

# The Vintage Rabun Quarterly

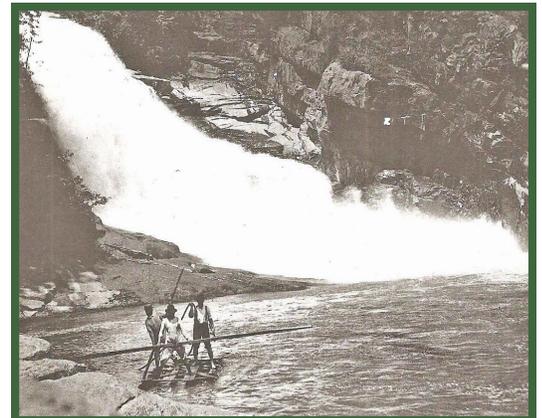
## HELEN DORTCH LONGSTREET: FIGHTING LADY

Helen Dortch, born in Carnesville, Georgia and educated at what is now Brenau University, married General James Longstreet in 1897. He was a Confederate veteran who fought at Gettysburg. At the time of their marriage, she was 34 and he was 76. She died in 1962 at the age of 99. An amazing woman, Helen Longstreet was a civil rights activist many years before it was a widespread movement. She was also an advocate for environmental preservation, and that is the reason for her importance in Rabun County history.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Tallulah Falls was attracting visitors from all over the country. Tallulah Gorge is a two mile long canyon that reaches a depth of almost one thousand feet. In those days the Tallulah River flowed through the gorge over a series of spectacular waterfalls.

Some suggested that the area should be made a national park. An Atlanta newspaper editor proposed that the State of Georgia purchase Tallulah Falls and “make it the most beautiful state park and reservation this side of Yellowstone.” In 1905, the state legislature appointed a committee to determine how much the state would have to pay to acquire the property. The committee reported that the land was owned in small portions by a

number of parties. It would take time to get options, and they estimated that a tract of a thousand acres would be needed to set up a park at an average price of \$1,000 per acre. They recommended further study to justify spending a million dollars, but nothing was done and the movement died.



Hurricane Falls—1907. The men in the photo offer a good perspective of the size of the falls, 96 feet high.

Meanwhile, Georgia Railway and Power Company (predecessor of Georgia Power) set its eyes on damming the Tallulah River for electric power. The utility company had scouted the river and its great drop in elevation at Tallulah Gorge as an ideal spot to build a dam and hydroelectric plant to supply electric power for Atlanta’s trolley cars. They succeeded in purchasing a strategic tract of land for



*Helen Dortch Longstreet*  
1863-1962

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- Group tours by appointment

their project for \$108,960 and began construction in 1910. One year later Helen Longstreet began the fight to rescue the river and gorge from development in the first large environmental battle in the state's history.



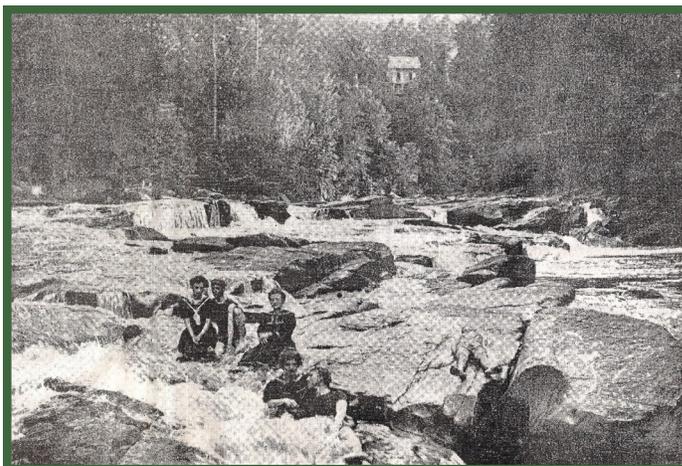
R.H. Moss of Athens built the Cliff House in 1882 on the edge of the gorge across the tracks from the depot. It was Tallulah Falls' largest and most popular hotel with room for three hundred guests. It burned in 1937.

In an era when women did not have the right to vote, Longstreet traveled the state to rally support for her campaign. She claimed that the state had no right to grant state property to a corporation against the will of the people. In a 1912 article in the Atlanta Constitution, she referred to the utility company as "commercial pirates and buccaneers" trying to plunder "the most wonderful natural asset of the Western Hemisphere." In addition Longstreet argued that the dam in the gorge would destroy a thriving tourism industry in the little town of Tallulah Falls, which once boasted 27 hotels. In that she was proven correct.

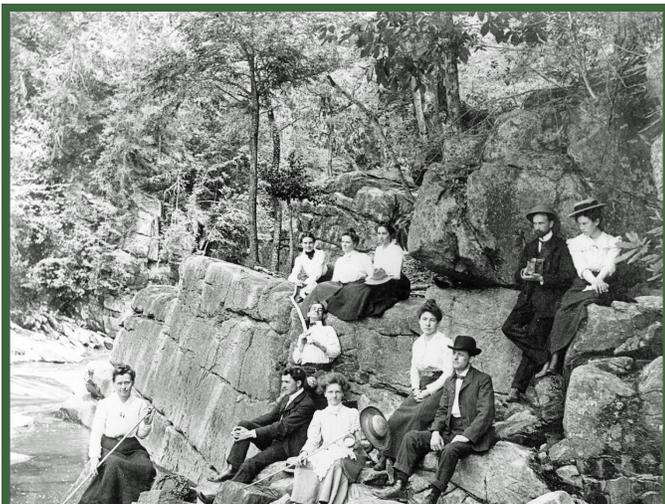
The power company knew from the outset that there was opposition to the dam. At first they attempted to appease their opponents by arguing that the falls would not be interfered with, as there was much more water than they would use, and the surplus would continue to spill over the

dam and keep the falls as beautiful as ever. They later realized they could not afford such a costly waste to their operations, and they began to claim that the lakes which would be created above the falls would be more beautiful than the falls and would attract many more visitors. Some were swayed by this argument, but many were more interested in the economic progress this project was expected to bring than the beauty of the falls.

Longstreet made a bold attack by disclosing that Georgia Power Company did not own the Tallulah River itself and the gorge, though their title to the land beyond the rim was legal. Her lawyers contended that the field notes and plats of the surveyors who laid off this county in 1820 for the Land Lottery indicated that they had stopped at the rim of the gorge and that the land at the bottom of the gorge and the river had never been surveyed. Longstreet appealed to Governor Hoke Smith in 1911, who ordered a survey made to see how complete the original survey had been. The report showed that there were about three hundred acres not included in the 1820 survey, and the assumption then became that the State probably did own the gorge and the river. The new Governor, Joseph M. Brown, declined to bring suit



Indian Arrow Rapids, circa 1900 - "Bathing" in the Tallulah River before the dam was built, women wore very modest costumes. This area of the river is now submerged beneath the lake.



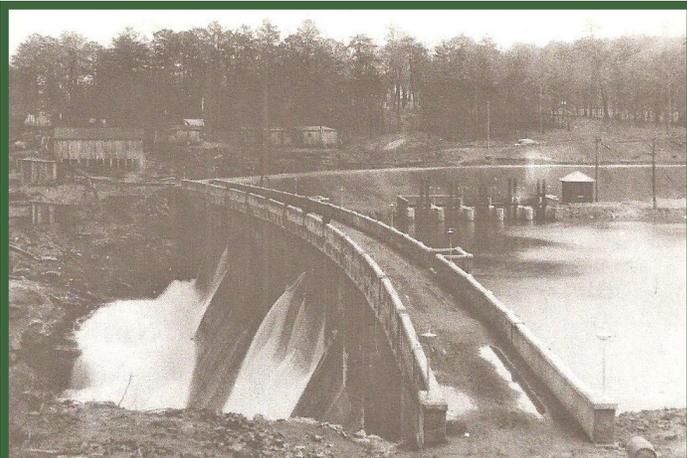
Visitors to the gorge in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>

to halt work on the dam because he felt the state had no basis for it. Persevering, Longstreet then approached the Georgia Legislature with a resolution concerning the disputed property at the gorge. The resolution which passed that body instructed the Governor to “bring such proceedings in the Courts of this State as will determine the rights of the State.” The State immediately applied for an injunction to stop work on the dam until title to the falls could be cleared.

The case went to a jury trial in Rabun County. When the jury found in favor of the power company, some angry conservationists questioned the mentality and greed of the “hill people.” The State appealed the case to the Georgia Supreme Court who again ruled in favor of the power company, and the dam was completed in 1913. Portions of the gorge were flooded, the reservoir covered the river, and the flow of water was diverted through a tunnel, silencing the beautiful falls that had been known as the “Niagara of the South.” When Tallulah Falls hydroelectric plant went into operation in 1914, it was the third largest in the United States and is still among Georgia’s outstanding monuments to engineering achievement.

With the dam completed, Tallulah Falls declined rapidly as a tourist attraction. Many of the hotels closed and others were burned in a fire in 1921 that almost destroyed the little town of Tallulah Falls. Eventually, US Highway 441 was built, bypassing the town.

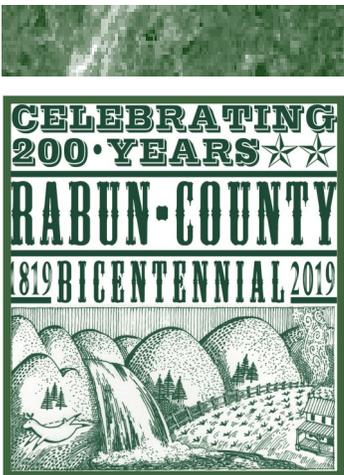
Ultimately, the power company built six dams and power plants along the Tallulah and Tugalo Rivers, completing the last one in 1927. At that time, the series of Georgia Power dams and hydro plants on the Tallulah River made it the longest stretch of river in the United States developed to produce hydroelectric power. The result was a series of beautiful mountain lakes – among them Lakes Burton, Rabun and Seed – that transformed tourism in Rabun County .



The dam at Tallulah Falls shortly after it was

Thirty years after her death, Longstreet’s dream for Tallulah Gorge began to be realized. In 1992 Georgia Power leased three thousand acres to the State of Georgia to create Tallulah Gorge State Park. On selected weekends in the spring and fall, the utility restores water flows to the gorge for recreational and aesthetic purposes. Her legacy for environmental preservation was rewarded in 1999 with the naming of the Helen Dortch Longstreet Trail System in Tallulah Gorge State Park.

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A postcard photo shows Tallulah Lake with the dam, the bridge, and the gorge. The city of Tallulah Falls is in the right foreground. The photo was taken before the Tallulah Falls railroad trestle was removed in the early