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# The Vintage Rabun Quarterly

## Geography is Destiny:

### Rabun as a Transportation Corridor

When researching the origins of the thought that geography explains much of history, it soon became apparent that the idea is an old one and carries across most of the world. In Rabun County's case, a natural gap through the Blue Ridge Mountains (now called Rabun Gap) made this part of southern Appalachia a natural corridor for Native Americans, the British during the French and Indian War, the colonists during the American Revolution, and explorers, settlers and tourists ever since.

Cherokee trails crisscrossed the area for hundreds of years, connecting major villages near today's Franklin, North Carolina, near Hiawassee and along the Chattooga River. The site that is now Clayton saw the convergence of many of these corridors, and the Native American name for the place was said to be "Dividings." Explorers such as Hernando de Soto may have come this way, but later explorers like botanist William Bartram certainly did, as it was a gateway through Appalachia to the rest of the South in 1775.

In the early eighteenth century, the British marched from their base in Charleston across the Chattooga and along Warwoman Creek, then turning north through the natural gap to take on the

were completed in South Carolina. After the Civil War, efforts to revive the line as part of the Black Diamond rail system also failed.

In the 1870s, there were many schemes, mostly from Athens residents, to connect cotton merchants in and around Athens with a major east-west trunk line in North Carolina and Tennessee. This rail system was eventually built but not connected, arriving in Tallulah Falls in 1882 from Athens and Atlanta. Rufus Moss, a wealthy Athens entrepreneur, had built himself a country house on the edge of the gorge in 1880 and



A Moss family photo of the Tallulah Falls Railroad depot in the 1920s.

would later build Tallulah Falls' first railroad depot building. Moss also knew that the spectacle of the gorge and series of waterfalls would make Tallulah Falls a tourist destination for much of the South and East now that the railroad had made it accessible to the masses, not just rugged explorers. Dozens of fine hotels and simple boarding houses soon were established to cater to visitors who came to admire the scenery and appreciate the summer weather. The railroad had made it possible for Tallulah Falls to have more hotel rooms available in 1900 than all of Rabun County would have a hundred years later. In another preview of

French and Indians and reinforce their own forts along the Tennessee River. Before the Civil War, entrepreneurs and investors in Charleston would plan to follow this exact route with a railroad that would connect the Atlantic coast with the interior at Cincinnati. In 1854, construction work proceeded with two tunnels in Rabun built and about 80% of the grading and abutments that were necessary, says Andrew Ritchie in *Sketches of Rabun County History*. With war on the horizon in the late 1850s, investment capital dried up, and there was no operational railroad through Rabun, although parts of the Blue Ridge Railroad

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what the twentieth century would bring, a performer called “Professor Leon” was hired to walk a rope across Tallulah Gorge in 1886 as a publicity stunt for the burgeoning tourist industry.

Among the descriptions of how completely Rabun County was shut off from the outside world before the railroad, one was the saying of Justice Logan Bleckley (1827-1909) that “It was a good country to come from, but a hard country to get to.” The judge often told this story: “In the old days to get from Atlanta to Rabun County you would go one day by railroad, the next day by horse and buggy, a third day on horseback, a fourth day on foot, and then on all fours until you climbed a tree, and when you fell out you would be in Rabun County.”

Judge Bleckley’s description of Rabun’s transportation woes would have improved in 1904, when the Tallulah Falls Railroad finally reached Clayton and, in 1906, the North Carolina state line. Although this represented a huge engineering achievement, the financial burden of maintaining 42 trestles and 58 miles of track soon became burdensome. This no doubt contributed to the Tallulah Falls Railroad going into receivership as early as 1908. Despite sporadic small profits in subsequent years, in 1923 the railroad again went into receivership and remained there until its demise in 1961. Looking back, the railroad’s economics were questionable from the beginning. In addition to the financial drain associated with maintenance issues, the Tallulah

Falls Railroad’s status as a rural short line limited its income potential. Things might have been different if a discussed connection to Knoxville, Tennessee had materialized. Without such a connection, the railroad’s debt rose, totaling over five million dollars by the time of its abandonment in 1961.



Trestle collapse at Panther Creek in 1898.

Apart from its finances, the Tallulah Falls Railroad also faced operational and image problems. The first operational failure occurred in 1898 when the trestle at Panther Creek in Habersham County collapsed, killing the locomotive’s fireman. Still other collapses and derailments followed, some resulting in further fatalities. The final blow to the public’s confidence came in 1946 when a collision just outside Cornelia showered passengers with glass. That same year, passenger service ended. Next to go was the railroad’s mail service contract, taken over by mail delivery trucks in 1954. The final end came in 1961 when freight service

was discontinued, yielding to faster and cheaper services provided by trucking companies.

Despite its many challenges, efforts were made to save the Tallulah Falls Railroad. This included an attempt in 1961 to raise operating stock through the formation of the Rabun Industrial and Development Board. The attempt failed. In the final analysis, it is unlikely any financial plan would have been sufficient to overcome the ultimate challenge, the automobile.

The first automobile ever seen in Rabun County arrived in 1911, thanks to its owner, the Georgia Railway and Power Company, which was building the dam at Tallulah Falls. Despite the trip from Atlanta taking twelve hours to traverse what were actually wagon trails, this new mode of transportation would provide families with the convenience and independence that could not be matched by the Tallulah Falls Railroad’s timetables and restricted routes.

In reality, all-weather roads did not come easily or quickly. During bad weather, Model Ts often were left in the middle of muddy roads until either the weather improved or they were pulled out by a mule team. In some locations, drivers were forced to follow roads which ran up, down or across creeks. Steep hills also were a problem, making it difficult for automobiles with gravity fuel systems to climb inclines without a full tank of gas.

The era of modern road building in Rabun began shortly after the creation of the Georgia State Highway Board in 1917, thanks in part to its

chairman who had a summer home in Mountain City. During the 1920s and 1930s, the lumber companies, U.S. Forest Service and depression-era Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) assisted in building roads throughout the county. Much of the early work was done with picks and shovels, as road building equipment was scarce and crude. Two cheap sources of labor came from prisoners housed at temporary camps and the men stationed at Rabun's four CCC camps. The CCC men are reported to have built more miles of road than by any other source.



CCC workers build Kelly's Creek Road in Dillard, circa 1935.

By 1928, the paving of that portion of US Highway 23 which formed Clayton's main street was nearing completion. It appears the entire paving project between Franklin, North Carolina and Atlanta was completed in the early 1930s, based on a 1931 *Clayton Tribune* announcement that a delegation from Atlanta was making plans to tour the length of the concrete highway between these two locations.

In contrast to US 23, the paving of US Highway 76, took years to complete. By 1936, only a small section of the highway just west of Clayton had been paved, further work progressing in piecemeal fashion. It was not until 1952 that the total stretch of road

between Towns County and the South Carolina state line was entirely paved, an event celebrated by the publication of the following verse in the *Clayton Tribune*:

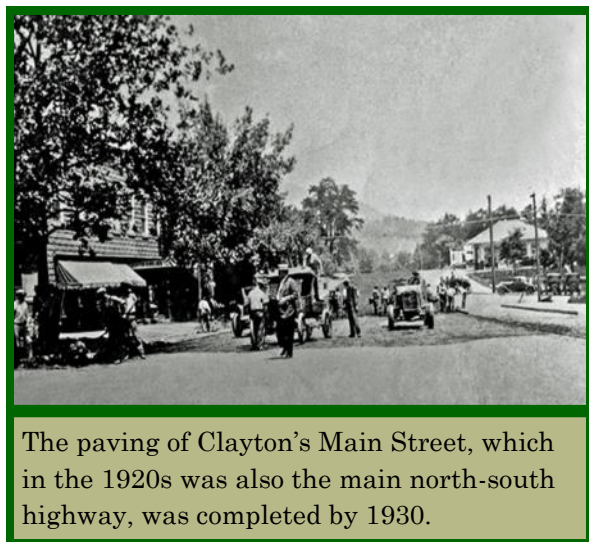
The Hiawasee road is open, complete,  
For a score of years and ten, a  
"fete" (feat),  
And the politicians have talked so sweet,  
While the people cussed and bore the  
heat.  
"anyhow it's finished."

Road maintenance and upgrades were the order of business during the 1950s and 1960s. With the creation of the Georgia Rural Roads Authority in 1955, a new and much needed pool of money led to the improvement of a number of secondary roads. Rabun's major thoroughfare, US 23/441 (the two roads began to run concurrently in the early 1950s) also received renewed attention, with the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* which referred to the highway as "old, crooked, narrow and rough." Apparently, Georgia highway officials agreed, launching the construction of a "new" road that, when completed in 1965, bypassed Clayton, Tiger, Wiley and Lakemont.

Even before highways, two rivers posed a huge problem for getting into and out of the county. The original one-lane iron bridges crossing the Chattooga and Tallulah along the US 76 corridor were first built in 1894 and 1899, respectively. The current two-lane bridges crossing the Chattooga and Tallulah Rivers, the Tallulah now running

beneath Lake Burton, were completed in 2007 and 1976, respectively. The first concrete bridge at Tallulah Falls was constructed in 1913 and ran directly across the newly completed Tallulah Falls Dam. The four-lane bridge we see today was completed in 1994.

The continuing evolution of Rabun's transportation infrastructure is evident in the recent upgrades made to US 23/441 and US 76, as well as the establishment of Heaven's Landing Airpark in 2003. We can only guess as to what the survival of the Tallulah Falls Railroad might have contributed to Rabun's modern-day transportation network. When experiencing today's volume of traffic, accidents and log-jams on the north-south highway any summer day or any holiday weekend, it is obvious that Rabun is a primary corridor from urban areas to the south to tourist areas here and to our north. The geography that worked for Native Americans, explorers and settlers two hundred years ago is still working today.



The paving of Clayton's Main Street, which in the 1920s was also the main north-south highway, was completed by 1930.



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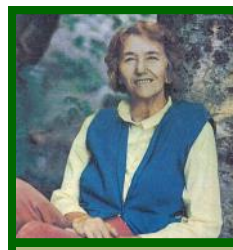
### History Sketches: People of Note

Exciting new feature on our website. Some of the sketches being featured now are pictured below.

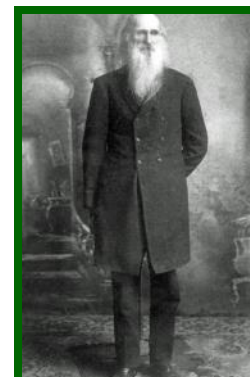
- Please visit our museum and research library on Mondays and Fridays from 10:00 until 2:00 and on Wednesdays from 12:30 until 4:30.
- Group tours by appointment



Rufus L. Moss, Sr.



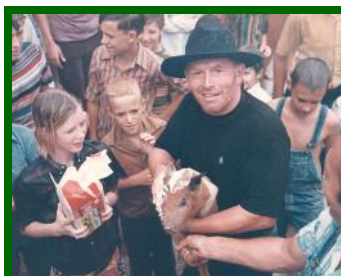
Marie B. Mellinger



Logan E. Bleckley



Thomas E. Roane



Frank Rickman

