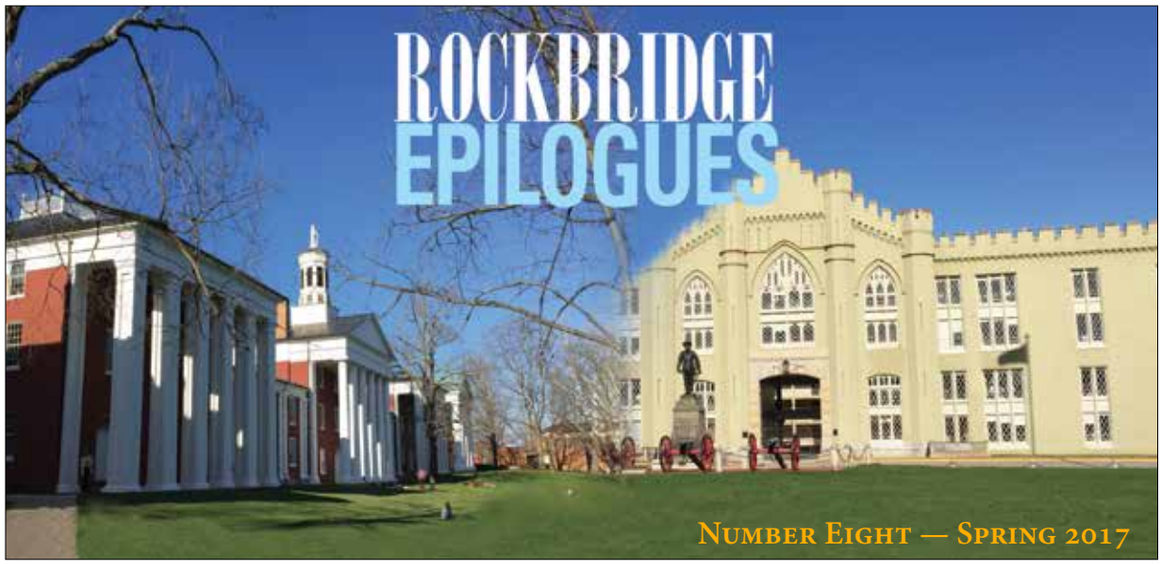

The Pass Maury Loved

by M. W. Paxton Jr.

Fortnightly Club, November 1973

A hundred years ago this fall, on September 26, 1873, the body of Commodore Matthew Fontaine Maury, the great oceanographer, was carried through Goshen Pass as it was taken from Lexington to Richmond for burial.

Maury, who spent his last years here as a lecturer at the Virginia Military Institute, felt a special love for the Pass. In the late fall of 1872, shortly before his death, his wife had requested his permission to take his body to Richmond for burial. His reply, well known to students of Virginia history was, "Very well, my dear, then let my body remain here until Spring, and when you take me through Goshen Pass you must pluck the rhododendron and mountain ivy and lay them upon me."[1]

On account of the uncertainty of the plans of his family as to their future residence, it was not in spring, but the following autumn, that the remains of Maury moved through the Pass.

Reaching a particularly beautiful spot, the solemn procession halted. In the bright fall weather Maury's children pulled branches of green mountain laurel and rhododendron, golden maple and wine-colored dogwood. They covered the casket and trimmed the horses' bridles with the boughs.

At Goshen, the closest railroad station to Lexington, Maury's body was placed on the train for Richmond.[2]

Early Days of Rugged Tranquility at Goshen Pass

During the century that has elapsed since that touching scene, the unique spot has been miraculously saved from destruction by efforts sparked by a handful of people who fiercely loved it.

Maury's admiration for its beauty, in a day when few Americans had much regard for the ruggedness of nature in its original state, may have been a strong force in the preservation of the Pass.

There is ample evidence that Goshen Pass was not always looked upon with affection. In the nineteenth century it was generally viewed as a barrier to transportation and as a haven for fierce wild beasts.

The saga of the Pass has been traced back to 1804, just two years before Maury was born.

According to one writer, "A little band of workmen in 1804, under the supervision of Capt. Christian Roadcap, undertook to build the first road through the pass." Blasting powder and heavy equipment being then unknown, the road builders had to break down the boulders with the use of roaring fires and cold water. The method was the same as that used by Hannibal in his famous crossing of the Alps in the days of the Roman Empire.[3]

The Pass was originally known as Dunlap's Gap and later as Strickler's Pass, drawing its name from early owners of property in the area.[4]

Goshen had been the name of a farm owned by a Mr. Bell.

Matthew Fontaine Maury, c. 1865–70.
Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

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When the railroad was built westward from Staunton in the 1850s, the railroad stop and the village that grew up there were given the name Goshen, and the name apparently then attached itself to the Pass.[5]

With the arrival of the railroad, Goshen became Lexington's closest point of access to the outside world. A regular stage line operated between Lexington and Goshen and the road through the Pass was the bane of travelers.

A reporter for the Richmond Dispatch wrote in 1857: "Lexington is imprisoned among the mountains with no outlet to the busy world, except for a most execrable turnpike leading from a point on the Central Railroad called Goshen, distant 20 miles, and the ruins of the Staunton and Buchanan plank road, which, after a few years' service became a succession of the most dismal traps and pitfalls for the unwary traveler. . . . The Goshen road surpasses the plank road in the energy and abruptness of its concussions."[6]

David McRae made the stage trip with General Lee through the Pass in 1868 and left this account of the journey:

> We had not left Goshen far behind before the coach began to jolt tremendously. I asked the boy why the roads were not kept in better order.
>
> "Oh," he said, just as a sudden, lurch threw him into my lap, "this ain't nuthen. This is kinder smooth. When you get further there's ruts that deep (indicating the length of his arm) and after dark the driver kent see whar the holes is."
>
> The two best-known stage coaches were the Richmond Belle and the Baltimore Belle. The door panels were decorated with ovals, each containing the portrait of a beautiful maiden . . . perhaps this was designed to take the traveler's mind off the bumps.[7]

Something of the horror of 19th-century travelers through the Pass is indicated in a description by John Esten Cooke in his "Picturesque America," published in 1870:

> Overhanging crags, black and blasted at the summits or bristling with stark and gnarled pines, tower in places into the very heavens, six, seven, eight hundred feet above the stream. Lower down, monstrous rocks threaten to topple and crush the foolhardy wayfarer who ventures beneath their dreadful mass."

In the early days the level of the road was so near that of the water that it had to be repaired regularly after freshets. Gradually the grade of the roadbed was raised and improved. A major setback occurred in 1870 when the greatest flood ever recorded surged through the Pass. It washed out a covered bridge just above Indian pool, where the road then crossed the river, and also the Rocky Ford bridge at Rockbridge Baths, which had been built only two years before. That flood also washed away everything at East Lexington, including the coffin needed for the burial of General Lee.

The Maury River today, winding through Goshen Pass.

After the 1870 disaster, the road was relocated so that it remained on the south side of the river throughout the length of the Pass.[9]

Lexingtonians became particularly fretful about the town's access to the west during the peak of railroad-building fever around 1880, and a proposal for a railroad through the Pass was unsuccessfully advanced.[10]

One of the county's favorite watering places flourished at the mouth of the Pass in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The people of Rockbridge County flocked to Wilson Springs, then owned by the family that still owns the beautiful tract of land stretching from the open meadows below the Pass up to Laurel Run.

It was a place where the county people felt at home, whereas nearby Rockbridge Baths was more fashionable and attracted a more urban clientele, recalls William Alexander Wilson, present owner of the springs property.

Probably the most famous visitor to Wilson Springs was the composer John Philip Sousa, who stayed there at the time of the dedication of the boom hotel in Goshen. Wilson still has the old guest registration books which show the composer's wife's name. He apparently did not sign the books.

W. A Wilson, grandfather of the present owner, a native of the Oxford community of Rockbridge, bought the springs property in 1843 from Joseph Strickler, father of the noted Presbyterian clergyman and educator Givens B. Strickler.[11]

The sulphur spring, located on an island in the river across from the Green where activity centered, was already an attraction, and the place was called Strickler Springs.

Wilson, according to his grandson and namesake, rode horseback, carrying $7,000 in cash to settle with Strickler. When he arrived at the springs and reached for his money it was gone. Retracing his steps, he found it at Colliers Creek. He had leaned over there to allow his horse to drink and the wad of bills had fallen out.

The informal resort flourished under the Wilsons. They enlarged the hotel and added such facilities as a dance hall and a bowling alley. A store with a soda fountain was opened.

Under simple verbal agreements, people constructed cabins on the Green and had free use of them whenever they wanted it. At other times, the Wilsons could rent them. In addition to the campers in cabins on the Green, people tented in the nearby woods. Many of the campers did their own cooking, but Mrs. Wilson, who was well known for her fried chicken and apple pie, served large crowds at the big tables in the hotel, recalls her grandson.

The resort probably reached its peak about the turn of the century. After the first Mr. Wilson died, his wife continued to operate it. Subsequently Orval Wilson, uncle of the present owner, operated the hotel until he died in 1920. His wife had a life interest in the property and after her death it came to the present owner, the last in the family to carry the Wilson name. He moved there in 1940.

The present Mr. Wilson recalls that when he was married in 1923, Wilson Springs was still an active resort. He and his bride spent a couple of weeks in a cabin on the Green and at that time there were 225 people staying on the Green and seventy in the hotel.

On one side of the hotel were the men's quarters and on the other side were accommodations for the women. People would arrive at the hotel and go to bed wherever they could find space in the proper quarters. Often it would be the next day before they would register with the management.

The men and the women had separate hours for bathing in the river, and a lookout would be posted to see that no one from the wrong sex approached the river at the designated times.

No one bothered about the fact that the sulphur spring on the island was flooded periodically by the river until the health department, about the time of World War I, got a bit disturbed and the owners built a wall around it and enclosed it.

Still, it would be occasionally inundated and the sand and silt would have to be cleaned out. When Strickler sold the property, the deed gave the public dipper rights to the spring. Wilson recalls that up until about three years ago, some elderly people still wanted to get the sulphur water and he would have to periodically clean out the spring.

When the present owner occupied the property at the outbreak of World War II, it took on quite a changed aspect. A new road was being built through the Pass and the state had torn down twenty-five of the cabins on the Green to make room for it.

Wilson pulled down some of the rambling old buildings around the hotel and removed the addition of about eleven rooms on the hotel which had been built by his grandfather and had been used as the men's quarters. The remaining portion of the picturesque double-veranda building he made into his comfortable residence.

Wilson's house incorporates the log house, said to have been built in 1775 by William Peples.

When installing a furnace several years ago, Wilson discovered a door cut through the logs and even dug up the doorstep. The logs were whitewashed all the way to the ground on the inside and there was evidence of portholes, presumably used for shooting at Indians. Most of the logs were of black walnut and seem to be impervious to the ravages of time. From a piece of one of the logs a friend made Wilson a handsome walnut gavel for his use when he was chairman of the County Board of Supervisors. The present dimensions of Wilson's house are essentially those established by Strickler.

One of Wilson's prized mementos is the square Knabe piano with massive legs, costing $300, which sat in the Goshen railroad station while his grandfather argued with the company over who should pay the freight. The company paid it.

Today Wilson's lean, rugged face stands guard over the Pass. An official fire warden, he looks out from the spacious verandas of his white board and batten house, across his broad meadow and up the wooded river gorge. There is still something of a reminder of hostile surroundings in his securely bolted three panel doors, in one of which is a small peep-hole, as well as in the massive rock and brick chimneys.

Wilson is intimately familiar with the Pass. At one time his family owned 2,500 acres in the area.

He can verify the fact that there were once two houses in the Pass with cleared patches of land around them. One was in what is known as Poison Bottom, named, it is thought, for the rhododendron there, which proved poisonous to cattle.[12] Wilson shuns the vulgarism "Pizen Bottom."

In this bottom, where tobacco was once grown, Wilson now rents several cabins on the land, which has reverted to dense woods.

Farther up the Pass, the road once crossed the river just above Indian Pool, and beyond this crossing is another small flat where a house once stood. When the occupant of that cabin died, his body had to be brought out by boat, Wilson was once told.

Several years ago he rediscovered the site of that habitation. Though it had been abandoned for 100 years there were still what he described as "Easter Flowers" blooming on the spot. On the hill above the house site he found a sweet chalybeate spring with a little rock wall around it.

The natural beauty of Goshen Pass never seemed more safe and secure than in 1923, the year Alec Wilson honeymooned on the Green. On a beautiful June day in that year, the Maury Monument was unveiled at Laurel Run and, according to a contemporary account, "all the elements of nature combined to make [it] pleasant and memorable."

Speakers for the unveiling of the monument included Governor E. Lee Trinkle, and chairman of the committee on arrangements for the Maury Memorial Celebration was Major A. Willis Robertson of Lexington.

The ceremony started at noon but, the local newspaper reported that "long before 11, the Green and surrounding plateaus at Wilson Springs and well up into the Pass seemed but a great parking space, taking care of at least 500 automobiles. The mountainside at Anchor Rock, opposite the memorial and speaker's stand had become a great theatre where awaited several thousand people."

The event began with the playing of the Star-Spangled Banner by the VMI Band and prayer by the Rev. Churchill Gibson.

Governor Trinkle declared that, in spite of the honors heaped upon him by monarchs and states, "the heart of the mighty Maury, steadfast at home, yearned for the blessed beauty of a bleeding land, his native land, Virginia. And so, like Lee, he came back to Lexington."

Dr. C. Alphonzo Smith, head of the department of English at the U.S. Naval Academy and brother of President Henry Louis Smith, of Washington and Lee University, delivered the main address, which was carried in full in the Rockbridge County News.

Unveiling the monument was Mrs. James R. Werth of Richmond, daughter of Commodore Maury. The cords were pulled by his two little granddaughters, the Misses Mary Maury and Alice Fitzgerald of Richmond, revealing a granite shaft eight feet tall bearing a bronze medallion of Maury with the following inscription:

> Matthew Fontaine Maury, Pathfinder of the Seas, the genius who first snatched from the ocean and atmosphere the secret of their laws. Born Jan. 4, 1806, died at Lexington, Va., Feb. 1, 1873. Carried through Goshen Pass to his final resting place in Richmond.[13]

In the issue of the local newspaper carrying the account of the unveiling, the Rockbridge Baths correspondent paid tribute to the State Highway Commission for taking over the road through the Pass "and so promptly inaugurating very satisfactory improvements which made it possible to handle such an amount of traffic."

Commercialization Threatens

It was scarcely five years after that bright June day in 1923 that the darkest threat of destruction hung over Goshen Pass. The next fifty years were to see the Pass repeatedly threatened with defacement, and each time a threat occurred, Lexingtonians took the lead in fighting for its preservation.

On January 24, 1929, it was announced that the Virginia Public Service Company* had filed application with the State Corporation Commission to construct

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* Later, Virginia Electric & Power (Vepco), and still more recently, Dominion Virginia Power

a dam at the upper end of the Pass and a giant flume to carry water from the dam down to a power plant, to be built at Wilson Springs.

The dam, to be about sixty-three feet high and 450 feet long, would be located just below the junction of the Big and Little Calfpasture rivers. It would back up water on Little River for 6.8 miles and on Big River 5.2 miles. The big flume through the Pass would be largely invisible except at one point, where it would cross the river on an ornamental iron bridge, the power company officials said.[14]

The week after the announcement, the Rockbridge County News editorialized that it "very much hopes that without delay permission will be granted" for the project. The editorial continued, "The News takes the view that it will add immensely to the scenic views and tourist attractions of the county." The editor was entranced by the idea of the lake at the upper end of the Pass, because, it was explained, water is one feature of landscape lacking here.[15]

The following week the local paper reported that the county Board of Supervisors had endorsed the power company's plans.[16]

But an opening gun for the opposition was sounded several weeks later, on February 19, in a letter to the local editor by Dr. William Davis Hoyt, professor of biology at W&L and chairman of the committee on conservation of natural areas of the Virginia Academy of Science. Dr. Hoyt was to be the sparkplug in the long and bitter fight against the power project.

In his letter to the editor, Dr. Hoyt said he had obtained facts from high state officials clearly showing that the people would have to decide "whether we are to have the pass or the power plant."

"The proposed power plant is to be erected at Wilson Springs," the writer explained, "so that, for the greater part of the season there would be a dry river bed throughout the entire length of the pass. Moreover, this power plant would be the most conspicuous object in the vicinity, staring the visitor in the face as he approached the region, with its attendant monstrosity of an 'ornamental iron bridge' crossing the river at that point."

Dr. Hoyt asked, "can one think of these unsightly structures at the entrance of Goshen Pass without a feeling of abhorrence?"

"There is contemplated," he continued, "no regulation of the amount of water that may be drawn from the proposed lake. Throughout the greater part of most summers there will, therefore, be a constant lowering of the water level and a steady increase in the width of the mud band exposed along the banks. In case of need in dry summers practically all the water may be drawn out, leaving little more than a muddy bottom to represent the lake that is to beautify the region."

Dr. Hoyt also charged that the project would be uneconomical in the long run, because of the relatively small amount of power that would be generated.[17]

On March 7, the County News announced that the opening skirmish in the fight over the project had taken place before the State Corporation Commission the previous Thursday. The Garden Club of Virginia, leading the fight against the project, was represented by its counsel, Andrew D. Christian.

The hearing opened in the hall of the House of Delegates with more than 150 persons present. In an episode somewhat embarrassing to A. Willis Robertson, who was then head of the state Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, the SCC ruled out evidence bearing upon the employment of Robertson as a counsel for the Virginia Public Service Company.

The episode unfolded after F. W. King of Charlottesville, a former state senator and executive vice president of the power company, took the stand and explained the purposes behind the development.

Christian asked King: "You testified that you have done nothing to influence public opinion on behalf of your project, did you not?"

"Yes," King replied.

"Well," continued the attorney for the Garden Club of Virginia, his voice rising, "how do you justify your employment of Mr. A. Willis Robertson, a state officer with a S4,000 salary as associate counsel for this project as revealed Feb. 11?"

The County News report continued, "There was a stir in the audience which caused the gavel of chairman [Louis S.] Eppes to fall with a thunderous smash. Mr. Eppes then ruled the question improper. Mr. Christian continued along a slightly different line.

"Was not Mr. Robertson in the employ of the Virginia Public Service Company on Feb. 4 when he appeared before the Board of Supervisors of Rockbridge County and persuaded or helped persuade them to pass a resolution approving the project?"

"Yes, but I didn't know of his appearance before the board of supervisors," King replied. Hugh A. White of Lexington, representing the company in the examination of King, moved that this line of evidence be stricken. Chairman Eppes agreed and ordered it stricken.

But newspaper accounts noted the fact that on the day Robertson's connection with the power company had been publicly revealed, he had resigned his position as a counsel for the company.*

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* Robertson, of Lexington, was later elected to the U.S. House of Representatives (1933–46) and U.S. Senate (1946–66).

As the hearing before the SCC dragged on, upwards of 100 garden club units from all over Virginia joined in the opposition, along with units of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, the Business and Professional Women's Club, the YWCA of Staunton and the Virginia Academy of Science.

A typical petition stated the view that the development would "during the period of construction and for some years thereafter totally destroy the natural beauty of Goshen Pass and that subsequently and permanently that beauty will be greatly marred and lessened."

In stating the company's position, King explained that the James River Basin is the greatest source of power lying totally within the state, arguing that it is necessary to impound the headwaters and maintain a steady flow if this power is to be brought to its full potential.

He explained that the company planned three impoundment reservoirs, one at Goshen, one in Alleghany and Bath counties on the Jackson River and one in Alleghany County on the Cowpasture River. Failure of any one of the projects would threaten the whole plan, he declared. The company had acquired options on 80 per cent of the property it needed at Goshen, he said, and had spent $125,000 on the Jackson River.

His statement tended to give credence to those who argued that the impoundment at Goshen would be subject to heavy drawdowns to augment the flow in the James.

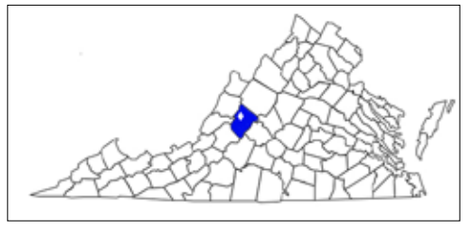
Among those speaking in favor of the Goshen project were B. C. Moomaw, secretary of the Covington Chamber of Commerce, W. W. Gibbs of Clifton Forge, T. M. Gathright of Alleghany, and William Ackerly, Rockbridge commonwealth's attorney.

About fifty persons from Rockbridge were in Richmond for the hearing. Among them, members of the Board of Supervisors and several residents of the Pass neighborhood were witnesses for the project, and Mrs. William H. Cocke and Miss Ellen G. Anderson were among those opposed.

The hearing was adjourned with the commissioners planning to visit the dam site.[18]

When the matter was taken up again in the spring by the SCC, it boiled down to a technical question of whether the commission had jurisdiction under the act of 1928, which spoke of "waters of the state." If the SCC did not have jurisdiction, then the company could proceed, but without certain condemnation rights.

The commission finally ruled that it did not have jurisdiction in the matter since the term "waters of the state meant essentially navigable waters." The case was



appealed by the Garden Club of Virginia to the State Supreme Court, which finally upheld the SCC ruling in January, 1930.[19]

While the battle raged before the SCC and the courts, a second front was opened in the fall of 1929 with the formation of "The Committee for the Preservation of Goshen Pass."

This phase of the war is documented by a file of more than 200 letters now in the archives of the Rockbridge Historical Society. The letters represent the correspondence of Dr. Hoyt, who in September of 1929 assumed the chairmanship of the committee.

The many-faceted efforts of the committee were certainly instrumental in the power company's quiet decision to abandon the project.

In an effort to blunt opposition to its project, the power company had made an open offer to turn the Goshen property over to the state for a park if opponents could reimburse it for nine-tenths of its investment, a reimbursement on which the company placed a whopping price tag of $300,000 and a deadline of October 1, 1929.[20]

Hoyt's committee strove to get the company to grant more liberal terms, pointing out that most of the property it had purchased was above the Pass proper and therefore would do the state little good if it were to make the Pass a park.[21] At the same time the committee tried to induce the legislature to come up with money for the park.

Simultaneously, Hoyt's group was urging property owners who had not yet settled with the power company to continue to hold out.[22]

To help the defenders of the Pass accomplish their aim, Hoyt was trying to enlist as members of the committee the state's most distinguished citizens. His correspondence shows that a number of influential persons agreed to serve. They included former Governor Trinkle, Representatives R. Walton Moore and Andrew Montague and John Stewart Bryan, publisher of the Richmond News Leader.[23]

Several state papers carried editorials strongly condemning the Goshen project.

Virginius Dabney, in a lucid summary of the situation, written for the New York Times, noted that while the public was generally welcoming power developments, two projects had aroused storms of opposition. One was the Cumberland Falls project in Kentucky and the other was the Goshen Pass project. The companies seeking to carry out both of these developments were controlled by Samuel Insull of Chicago.[24]

Even before the state supreme court came out with its ruling giving the Virginia Public Service Co. the green light, there were indications that the Goshen project was losing steam.

On December 10, H. W. Anderson Jr., assistant counsel for the company, wrote John Critcher of Goshen, the local attorney who had been handling property acquisition:

> At a conference of the members of the board of directors of this company, held in New York last week, it was definitely decided to abandon for the time being the acquisition of property in the Goshen Pass area. Unless the attitude of the people who own lands in that neighborhood that we have not obtained undergoes a decided change, I am afraid that this project will never be completed . . . . The directors felt that we were being held up, so to speak, by owners of property yet to be acquired and placed themselves on record to the effect that the completion of said project would rest entirely upon the action of these property owners. . . . We have secured enough property in the immediate neighborhood to protect ourselves in case any foreign interest might try to develop this project.[25]

The County News reported on February 13, 1930, that the Goshen hydro-electric development had been postponed due to litigation by the Garden Clubs of Virginia. It said: "Mr. King would not undertake to say when the . . . development would be commenced, further than to intimate it might be next year."

Hoyt was writing in February to staunch supporter W. Jett Lauck conceding that there was no chance of getting any money from the legislature and noting it might be necessary to carry on the fight for two more years.

Contributions to the committee were painfully slow and Hoyt was having to pay expenses out of his own pocket, but in a letter to Lauck he put his finger on a factor that probably had much to do with the demise of the Goshen scheme. The stock market crash had occurred a few months earlier and he wrote Lauck, "The same slump that hinders us will probably prevent the company from financing its undertaking."[26]

The serenity of beautiful Goshen Pass remained undisturbed, but only for a few years.

Highway Modernization Looms

The road through the Pass was treacherous even in good weather and in the late '30s the state highway department launched plans for modernizing it.

When the highway commission met in November of 1938 to consider an initial allocation of $80,000 for the project, no one opposed it. But it was reported that the commission had received letters urging that the services of a landscape engineer be employed before start of construction, and at the hearing, Capt. Greenlee D. Letcher of Lexington stressed the importance of retaining the beauty of the Pass and not allowing construction to injure its natural condition. Earl L. Velentine, president of the local chamber of commerce, noted that at many points in the Pass it was almost impossible for one vehicle to pass another.

The issue of the Rockbridge County News that reported on the hearing editorialized: "As stated before in these columns, if the commission puts a steam shovel in the Pass and cuts a swath straight through it, the road might as well not be there as far as the Pass is concerned, for it will be ruined." The editorial urged those anxious to preserve the beauties of the Pass to write the commission and use their influence to have the improvement carefully done.[27]

The next November, when the commission met and approved the final $80,000 for construction, it was noted that a number of protests had been made and that a special landscaping effort was being incorporated into the project.

Thanks at least in part to public prodding, the new road was constructed with such care that it has since been pointed to by the highway department with pride as a model project.[28]

Very few cars were traveling the Goshen Pass road when the Pass next came under attack. It was in the dead of winter and the intrusion went unnoticed until the cry of alarm was raised by local citizens in January of 1954.

The County News reported on January 21 that a firm had begun cutting timber on the north side of Goshen Pass and local citizens had initiated action to preserve the scenic beauties of the Pass.

"Howard Cronk of Goshen has bought logging rights on the north side of the Maury through the length of the Pass and built a road along the northern bank to get the timber out. The road extends from Little River to a point below Indian Pool and follows the old road," the newspaper reported.

Cronk had cut about 30,000 feet of a potential 500,000 feet of prime timber when Gen. John S. Letcher, Mrs. William W. Pusey III, president of the Blue Ridge Garden Club, and F. M. Yellott, resident highway engineer, called on him Monday,

January 18. He agreed to sell his rights for $15,000 including cost of timber and road work.

The land along the north side of the river belonged to Col. H. W. Shawhan of Charleston, West Virginia, former conservation commissioner of West Virginia and former head of Appalachian Wood Preservers Inc. of Goshen.

The local leaders immediately approached Col. Shawhan and he generously offered to sell the tract from the river to the top of the mountains, estimated at 1,000 acres, for $2 an acre — the price he had paid for it.[29]

It was learned, subsequently, that the Olga Coal Company had bought the rights to cut mine props on the tract and the head of the company indicated his firm would consider $4,000 for these rights.

This brought the total cost of land and rights to an estimated $21,000.

On Wednesday, January 20, the day the legislative session opened, Letcher went to Richmond to get Delegate Baldwin G. Locher to sponsor a bill authorizing acquisition of the property for a state park or state forest.

Locher offered enthusiastic support and, two days later, he and Letcher were to walk over the land so the local legislator could gain first-hand knowledge of it.

Letcher later recalled awaking on that morning of Friday, January 22, to find it snowing hard. His wife commented that Mr. Locher would not be coming. While she was saying this the phone rang. It was Locher, who said that in view of the weather he thought they had better get an early start, and he would be by at 8:30.

The men loaded Letcher's canoe on top of his car and proceeded to the Pass. At Indian Pool they carried the boat down the steps to the river bank. It was snowing so hard they could barely see the opposite shore. The water was considerably higher than usual with a strong current.

"The canoe was rather small for two large men, being only 13 feet long," recalled Letcher. "This was Mr. Locher's first voyage in my canoe and I think he entertained some doubts as to its seaworthiness and perhaps also as to my ability as a boatman, but he said nothing and just drew his overcoat a little closer about while I paddled from the stern.

"The uppermost thought in both of our minds, I'm sure, was that it would be most unfortunate to have the canoe upset. I don't believe that I ever saw a man sit with more concentrated attention on keeping a boat on an even keel than Mr. Locher as I did the paddling."

The crossing was safely negotiated and the men walked several miles through the forest on the newly opened access road. Letcher noted that at one point a grove of white pines and hemlocks along the river contained specimens whose trunks

measured seven, nine and even eleven feet in circumference, four feet above the ground. He doubted that their equal could be found east of the Mississippi River.

Recrossing the river the men proceeded to Goshen, where Locher conducted negotiations that ended with agreement by Cronk to sell a 30-day option to his rights for $1,000, to be delivered to Cronk by noon the following Monday[30]

The option money was put up by Locher, Gen. Letcher, Capt. Greenlee Letcher and Mrs. Cole Davis and delivered before the deadline on January 25.[31]

Meanwhile, Mrs. Pusey launched a campaign for statewide support of the preservation effort. She alerted garden clubs throughout the state and sent letters to every newspaper in Virginia.[32]

At that time the state legislature was not in the habit of coughing up money to preserve the natural beauty of land, even if it be Goshen Pass. Prospects of raising the necessary $21,000 appeared dim.

But an eloquent editorial in the Charlottesville Daily Progress came to the attention of the Perry Foundation of that city, which offered $17,500 toward the purchase.[33]

With this stimulus, Mr. Locher's bill sailed through the legislature. The emergency legislation was signed into law by Governor Thomas Stanley on February 17, less than a month from the date when local citizens initiated action to save the Pass.[34]

In ceremonies near the Maury Monument on October 7, 1954, the state officially accepted the land. A bronze plaque mounted on a 2½-ton boulder was unveiled. Four young girls, all related to persons instrumental in the preservation

effort, pulled the drape from the stone: Diana Enid Pusey, Marion Bailey Brooke, Elizabeth Marston Letcher and Anne Conrad Drake.[35]

Preservation of one side of the Pass was thus assured, but what about the status of the rest of this sensitive area?

Another Lexingtonian successfully engineered the sale to the state of a vast tract including most of the south side of the Pass in 1959.

The late W. N. Williams, interviewed several weeks before his recent death, told of making fifty-four trips to Richmond before the delicate negotiations could be completed.

Williams begged the far-flung Cronkhite heirs, some of whom lived in California and others in England, to let him have exclusive listing of their holdings of 15,688 acres. From Rockbridge Game Warden Posie Kemp he knew of the state's interest in buying the tract and he convinced both parties that they could benefit from the transaction.[36]

Six thousand acres of the tract were under lease to the Locher Silica Corp. until the year 2001 for $10,000 a year. Under the terms of the sale, consummated two days before Christmas, 1959, the state paid $275,000, or about $17.52 per acre for land that, according to Williams, would now sell for $100 per acre.[37]

The Cronkhite heirs, who had actually been losing money on the management of the property, were to continue to receive $5,000 a year for the term of the Locher lease. The state would receive the other $5,000 a year from Locher for the more than 40 years of their lease, and thus recoup almost its entire acquisition cost.

The Federal Wildlife Service provided a large portion of the funds for the purchase under the Robertson-Pittman Act.

The property, now known as the Goshen Wildlife Management Area, stretches from Goshen Pass to U.S. Route 60 and takes in all the south side of the Pass from Laurel Run west. With its purchase, the state became owner of all the land in the Pass proper except for the W. A. Wilson tract.[38]

The large holdings of the Virginia Public Service Company (now Vepco) immediately north of the Pass on Little River got a boost toward preservation several years later when they were bought by the National Capital Area Council, Boy Scouts of America.[39]

In the late 1950s, T. F. James, local Vepco manager, had advised W. E. Tilson & Son, Realtors, that the company was ready to sell the land that had been lying fallow since the abortive power dam project of the 1920s.

In May 1958, Forest T. Noel, a Montana sheep dealer who had a son at Washington and Lee, bought the 2,793-acre tract from Vepco. In order to round out the holdings and consummate the sale, Tilson had to buy a farm in Augusta County and trade it for a much less valuable piece of property on Little River.[40]

The sheep operation failed to materialize and, in May of 1962, Tilson handled the sale from Goshen Acres Inc., a corporation created by Noel, to the Boy Scouts. Again a farm purchase in Augusta County and a swap of land were necessary to provide the land for the scout camps' Lake Merriweather. The scouts acquired 3,703 acres for the largest scout camping operation of its kind in the country.[41]

No End to Threats?

Less than twenty years after the Perry Foundation had rescued Goshen Pass, when it seemed unlikely the state would provide the modest sum necessary, events had come full circle. In 1972 the state wanted to lavish millions on Goshen Pass and Lexingtonians were organizing to keep the Pass from being loved to death.[42]

In March of that year, the State Board of Conservation and Economic Development gave conditional approval to a $3.17-million master plan for "preservation and development" of Goshen Pass.[43]

Area residents were appalled to learn that features of the long-range plan included a large parking lot and visitor center at the upper end of the Pass near the scout camps and another parking lot in Poison Bottom, the two lots to be connected by a "white waterwalk" on the north side of the river and two foot bridges.

The plan envisioned future development of camping areas at the upper end of the Pass, horseback riding trails and even a road up to the Meadow Ground, where a lake and more camping facilities would be developed. The grandiose scheme had been drawn up for the Commission of Outdoor Recreation by landscape architect Stanley Abbott of Williamsburg.

Local residents were not sold on the plan by arguments of state officials that the Pass is now being trampled to death and that the present restroom facilities at Laurel Run are a health hazard.

One feature of the plan that did have local support was the state's aim to guarantee that there would be no commercial encroachments on the Pass. This would be accomplished by gaining control of the last remaining private tracts in the area, primarily the Wilson property.

Another element in the proposal that seemed worthwhile was the consolidation of the efforts of the several state agencies with an interest in the Pass (the game commission, the highway department and the parks department) and putting the area under the management of the state Division of Parks, which would provide full-time supervision.

Goshen Pass, 2016, by Linda Hollett-Bazouzi. From a private collection.

It was the conservation and recreation committee of the Central Shenandoah Planning District that put the brakes on the plan. When the state unveiled its proposal to that group, Lexingtonian Royster Lyle Jr., a committee member, led the opposition.

"We don't want campsites and parking lots in Goshen Pass," Lyle stated. "The Pass is much smaller than people realize. It's not the kind of place for wholesale development."

State officials agreed to meet the committee in the Pass in July of 1972 to go over the proposals on the spot.

Meanwhile, Lexington High School graduates of the early 1950s had assembled from far and near for a reunion at Indian Pool and had signed a petition to state officials. It read: "We are alarmed by the scope of proposed developments announced for the Pass. We urge that development of public facilities in the pass be kept to an absolute minimum."[45]

About thirty-five people were present for the July meeting with state officials at Laurel Run Wayside. At this gathering Miss Mary Monroe Penick showed the officials a book she had compiled of letters and editorials from all over the state opposing development of the Pass.[46]

Back to the drawing boards went the state's plan, and when it emerged again, in early 1973, the architects had eliminated such features as the road to the Meadow Ground and the development of camping areas near the Pass. The proposed parking lots had been cut approximately in half.[47]

But another feature surfaced that was to cause the plan to fail again to win the approval of the district planning commission: a proposal to remove all the small roadside parking places in the Pass proper, including the places used by swimmers at Indian Pool. Rockbridge County's representative on the commission, Tom Dixon, hit this hard. And the Rockbridge County Board of Supervisors showed their general displeasure by unanimously rejecting plans for a small sewage treatment plant to serve the new visitor center at the upper end of the Pass.[48]

Chances for resolving the disagreements over the future of the Pass were brightened by the appointment, in September, of Mrs. B. McCluer Gilliam, of Lexington, to the state Commission on Outdoor Recreation.

State officials now indicate a willingness to make further compromises on the parking ban in the Pass. They are receptive to a scenic easement proposal that would guarantee protection of the Pass and even of the approach to the Pass without depriving Mr. Wilson of his land. The scaling down and simplifying of the proposed visitor center is under study.[49]

On the centennial of the solemn procession bearing Maury's body through Goshen Pass, the mood of veteran fighters for the Pass is one of guarded optimism.

NOTES

1. Stuart Moore, paper on Maury published in the Rockbridge County News, March 20, 1941.
2. Frances Leigh Williams, "Matthew Fontaine Maury, Scientist of the Sea," page 478.
3. Marshall Fishwick, article in Ford Times, Rockbridge Historical Society file on Goshen Pass.
4. Oren F. Morton, "A History of Rockbridge County, Va." page 9.
5. Solon A. Person Jr., W&L student paper, Historical Society file on Goshen Pass.
6. The Lexington Gazette, Dec. 3, 1857, article reprinted from The Richmond Dispatch.
7. Unsigned paper in Historical Society's Goshen Pass file.
8. John Esten Cook, "Picturesque America," 1870.
9. Interview with W. A. Wilson, Sept. 1973.

10. Report on proposed railway from Pittsburgh, Pa., to the James River Valley in Virginia by Major P. P. Dandridge, C.E., Lexington, Va., May 1881. Historical Society archives.
11. G. B. Strickler was the grandfather of Miss Frances Denny and Mrs. O. H. McClung of Lexington.
12. Morton, op. cit. page 9.
13. The Rockbridge County News, June 14, 1923.
14. RCN, Jan. 24, 1929.
15. RCN, Jan. 31, 1929.
16. RCN, Feb. 7, 1929.
17. RCN, Feb. 19, 1929.
18. RCN, March 7, 1929.
19. RCN, Jan. 23, 1930.
20. Mrs. H. McKeldin Smith, president, Garden Club of Virginia, to Floyd King, Sept. 1929, Historical Society Goshen Pass file.
21. D. W. Hoyt to Floyd King, April 25, 1930, Historical Society file.
22. Hoyt to Mrs. Evan R. Chesterman, Nov. 12, 1929, Historical Society file.
23. Letters of acceptance, Historical Society file.
24. The New York Times, Jan. 30, 1930, Historical Society file.
25. H. W. Anderson Jr. to John Critcher, Dec. 10, 1929, Historical Society file.
26. Hoyt to Jett Lauck (date?), Historical Society file.
27. RCN, Nov. 3, 1938.
28. RCN, Nov. 12 and Dec. 9, 1939.
29. RCN, Jan. 21, 1954.
30. Gen. John S. Letcher, address Oct. 7, 1954 at unveiling of plaque in Goshen Pass marking state acquisition of land. Text in file of Mrs. W. W. Pusey III.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. RCN, March 4, 1954.
35. RCN, Oct. 8, 1954.
36. Interview with W. N. Williams, September, 1974.
37. Rockbridge County Deed Book 255, pp. 186, 197, 200, 203, 207, Commonwealth of Va., Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries from Gordon F. Cronkhite, etc., deed dated Feb. 26, 1960.
38. Williams interview.
39. Interview with James A. Tilson.
40. Virginia Electric and Power Co. to Forest T. Noel, Deed Book 244, page 189, May 12, 1958. Noel to Goshen Acres, Dec. 5, 1958, Deed Book 246, page 544. F. E. Dairs to Goshen Acres, Aug. 12, 1959, Deed Book 252, page 418. Ralph T. Reid to Goshen Acres, April 2, 1960, Deed Book 253, p. 430.
41. Goshen Acres to National Capitol Area Council, Boy Scouts of America, May 31, 1962, Deed Book 267, page 169.
42. In an episode not dealt with in this paper, Vepco tried to enlarge its transmission line through the Pass in 1968 but the move was headed off by state agencies controlling land in the Pass and Vepco relocated the line. (See News-Gazette, Nov. 13, 1968.)
43. The News-Gazette, March 15, 1972.
44. The News-Gazette, April 19, 1972.
45. Petition, Copy in News-Gazette Goshen Pass file.
46. The News-Gazette, July 19, 1972.
47. The News-Gazette, Feb. 14, 1973.
48. The News-Gazette, Sept. 12, 1973.
49. The News-Gazette, Jan. 23, 1974.

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