

A REPORT ON
THE NORTH AND SOUTH FORKS
OF THE ROANOKE RIVER
TO
THE GOVERNOR
AND
THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINIA



SENATE DOCUMENT NO. 6


COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA
Richmond
1981

TO: The Honorable John N. Dalton
Governor of Virginia
and
The General Assembly of Virginia

The report contained herein is pursuant to Senate Joint Resolution No. 44 of the 1980 Session of the General Assembly of Virginia.

This report, prepared during the spring and summer of 1980, constitutes the Commission of Outdoor Recreation's response to the legislative directive to study the North and South Forks of the Roanoke River in Floyd and Montgomery Counties to determine their suitability for designation as components of the Virginia Scenic Rivers System.

Respectfully submitted,


Rob R. Blackmore
Director

Commission of Outdoor Recreation
Mr. Robert H. Pratt, Chairman
Mrs. McCluer Gilliam, Vice Chairman
Mr. O. Gene Dishner
Mr. Dee E. Floyd
Mr. Harold C. King
Mr. James F. McInteer, Jr.
Mr. John H. Parsons
Mr. Thomas W. Richards
Mr. Fred W. Walker
Mr. Rob R. Blackmore, Director

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 44

Offered January 25, 1980

Requesting the Commission of Outdoor Recreation to study the North and South Forks of the Roanoke River from the point of their convergence to its headwaters in Floyd and Montgomery Counties for possible inclusion in the Virginia Scenic Rivers System.

Patron-Marye

Referred to the Committee on Rules

WHEREAS, it is the declared public policy of the Commonwealth that the waterways of Virginia are natural resources, the conservation of which constitutes a beneficial public purpose; and

WHEREAS, it is also State policy, through the use of the Scenic Rivers Act, to preserve certain rivers or sections of rivers for their scenic value; and

WHEREAS, the North and South Forks of the Roanoke River from their point of convergence to its headwaters in Floyd and Montgomery Counties appear to encompass those scenic, natural, historical and recreational qualities suitable to its designation as a scenic river, and

WHEREAS, consideration of the Roanoke River for inclusion in the Virginia Scenic River System is desirable; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate of Virginia, the House of Delegates concurring, That the Commission of Outdoor Recreation is requested to make a study of the North and South Forks of the Roanoke River from their point of convergency to its headwaters in Floyd and Montgomery Counties to determine its suitability of the Roanoke River for designation as a Virginia Scenic River.

The Commission shall complete its study and report to the Governor and General Assembly on or before December one, nineteen hundred eighty.

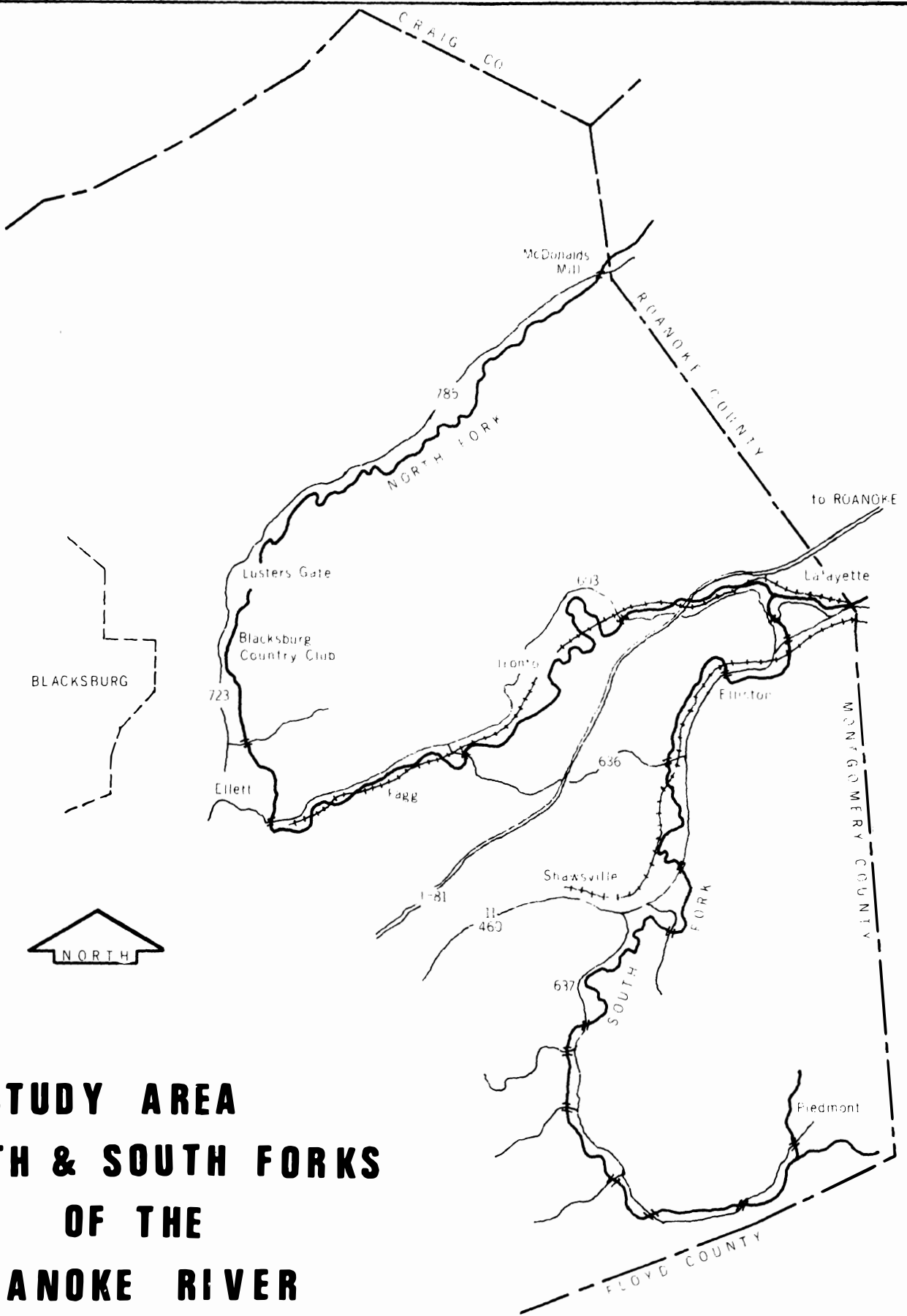
INTRODUCTION

A 1969 report by the Commission of Outdoor Recreation entitled "Virginia's Scenic Rivers" recommended the establishment of a State Scenic Rivers System. The enabling legislation for such a system was enacted by the 1970 General Assembly in the form of the Scenic Rivers Act, Title 10, Chapter 15, Sections 10-167 through 10-175 of the Code of Virginia.

The Scenic Rivers Act states in part: "It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Commonwealth of Virginia that rivers, streams, runs and waterways including their shores and immediate environs which possess great natural and pastoral beauty constitute natural resources, the conservation of which constitutes a beneficial public purpose."

Virginia Senate Joint Resolution No. 44, passed in 1980, directed the Commission of Outdoor Recreation to make a study of the North and South Forks of the Roanoke River, from their confluence to their headwaters in Montgomery and Floyd Counties to determine if they were suitable for inclusion in the Virginia Scenic Rivers System. This study involved only an investigation to determine if the resource met the criteria for scenic river designation. Therefore the report does not address alternative resource uses, the development of a conservation plan, or specific designation recommendations which would be necessary if the rivers were determined to qualify for inclusion and designation sought.

For the purposes of this report, the study corridor included the entire 17 miles of the South Fork of the Roanoke and 27 miles of the North Fork of the Roanoke in Montgomery County.



**STUDY AREA
NORTH & SOUTH FORKS
OF THE
ROANOKE RIVER**

HISTORY

According to many historians, present day Montgomery County was probably never continuously inhabited by Indians. Rather, the area served as a hunting ground providing an abundant supply of game for a number of villages.

The first Europeans to venture into western Virginia were under the direction of Colonel Abraham Wood of Fort Henry. In 1671 his party followed the Roanoke River into western Virginia discovering an Indian Village inhabited by the Toteros. From there, they proceeded southwest and eventually reached the New River.

During the mid-1700's, masses of British, Germans, and French surged into the wilderness territory only to face repeated Indian attack. A series of peace treaties eventually terminated the threat of conflict and encouraged additional westward expansion.

In 1776, because of its swelling population, the County of Fincastle was abolished and three new jurisdictions were established. The easternmost county was named in honor of a respected Revolutionary War officer, General Richard Montgomery.

VEGETATION

The steeper slopes along the South Fork of the Roanoke River are covered with stands of mixed hardwoods and softwoods. Pines, cedars and occasional stands of hemlock are the predominant evergreen species, while oaks, maples, sycamores and elms represent the major hardwood species. The flatter lands in the river corridor are largely devoted to row crop agriculture or pasture, and in many cases, the fields or pastures extend to the top of the river bank. Bankside vegetation in those instances consist of willows, multiflora rose, and similar underbrush; while laurel and rhododendron are found in the understory along the steeper slopes.

The upper North Fork is characterized by rolling topography and is generally better suited for pasture and row crop agricultural. While the forestry associations on the North Fork are similar to those on the South Fork, because of the more intensive agricultural uses, the larger timber tracts do not extend down into the stream valley. The vegetative cover at stream side consists primarily of grasses, weeds and underbrush with an occasional tree buffer. Periodically, however, woodlots do extend down to the stream bank.

FISH AND WILDLIFE

The South Fork of the Roanoke River is reported to support moderate populations of sunfish and smallmouth bass. Upper stretches of the South Fork were in the past stocked with trout by the Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries. However, in recent years much of the property along the stream has been posted, causing the Game Commission to discontinue its put-and-take stocking program. The North Fork supports populations of sunfish and smallmouth bass. There is a commercial trout farm on a major tributary near the headwaters, and some of these fish, no doubt, escape into the upper North Fork. It should also be noted that two potentially threatened species, the Roanoke logperch and orangefin madtom inhabit portions of the North and South Forks of the Roanoke River.

Although little official data exists on the warm water sport fishery, the river's many rapids, riffles and rock and gravel bars would seem to provide good fishery habitat. Where the streams are accessible, there are signs of light to moderate use by local fishermen.

Although the river corridors immediately adjacent to the streams are not heavily wooded for the most part, there is good wildlife habitat nearby. Deer, racoon, opossum, muskrat and groundhog are among the more common furbearing mammals occupying the ridges and floodplains along the rivers. Numerous game and nongame species of birds can also be found in the valley.

WATER QUALITY AND FLOW

The North and South Forks of the Roanoke River in the study area are classified by the State Water Control Board as mountainous-zone primary contact recreation streams which provide acceptable habitat for fish and wildlife propagation. Both rivers, however, receive treated wastewater discharges and some effluent from private residences. Current water quality monitoring data taken near Lafayette on the North Fork and at the Route 11/460 bridge on the South Fork show some values of fecal coliform above the level acceptable for primary contact recreation

Available data indicates that the North and South Forks are fairly similar with respect to average flow. Although the flow of both streams is sufficient to support fishing and some swimming during most of the primary outdoor recreation season, canoeing is generally possible only during the late winter and spring months when water volumes are higher than average.

RECREATIONAL RIVER USE

Recreational use of both the North and South Forks of the Roanoke River is relatively light and limited primarily to canoeing and fishing by local residents. Access to both streams is via privately owned land or the numerous public road crossings. There are no publicly owned recreation areas or facilities along either stream. Although access to them is good, there is only limited evidence of recreational use along the banks of either stream.

Portions of both the North and South Forks are canoeable about five months out of the year, during winter and early spring. Water levels during the primary recreation seasons are generally too limited to accommodate boaters. While the upper 15 miles of the North Fork is generally too small and heavily obstructed by fences and low water bridges to canoe, the lower stretch from Route 603 to Lafayette is canoeable. All of the South Fork is large enough to accommodate canoes and kayaks. However, recreational boaters on both streams should exercise caution due to the many low water bridges and fences.

RIPARIAN LAND USES

The majority of the land within the study corridor of both forks of the Roanoke River are in agricultural and forestry usage, with forestry dominating the steeper topography and agricultural uses predominant on rolling hillsides and along the valley floors adjacent to the rivers. This extensive agricultural use has removed most of the forest vegetation along the two streams.

Secondary roads parallel and cross both streams numerous times and scattered strip residential and light commercial developments mix with the numerous farming operations. Due to the convenient road access, much of the development in the corridor is in close proximity to the river. Frequently residences, seasonal cottages and farming operations are adjacent to or within view of the stream bank. Dilapidated structures, feedlots and outdoor toilets were observed in the flood plains. In many cases, household trash or worn out machinery has been dumped over the river bank. Subsequent minor floods have scattered much of this debris along the streams.

The area's road and railroad systems cross the South Fork a total of 20 times between Lafayette and Piedmont. There are also at least two major power lines, one pipeline and numerous individual telephone and electrical distribution lines that cross the corridor within its 17 mile course through the county.

Shawsville, Elliston and Lafayette are developing communities in the lower South Fork Valley containing some light industrial and commercial as well as residential areas. While only a portion of the existing development is visible from the stream, the County's zoning ordinance will allow increased development in this area which will bring about future stress on the river due to clearing of vegetation and increased runoff.

The North Fork of the Roanoke River has a total of 29 road and railroad crossings along its 27 mile corridor. As with the South Fork, it is also being impacted by development. There is a new residential development and country club complex which flanks the stream near Ellett and heavy strip development exists adjacent to the river between Ellett and Ironto. The upper half of the North Fork is crossed at frequent intervals with fences used in connection with farming operations. Although not as numerous as those on the South Fork, the North Fork does have a number of crossings of individual electrical distribution and telephone lines, which detract from the scenic qualities of the river. Streamside trash dumps are numerous in areas where development borders the river.

EXISTING LAND USE CONTROLS

Development and land use along the North and South Forks of the Roanoke River is regulated by Montgomery County's Comprehensive Plan, zoning ordinance and subdivision ordinance.

The Comprehensive Plan has established a number of policies which serve to encourage the protection and preservation of the natural, scenic and historic environment in the county. One such policy, having a direct impact on the river corridor, discourages new development within flood plain boundaries. The subdivision ordinance supports this policy by prohibiting lands subject to flood from being platted for residential use.

According to county zoning maps, a majority of the property adjacent to both forks of the Roanoke River is zoned for agricultural use (A-1). Under this designation, residential development on lots of .5 acre or greater and rural oriented commercial use is permitted. At present no land along the South Fork has been zoned for residential use. Two industrially zoned tracts adjacent to the river are located south of Elliston. At this time, one site, owned by the Appalachian Power Company, is not expected to be developed. The second site is occupied by a lumber company and log home manufacturer.

Much of the North Fork above Luster's Gate has been designated as Agricultural and Forestal District. The purpose of this designation is to enhance and protect farming and forestry operations within district boundaries. However, one large tract between Luster's Gate and New Ellett on the North Fork is zoned R-1 with the Blacksburg Country Club Subdivision currently under construction.

Montgomery County also participates in the National Flood Insurance Program which prohibits the construction of non-flood proofed residences within flood plains. However, it should be noted that there are numerous structures in the flood plain that were built prior to the County's participating in the flood insurance program.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The purpose of the Virginia Scenic Rivers Program is to provide for the identification, preservation and protection of certain rivers or sections of rivers which possess natural beauty of high quality and whose scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic and cultural attributes combine to make them of statewide significance. The North and South Forks of the Roanoke River were evaluated to determine if they qualified for inclusion in the system.

Due to their proximity to the population centers of Christiansburg/Blacksburg and Salem/Roanoke and the existance of good agricultural lands along their banks, both the North and South Forks of the Roanoke River have been heavily impacted by a variety of developments. Transportation and utility transmission corridors follow both streams and frequent residential developments are found along their banks. These uses, in combination with the extensive agricultural operations have resulted in a removal of much of the natural streamside vegetation, heavily impacting the scenic qualities of both streams.

Although access to both streams is good and fair canoeing and fishing potential exists, recreational use appears to be only light to moderate. Low stream flow throughout most of the primary recreation season greatly limits the use of both streams.

While water quality in both streams is good, problems may arise as development in the watershed increases. Current water quality monitoring data along the lower reaches of both streams indicate some fecal coliform values in excess of those deemed safe for primary contact recreation.

CONCLUSION

While the North and South Forks of the Roanoke River in Montgomery County are undoubtedly of importance to the people of this region, both streams have been significantly impacted by the work of man. Based on the findings of this study, the Commission of Outdoor Recreation does not believe that they "possess great natural and pastoral beauty" of statewide significance. Therefore, we do not believe that they qualify for inclusion in the Virginia Scenic Rivers System.

