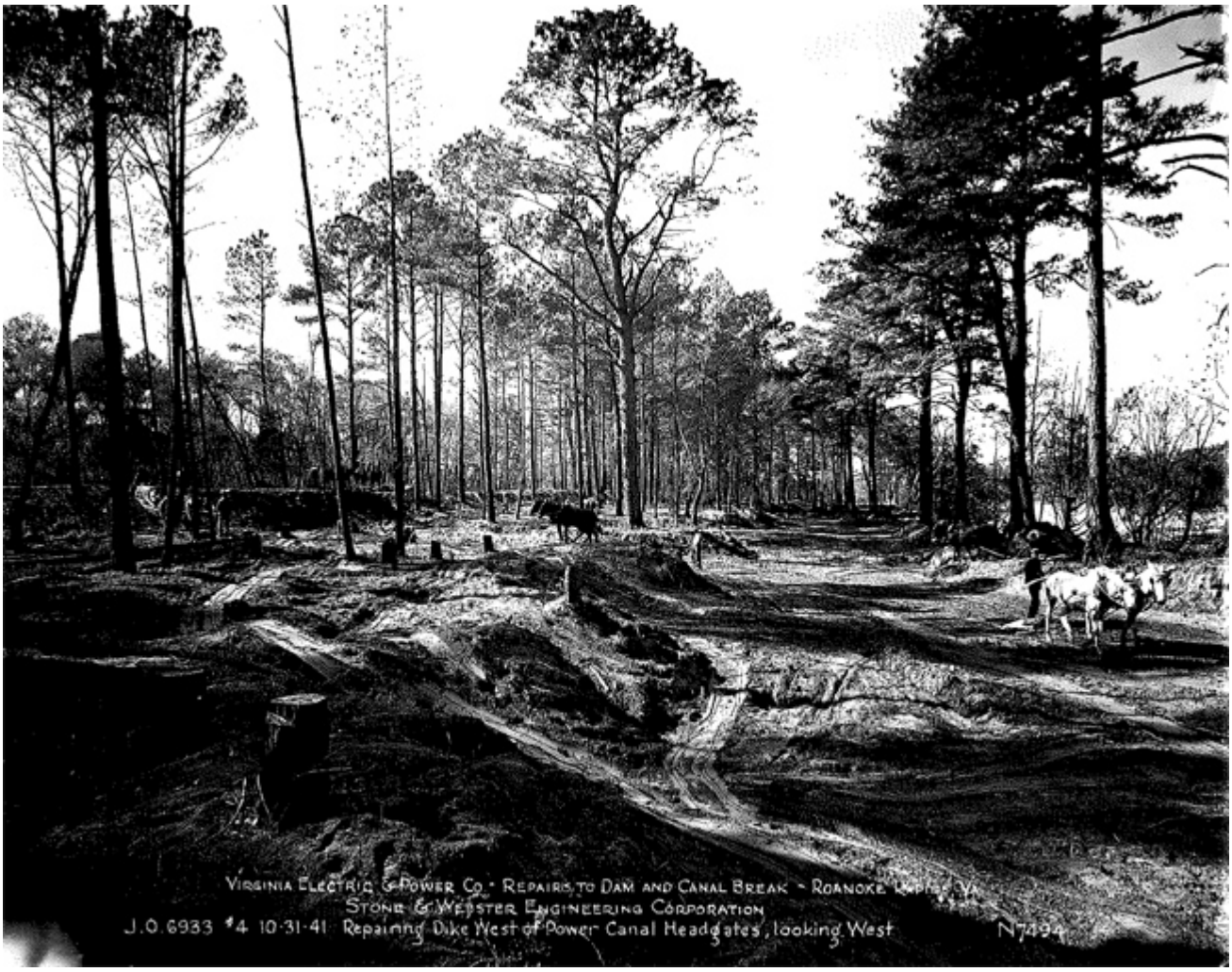
In 1924, the Virginia Railway and Power Co. (predecessor of today's Dominion) bought the Roanoke Rapids Power Co. Electricity was provided from the power canal until the company started operation of the Roanoke Rapids Lake Hydro-Station in 1955. The Lake Gaston Power Station was added in 1963.

Today, these facilities provide electricity to thousands of households and many industries, while providing home sites, outdoor recreation and tourism. Dominion has been a vital partner in preserving the rich history of the Roanoke Canal Museum and Trail in Roanoke Rapids.

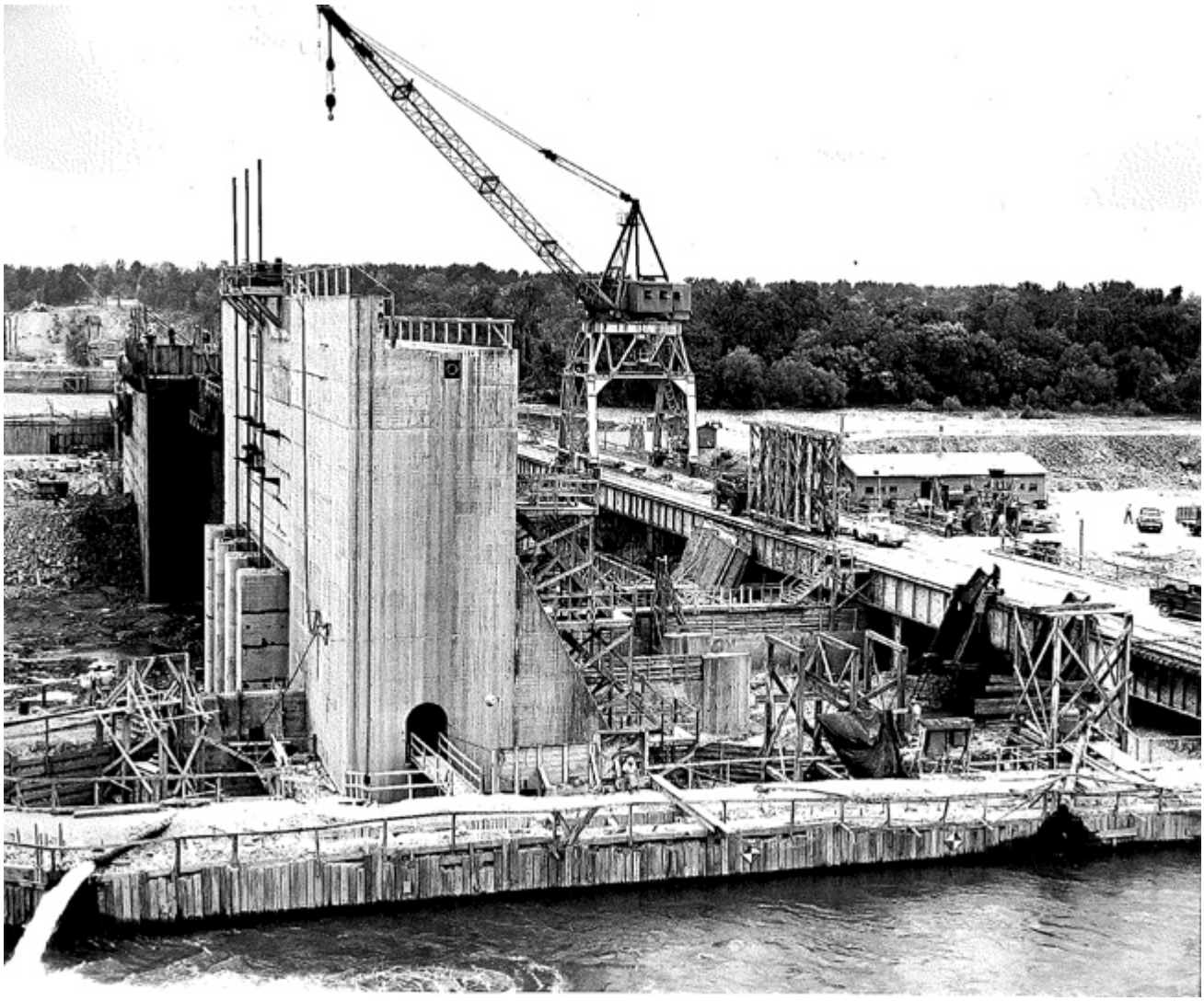
This is a photo of the "diversion" dam that was in place in 1941 before the existing Roanoke Rapids dam. It was used to divert water from the river to the power canal.



This photo shows horses being used during repairs to the power canal in 1941.



Construction of the existing Roanoke Rapids dam, which began in 1951.



To get more energy from the river, a tailrace was constructed. Construction involved blasting and removing solid bedrock, 40' deep by 60' wide, for about 1.2 miles. This gave the dam a higher "head" which gave the turbine-generators about 20 percent more generating capacity.

Bateaux* Brunswick Belle *rests at the Roanoke River Canal Museum.

Visitors also can view the original locks at the Roanoke River Canal Museum.