

ROCKBRIDGE EPILOGUES

NUMBER 39 — SPRING 2023

MARBLE VALLEY AND OTHER THOUGHTS ABOUT DAMS

By Royster Lyle Jr.

March 10, 1969

A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO [in 1939], the State Highway Department unveiled plans to put a new highway through Goshen Pass in Rockbridge County. The concern, or I should say the wrath, of organizations focused on conservation and preservation of nature suddenly surfaced like a Loch Ness Monster. This angry coalition of Virginia garden clubs and others did not stop the highway from going in, but it did cause the road builders to be so careful that the resulting road is a masterpiece — a fine example of how a road really should be built. The result, as you know, was such that the Pass has retained its natural setting. Hardly a rhododendron was bruised.

The Pass has been threatened several times since. In 1954 a logging interest bought the land across the river from the highway and began cutting. Quick action here by a group of Lexingtonians, followed by strong support from conservationists across Virginia, again saved the Pass.

More recently Virginia Electric and Power Company, Vepco, rather quietly proceeded to widen its power-line swath through the Pass. Many more trees would have been taken out in several strategic spots. Once again, however, the threat came to the public's attention, and Vepco backed down and consented to run its new lines, as well as the existing one, over Hogback Mountain to the south rather than through the Pass. And here we are indebted to the Commission on Outdoor Recreation. This new commission has been especially helpful to us in Lexington on a number of occasions,



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The photo at the top shows Marble Valley in Augusta County, Virginia, north of Goshen — a threat to which is topic of this article.



State highway built in 1939 through Goshen Pass: a rare instance of a road as roads ought to be built

and I think this agency is about the finest thing that has happened to Virginia since the *Sarah Constance* landed at Jamestown.

Goshen Pass had its closest call in 1929–30, when the Virginia Public Service Company planned a dam 63 feet high and 450 feet long at the upper end of the Pass.¹ This proposal would not only have flooded the area around Goshen, but would also have wreaked havoc with the Pass itself. The design called for a concrete pipe — ten feet in diameter — to bring a water column through the Pass, some 10,000 feet to a power station at Wilson Springs below the Pass itself.

At some places, the exposed portion of this conduit would have been 75 feet above the river. This would have been a beautiful sight indeed. It would have destroyed the Pass completely. This proposal received wide support from the area newspapers, boards of supervisors and chambers of commerce. But I need not tell you the wrath of the conservationists surfaced again. The Richmond and Lexington papers carried fascinating accounts of the

This article is adapted from remarks Royster Lyle delivered to the Garden Club of Virginia in Richmond.

In Virginia, if not everywhere else, the Garden Club was a fierce and effective lobbying force. As the author notes, it had succeeded in thwarting brash development plans earlier in the 20th century, and it was ready to use its considerable influence again in the Marble Valley affair.

delegations from the Garden Clubs of Virginia swarming into the office of then Governor Harry F. Byrd. “Every section of the State was represented.”² Today this would have been referred to as a sit-in, I suppose. A very involved legal suit called the “Garden Club of Virginia versus the Virginia Public Service Company” finally ended in the Virginia courts. The dam was not built. And for this we are all eternally thankful.

So you can see: We are indebted to the Garden Club of Virginia for what it has done in the past many years to keep Goshen Pass intact.

UNFORTUNATELY, there are few places capable of stirring the public’s emotions to the point of actually calling a halt to a dam. Goshen Pass is one of those few places, perhaps. One reason for this is that it is easily accessible and has been seen and enjoyed by thousands of people in Virginia and from across the country. Were it located in an inaccessible valley and only known by a few people, would it get saved? Could public opinion be mustered? The answer is probably no.

Hardly a morning paper appears without a story of a dam project in the Commonwealth. In a recent article in *Architectural Forum*, “The Most Thoroughly Dammed Nation on Earth,” the author wrote: “The entire country appears to be in the grip of an almost psychotic fixation on dams as the magic key to profits, politics, and progress. We may survive, but one must wonder.”³ I might add: We will survive, but, unfortunately, for a while, at least, the dam builders will prevail.

The two primary dam builders in this part of the country are the Corps of Engineers and the public service companies. Virginia has in this latter category Vepco and Appalachian Power. These two groups — the Corps and the power companies — build dams from entirely different motives, though sometimes for the same purposes. Both are given the power of eminent domain to do their work. The Corps’ job is to carry out river basin studies, paying particular attention to such things as navigation, water quality, flood problems and pollution control, and it is expected to devise ways of implementing its studies.

Marble Valley and the Calfpasture River, near Deerfield



It is often said the Corps’ answer to everything is to build a dam — as large and as costly as can possibly be sold to Congress. Justice William O. Douglas suggests that “because the Corps builds dams very well and does not do other things quite as well . . . therefore, it imposes upon society its specialty, like the chef who imposes his own favorite dish on all patrons.”⁴ Even earlier, Justice Douglas had charged that an excess of dams was ruining the rivers of Virginia and the nation. Knowing the Corps of Engineers must build dams to stay in business, he suggested as a possible solution: “We pay farmers not to plant crops; let’s pay the Corps not to build dams.”⁵

The second dam-building lobby consists of the public service companies, such as Vepco and Appalachian Power. There are others — the municipal power set-ups and local water authorities — but these are relatively inconsequential, since it takes millions of dollars these days to build the big dams.

YOUR CHAIRMAN asked me to mention a word or two about the Marble Valley project on the Calfpasture River above Goshen Pass. This I am glad to do. I have been trying to follow this situation as

closely as possible since that morning back in June of last year when we read in the paper that Vepco planned a \$95-million project to flood more than 1,800 acres of one of the most attractive valleys in Virginia [almost \$800 million in 2023].

The Calfpasture River, which is really the headwaters of the Maury, winds its way through Marble Valley some fifteen miles or so below Deerfield, Virginia. The automobile age has pretty well passed the valley by; the road running beside the river is not even yet paved.

To get to Marble Valley, one must drive through Goshen Pass from Lexington, or west from Staunton. Several miles beyond the town of Goshen, through close woods, the valley opens up. One comes to an area which a Vepco vice president described as “one of the most desirable pumped-storage sites in this part of the country.”⁶

To explain pumped-storage, I must digress a minute.

The large power companies have apparently reached a point in the development of electricity that the ordinary hydroelectric dam is no longer necessary. The word “obsolete” is not exactly accurate because the



Marble Valley

dams in use will continue to be used and municipalities and rural companies will continue to build hydroelectric dams. But it is now painfully clear that nuclear steam plants and fossil-fuel steam plants can do the lion's share of the job of developing power for normal (steady) use.

The new problem seems to be what is now referred to as "peak power." And this is where pumped-storage comes in. Nuclear facilities and fossil-fuel steam stations are designated to operate most efficiently at a constant generating level. By 1975, Vepco will have four nuclear plants around the state producing a set load of electricity.

But the complication is that the need for electricity fluctuates greatly during any 24-hour period. The pumped-storage facility actually stores future energy, i.e., water, until it is needed. This calls for two dams and two reservoirs — one high, one low. The power company charges its battery, in a sense, by pumping from the lower reservoir to the upper reservoir during off periods — for example, at night and over weekends. The power for this comes from other generating systems around the state. The water stays in the upper reservoir until peak power

is needed; then the water is permitted to pass through the turbines to the lower reservoir, generating electricity for the peak hours. Eventually it will be pumped back up to the upper reservoir. As Vepco puts it: "Extensive studies indicate that a pumped-storage hydroelectric station is the most economically and technically suitable facility to meet our needs for 1975."⁷

There are very few places that provide the topography for this complicated type of operation. Unfortunately, Marble Valley is just such a place.

The upper damsite, in the George Washington and Jefferson National Forest, will cover only 380 acres. The daily fluctuation here will be tremendous, leaving no possibility for recreation. The lower damsite touches the National Forest and is only a short way from Goshen Pass. The dam there will flood most of Marble Valley. It will be 160 feet high and will back water about seven miles up stream, covering some 1,820 acres of farmland, river bottom and National Forest area.

The power company says the "project will create a recreational area which should benefit not only

the residents of the local counties, but should attract many tourists and should provide broad business opportunities."⁸

To argue that this section of the state *needs* more recreation facilities would be difficult. Cornered by Bath, Augusta and Rockbridge counties, the area already abounds in wildlife — deer, bear, turkey, and trout. Bath County alone sells twice as many deer licenses each year as it has residents. But it is a fact that a lake anywhere will attract motor boats and water skiers.

One of the big questions is: What happens to Goshen Pass, some few miles downstream? Vepco engineers are confident that the new dam will not affect the stream flow in the Pass. In fact, although there is little water in the Calfpasture River in July and August, one state official says the dam could increase the downstream water volume in the Calfpasture in the drought months from two to eight times regular flow.⁹ All this could help the fishing possibilities and the water quality situation for Lexington and Buena Vista.

But many are skeptical that, when the final bargaining is finished among the Virginia state agencies, Vepco and the Federal Power Commission, the result will look like the promise.

And what about Marble Valley itself? What about the people who live there? As usual, the residents get pushed in the background, while the state and federal agencies, the power company and the conservationists argue about the dam.

The residents of Marble Valley have not been silent. Recently I visited the project file room of the Federal Power Commission in Washington, and when I asked for the Vepco-Marble Valley file, the clerk commented to my surprise that there seemed to be a lot of opposition to that particular dam. The opposition has come from a rather small group of local land owners who have formed the Save Marble Valley Association. One landowner in the valley wrote: "I take my hat off to these people. With no visible evidence of strong local support, or a developed organization, they have done a masterful job of arousing interest in, and in most cases opposition

to, the dam at a great many levels up to and including cabinet members and justices of the Supreme Court."¹⁰

Though the Save Marble Valley Association has indeed been effective, the feeling generally in the Valley is one of confusion and bewilderment. Of the people I have interviewed, all would prefer to be left alone, but they hold little hope of defeating the project.

As Vepco rightly points out, a comparatively few people will be displaced, in contrast to many other dams going up across the country. The crime here is against quality, not against quantity.

Residents feel the dam is already a fact. Even though federal permission has not yet been given, Vepco is already at work on a series of studies that have been budgeted at \$1 million. It will be an uphill battle, but the Save Marble Valley Association doesn't plan to give up without a tough fight.

LET ME ADD that Marble Valley is hardly unique. The story of the impoundment projects flooding some of our most valuable scenic areas could be told over and over in Virginia, Kentucky, and in every state. Justice Douglas feels that after pollution, the erection of dams is probably our problem number two.

But even if we could defeat a dam, like the Vepco project in Marble Valley, that is not enough; nor will it be of any real long-term value in preserving this important natural resource: the unspoiled river.

We must devise a system in which all of the forces affecting a river basin are considered and studied — not by a group that just wants industry, or another that just wants recreation, or just water electric power, but a wise authority that can objectively see the full picture of sensible development of water resources. We must come to the realization that Virginia's rapidly diminishing river valleys are not up for grabs to whichever corporation or agency has the best engineers or the smartest legal counsel.

The Corps of Engineers and the power companies must be kept from maintaining secrecy about their plans before the announcement of a dam, and especially before

the right of eminent domain is handed to them on a silver platter. Conservationists and planners, especially local planners, as well as all other interested parties, and far from least the land owners have to be involved from the beginning.

We must overturn the idea that because one dam is valid, all dams are valid. This must be replaced with the new notion that a dam is the last possible solution to a problem. We must accept the fact that dams are, as Justice Douglas has said, “temporary expedients for which we pay an awful price.”¹¹

Really, is there any good reason to preserve rivers? Maybe this is a preconceived idea with no logical basis, like preserving an old house that has no conceivable use today. There is no doubt that more people will use a lake than will use an inaccessible white-water stream. What excuse is there, therefore, to preserve the latter?

Congress has wrestled with this question — that is, whether there is value preserving wild rivers. Finally in 1968 it passed a watered-down Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The new federal act forbids the Federal Power Commission to license dams, transmission lines and the like within areas designated in the wild river system and also prohibits federal support for projects that would adversely affect streams in the system. The act has great potential, but oddly enough, several rivers were taken out at the last minute by politicians who feared that the rivers’ inclusion might hamper industrial development in their states. This is demoralizing indeed.

No river in Virginia was included in the final bill.

LICENSES for most hydroelectric dams last fifty years. At the end of that time the cost of the dam is presumed to have been amortized. The dam has served its purpose, at least economically. Fifty years may seem like a long time. But it doesn’t seem so long in Marble Valley. There are stone fences there that are five times that old already.

If the Garden Club of Virginia hadn’t had the foresight to fight to stop a dam in Rockbridge County almost fifty years ago, we wouldn’t have Goshen Pass today.

That proposed hydroelectric dam would today be obsolete, and Goshen Pass would have been needlessly and thoughtlessly destroyed forever.

I can’t help wonder now about the pumped-storage process and Marble Valley.

The studies which Vepco undertook revealed a series of geologic faults that made the pumped-storage project infeasible, and in 1971 Vepco withdrew its application to build the facility. Once again, Goshen Pass (and Marble Valley) escaped the effects of too much progress. No one doubts that Vepco was relieved to escape the unexpected, furious opposition from the Garden Club and other conservationists not usually associated with militancy and confrontation.

See also “*Matthew Maury’s Goshen Pass and Threats of ‘Development,’*” by M. W. Paxton Jr., *Rockbridge Epilogues* No. 8, Spring 2017.

NOTES

- 1 “Garden Club of Virginia versus Virginia Public Service Company,” 153 Va. 659 — Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals, 1944.
- 2 *Rockbridge County News*, January 24, 1929.
- 3 *Architectural Forum*, “The Most Thoroughly Dammed Nation on Earth,” Michael Frome, April 1968.
- 4 William O. Douglas, “An Inquest on Our Lakes and Rivers,” *Playboy*, June 1968, p. 178.
- 5 *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, article by Linda Anne Murphy, February 21, 1966.
- 6 Telephone interview, February 26, 1969, with Vepco Vice President Stanley Ragone.
- 7 Marble Valley Pumped Storage Project: Vepco folder, undated, p. 3.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Telephone interview with Water Resources Board staff, February 28, 1969.
- 10 Gale Richmond to T. R. Nelson, counsel for the Board of Supervisors of Augusta County, February 14, 1969.
- 11 *Playboy*, January, 1968, p. 178.

