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THE JAMES RIVER
AND
KANAWHA CANAL
COMPANY

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UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND

VIRGINIA

1941

THE JAMES RIVER AND KANAWHA CANAL

In the early colonial days when Governor Spottswood, with his Knights of the Golden Horseshoe, ventured to cross the mountains, then a barrier between Virginia and the territory west, he realized the necessity of a waterway to connect the two portions of the state so that the products of the western part could be brought to the Atlantic coast, both for the use of that portion of Virginia then being settled by the white man and for shipment to foreign countries. Yet he was so occupied with other interests that he could do nothing for the achievement of such a great and desirable work.

While surveying the western wilds years later, George Washington was also led to observe that great benefit would be derived from such a waterway connection between the eastern and western portions of the state.

Late in the eighteenth century a company was founded with a view to construct a waterway west from Richmond.¹ In 1784, on the occasion of the reunion of Washington

1. Andrews, Virginia, The Old Dominion, p. 407.

and Lafayette in the latter's first post-war visit to America, the Virginia General Assembly voted special honors to these former companions in arms.² To Washington was awarded one hundred shares in the recently formed James River Company.³ Washington gave his James River Company shares to Liberty Hall Academy.⁴

The company was formally incorporated on August 21, 1785, and Washington was elected as the first president.⁵ The company was organized with the intent of constructing a canal along the James to connect with the Midland Trail over the Alleghanies.⁶ Work was began immediately and the first section of the canal completed was the part built around the falls at Richmond.⁷

Early in the eighteen hundreds, Chief Justice John Marshall and other men who considered the public interest became interested in this company and they raised a million dollars to carry out this work, making sluices in the James River and damming it up at certain points, but

2. Andrews, op. cit., p. 375.

3. Ibid., p. 374.

4. Liberty Hall Academy is now Washington & Lee University.

5. Andrews, op. cit., p. 407.

6. Ibid.

this failed in accomplishing their object, but the desire to construct a prominent waterway continued to grow stronger each year, until in 1818, Ballard Smith, of the Kanawha River district, proposed to authorize the federal government to subscribe 2/5 of the capital stock of any company which Virginia might incorporate to effect a communication between the James and Kanawha rivers.⁸ The question came up in the Assembly of 1819, and this assembly authorized the purchase of the rights of the James River Company and assumed responsibility for continuing the James and Kanawha river improvements at the expense of the state.⁹ The stockholders of the James River Company were to receive 12% per annum on par value of their stock for twelve years, after which time the interest was to be 15%. The actual construction was to be left to the management of the company, but with the Board of Public Works authorized to spend \$200,000 annually in addition.¹⁰

In 1820, another act further appeased the west by placing the management of the works on the Kanawha and

7. Stanard, Richmond, Its People and Its Story, p. 78.

8. Ambler, Sectionalism in Virginia from 1776 to 1861, p. 105.

9. Ibid., p. 106.

James under control of two commissions.

A discussion of the project was again brought up in the General Assembly on May 17, 1823, and completion of the project was assured.¹²

During the years immediately following many thousands were spent.

A state engineer reported, in 1826, that a canal connecting the James and the Kanawha was practical,¹³ thus opening up a new field of discussion. A convention was held at Charlottesville in 1829-30 to arouse interest in such a connection.¹⁴ The climax came when on the night of St. Valentine's eve, 1830, the packet boat Constitution arrived at Richmond with twenty shivering but happy passengers from Lynchburg.¹⁵ Richmond welcomed, warmed, and fed them, and joyfully celebrated the successful beginning of canal transportation between the two cities.

On March 16, 1832,¹⁶ the state surrendered its in-

10. Ambler, op. cit., p. 106.

11. Ibid., p. 107.

12. Christian, Richmond, Her Past and Present, p. 100.

13. Ambler, op. cit., p. 126.

14. McGregor, The Disruption of Virginia, p. 20.

15. Stanard, op. cit., p. 128.

16. Christian, op. cit., p. 120.

terest in the James River Company and its rights to super-
intend the work to a joint stock company, incorporated
as the James River and Kanawha Company.¹⁷ The vote of
the General Assembly being 75 for and 37 against the bill.¹⁸
The company was to have a capital of \$5,000,000, of which
the state took \$2,000,000; one half paid by the transfer
of the state's interest in the James River Company; the
remaining half in cash when 3/5 of the capital stock had
been subscribed.¹⁹ Chief Justice John Marshall was ap-
pointed chairman of a commission of fourteen to dispose
of stock.²⁰ On May 30, a meeting was held at the Capital
with Marshall as chairman.²¹ This meeting expressed its
appreciation of the charter, and urged the people to co-
operate by subscribing. There also was appointed a com-
mittee of seven to devise means for securing more sub-
scriptions. This committee was composed of John Marshall,
Chapman Johnson, James Marx, Richard Anderson, Robert
Stanard, J. G. Williams, Thomas Rutherford, and Lewis
Webb.²² These directors caused a book of subscription

17. Ambler, op. cit., p. 182.

18. Ibid., p. 183.

19. Ambler, op. cit., p. 182.

20. Stanard, op. cit., p. 128.

21. Christian, op. cit., p. 120.

to be opened in the various towns on or near the James and Kanawha Rivers. The people in all parts of the state became interested in this undertaking. Governor Floyd published, at his own expense, a pamphlet of the synopsis of the James River and Kanawha Company that had been previously published to aid the memorial, asking the privilege of subscribing by some of the cooperate bodies of the state.

The books closed on June 11. Richmond had taken 10,024 shares. During the following January, the Common Hall took \$400,000 for the city. February saw the Bank of Virginia subscribe \$500,000.²³

The company created a fund sufficient to begin the work which was for years a great comfort and profit to a large part of the state and added especially to the prosperity of those who lived near the canal. They purchased all the rights of the James River Company promising to pay six percent interest on the amount of true value, then a million dollars, and this they continued for many years.

The canal was to connect Richmond with Lynchburg, Buchanan, Covington, and some other smaller towns, in

22. Christian, op. cit., p. 120.

23. Ibid.

this way bringing the resources of the western country through Richmond to the Atlantic Ocean, from thence to distant parts. The work was to be divided into three parts. The first commencing at Richmond and ending at Lynchburg, from Lynchburg to the town of Pattenburg, and the last from Pattenburg to Covington, They were to be worked in successive order. The line of locks on the Kanawha would begin with the third part of the canal. They expected, by means of locks, to connect with the Ohio River. In this way it was believed that produce from the Mississippi Valley could be brought to the Atlantic Ocean by a shorter line and at less expense than through the lakes. However, engineers later discovered that Crow's Ferry, at the mouth of Looney's Creek was the highest place practical for navigation to reach.²⁴

In July, 1833, the Farmers' Bank of Richmond refused to take the 5,000 shares to which they had subscribed, so a public meeting was held at the Capital to devise means of disposing of more.²⁵ In order to be given more time, the charter was extended from December 31, 1833 to December 31, 1834. Then on December 10, 1834, all the stock necessary was still untaken. This necessitated a-

24. Kegley, Kegley's Virginia Frontier, p. 425.

25. Christian, op. cit., p. 128.

nother meeting at the Capital. John Marshall nominated Joseph Tate, the mayor, as chairman. It was reported that 25,528 shares had been taken by the citizens of Richmond, 10,722 by the citizens of Henrico, 4,000 by the City of Richmond, and 5,000 by the Bank of Virginia— a total of 45,250.²⁶ It was resolved to ask the City of Richmond to take 7,500 additional. The council expressed its approval, and submitted it to the approval of the free holders on December 29. The vote was 330 to 88 for subscription. The house subsequently passed the bill allowing the city to take 7,500 shares. Then on January 26, 1835, the Senate passed a substitute bill providing for the state to take 5,000 more and Richmond another 2,500. This caused great rejoicing, and a salute was fired in honor of the occasion. Now the state had \$1,-990,800 of stock.²⁷ This being in excess of the amount of stock necessary to secure a charter, a meeting of the stockholders was held at the Capital on May 25 of the same year. A committee on organization was appointed, consisting of Chapman Johnson, John Rutherford, John Early, Samuel Marx, Joseph C. Cabell, J. N. Cocke, Randolph Harrison, Richard Sampson, and Hugh Caperton.²⁸

26. Christian, op. cit., p. 128.

27. Ibid., p. 129.

The committee reported on the 26th, recommending that the lower James River canal be continued to Lynchburg and that they proceed by rail to the Great Kanawha and from there on to the Ohio. The canal was to be 35 feet wide at the bottom, 50 feet at the surface, 5 feet deep, with tow paths and locks, the locks to be 35 feet between gates and 45 feet wide. The present canal from Richmond to Maidens Adventure was to be enlarged,²⁹ This report was adopted on the 27th by a vote of 6,820 to 450.

Subsequent business saw Joseph C. Cabell, of Nelson County, Virginia, elected as the first president of the company. S. S. Baxter and Samuel Marx, of Richmond; Richard Sampson, Goochland; Randolph Harrison, Cumberland; J. N. Cocke, Sr., Fluvanna; John Early, Lynchburg;³⁰ and Hugh Caperton, Monroe, were elected as directors. These procured the services of Judge Benjamin Wright, of New York, as chief engineer; Charles Ellett, of Pennsylvania, David Livermore, and Simon W. Wright as assistant engineers.³¹ Later on Colonel David Haines took an active hand in the construction.

28. Christian, op. cit., p. 129.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

At one time they had for a short period Colonel Crozet, a distinguished French officer who had fought under Napoleon and came to this country after his downfall, continuing here a life of usefulness. Some of his plans, which were never carried out, have been recently found, preparing to extend the canal to Manchester. By this means produce could be more easily conveyed to Norfolk or Portsmouth for shipping.

November 25, 1841, marked the date of the first trip of a packet boat from Richmond to Lynchburg.³² The trip took a total of 30 hours.

In 1845 an effort was made to remove J. C. Cabell from the presidency, and a bitter fight resulted. The question was put to a vote by the stockholders and Cabell won by an 8-1 margin.³³ However, later in that same year, Cabell resigned and Walter Gwinn was elected on October 22.³⁴ Through the work of Gwinn, another charter was granted to extend the canal from Lynchburg to Buchanan in 1847.³⁵

32. Christian, op. cit., p. 142.

33. Ibid., p. 150.

34. Ibid., p. 153.

35. Ibid., p. 158.

Not long before the War Between the States the difficulties attending so expensive a work as the construction of a canal was becoming greater and the necessity for its achievement even more than ever desirable. In 1859, a French company was formed under Monsieur de Billot³⁶ des Menieres, of Bordeaux, who became much interested in carrying out the plans for the connection especially with the Kanawha and Ohio Rivers, they being already interested in a Virginia coal company. Negotiations were carried on through Charles J. Foulkner,³⁷ United States minister to France. They made offers to the state to buy out the James River and Kanawha Canal Company. On September 17, 1860, a special session of the state legislature was called for the purpose of considering this proposal.³⁸ However, the negotiations were suspended when the question of secession arose.³⁹ Before dropping the matter, the state guaranteed the debt of the company and vested the entire control to the stockholders. It also authorized the company to borrow \$2,500,000 for continuation of construction.⁴⁰ This was forgotten during

36. Ambler, op. cit., p. 317.

37. Ibid.

38. McGregor, op. cit., p. 104.

39. Stanard, op. cit., p. 318.

the excitement of the war.

While the canal was of great use during the war for transportation of supplies to Richmond and to the army of Virginia, it was a source of danger to those near it as it caused some serious raids into our country. The effort made by the Northern army was to cut off all supplies from Richmond, surrounded as it was on all sides save this one. The first of these was led by General Stoneman. Dalgren later attempted a raid and towards the end of the war Sheridan blockaded it at Columbia.

The war being ended, the financial condition of Virginia was a problem to solve. West Virginia had severed her interests from Virginia, and had left her debts unpaid as well as those owed to Virginia. The canal remained needing repairs, and the impoverished citizens found it hard to pay the interest on the debt incurred in its construction. Railroads had grown and it was often said that the old canal should be replaced by a more rapid means of transit. This view grew rapidly upon the public. Yet the canal so endeared by long use remained to help the impoverished people some years longer. In 1869, M. F. Mavry made a powerful plea in favor of completion of the canal, but it fell on death ears.

The Kanawha River portion was the only part of the canal which more than met expenses after the war. There were many suits for sunken barges and damage incurred from the poor condition of the canal.⁴²

A devastating flood on November 24, 1877, damaged the canal to such an extent that it was proposed to abandon it.⁴³ To prevent this, the City of Richmond advanced funds to restore it.⁴⁴ As the time wore on the days of the old canal were being numbered. Mr. Billot des menieres made another offer to purchase, which was again in consideration. But no definite action was taken toward this end.

A meeting of the stockholders with Major J. W. Johnston presiding was held on March 4, 1880. Present at this meeting were George M. Bartholomwe and H. C. Parsons, president and vice president of the Richmond and Alleghany Railroad Company. After much discussion. it was agreed to sell the canal to this railroad. This was concluded, and tracks were laid on the towpath. Then on September 21, the first train ran from Richmond to Mai-

41. Lamb, Our Twin Cities of the 19th Century, p. 181.

42. Stanard, op. cit., p. 315.

43. Christian, op. cit., p. 357.

44. Ibid.

dens. The line was completed to Lynchburg on August 17,
1881, and later extended to Clifton Forge.⁴⁵

Up to the time of the sale of the canal to the R. &
A. R. R. it had cost over \$10,000,000 for the 197 miles⁴⁶
which had been completed from Richmond to Buchanan.

Left undone from the original plans were 203 miles.

In 1887-88 the Legislature concluded the sale of all
the franchises of the canal to the Richmond and Alleghany
Company. The rights afterwards were sold to the Chesapeake
and Ohio Railway Company, and the "Jeems and Kanaway"
canal became a thing of the past.

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