

5-1-2009

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Nathan Horn

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CHANGING CURRENTS: INTERPRETING THE PROMISE OF THE TENNESSEE-
TOMBIGBEE WATERWAY

By

Nathan Horn

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Masters of Arts in History
in the Department of History

Mississippi State, Mississippi

August 2009

CHANGING CURRENTS: INTERPRETING THE PROMISE OF THE
TENNESSEE-TOMBIGBEE WATERWAY

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At the time of its construction (1971-1985), the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway was a highly scrutinized public works project, but the years after its construction have remained largely unexplored. Research in the John C. Stennis Collection, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority archives, and local newspapers, revealed that despite developers' promise the waterway's economic impact failed to live up to expectations, while its environmental influence more than exceeded them. Though rural southerners failed to benefit economically from the waterway, they embraced the environmental changes forced upon the project by the National Environmental Policy Act. Built as a promise of economic development, the Tenn-Tom offers a model of how economics and environmental forces intersected within the rural South. The waterway's history as an economic and environmental force demands a reconsideration of the role of public works projects in southern environmental history.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research to the common people of Northeast Mississippi: my family, the old folks out at Cairo, Mississippi, and the Holcut survivors and as a memorial to my Great-uncle Carl Frank Hill. May memories outlast us all!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author expresses his sincere gratitude to the many individuals whose selfless assistance contributed to the fulfillment of this thesis. To start with, many and sincere thanks are due to Dr. James C. Giesen, my major advisor, for introducing me to the field of Environmental History and his willingness to assist me through the many obstacles of the thesis writing process. It has been a long road. Equal appreciation is also due to the other members of my thesis committee, namely, Dr. Jason K. Phillips and Mark D. Hersey for invaluable aid in working around conflicting time schedules and baby births. There are numerous other individuals who helped throughout the stages of this work, but who shall remain nameless as they are too numerous to mention. Finally, I would like to thank the close members of my family which led me to the topic in the first place. Starting first with my mother, Oneta Cole, who taught me the true meaning of being an artist and the passion it takes to do one's craft well. And then there was the originator of the topic, Carl Frank Hill, whose aspirations to profit from the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway pushed him to reach a little too far. To the mind of an impressionable youth, his connection to the land and nostalgic memories of the place where he lived made a deep and lasting impression.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the later decades of the twentieth century, the people of the South experienced a change in their society as dramatic as the end of the Civil War. Changes occurring within southern culture paralleled modifications to its physical landscape, which was altered by the machinations of regional development. Earlier in the twentieth century, countless individuals fled the economic stagnation of rural areas and flocked to the region's expanding cities, or left the South entirely for other areas of the country in search of new economic opportunities. During the New South period, southern boosters, like Henry Grady, struggled to repaint the South's external visage by laboring to improve its economic image. These men and women sought to make the region appear more modern and developed in order to attract new investors and industry. To accomplish this goal, they reshaped the region into a territory of low wages, improving infrastructure, and passive government. Leadership in the New South became effective in dictating policy and controlling the political pulse of its populace. What Southern leaders wanted then and would want throughout the twentieth century was a vibrant and stimulated economic environment that would personify Grady's image of "diversified industry that meets the complex need of this complex age." Though Grady's promises for the New South of the

early 1900s were fulfilled only marginally during his lifetime, by the 1960s, 70s, and 80s he would have recognized the fulfillment of many of his fundamental wishes. This “Sunbelt South” was a fully industrialized and modernized New South.

Within the economically and politically transformative years of the Sunbelt South, roughly 1955 to 1990, currents of change swept away the diehard staples of the New South’s natural environment. The monoculture of King Cotton lost ground to diversified crop systems where soybean fields, cow pastures, and timber plots gained regional importance. The growth of southern cities and their suburbs taxed the region’s water supply resulting in drastic loss of wetlands. Then, as the Sun Belt cities moved out into former farmland areas, emphasis grew on harnessing the region’s water resources for not only drinking but also for navigational purposes. The newest southern boosters envisioned a water system linking isolated southern territories to an expanding national network of navigable waterways. When these dreams were realized alterations to the region’s aquatic resources shrunk natural wetlands, as more areas were drained to make way for human occupation.

The resulting changes to the land did not only affect the natural world, but the human one as well. Farm sizes increased while their labor demands diminished as mechanization forced poor farmers to seek employment in other areas. Many southerners turned toward the industrial and manufacturing sector for employment, but jobs within the region were limited. In response, southern leadership widened the region’s doors to new economic experiences and began growing the region’s infrastructure in order to entice industries to relocate their factories into the South. One integral part of the South’s new evolution was the development of its transportation network. Within this system,

waterways emerged to take their place alongside highways and railroads and became another tool important for southern industrial expansion. Like the efforts of the TVA during the early part of the century, developers targeted the many rivers, lakes, and streams dotting the South, incorporating them as another ingredient in their recipe for regional progress. Through Herculean efforts of pacification, the turbulent waters of the territory's aquatic resources became another form of capital for selling the South's improving image to the rest of the nation.¹

During the formation of the Sunbelt South, one regional project stands above all others in size, money, and importance and it chronicles not only changes in southern culture and environment, but also changes within modern society during the 1970s and 1980s. This was the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. Built between 1971 and 1985 the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway was an enormous \$1.96 billion federal transportation project providing a navigational link between the Gulf of Mexico and the mid-Atlantic Region of the United States. Intended as an alternative to the Mississippi River, waterway boosters promised it would offer shippers from the hinterland of America an expedited and therefore cheaper route to the Gulf Coast and the port city of Mobile, Alabama. By cutting a shipping canal through the geographical divide of the Appalachian Mountains and connecting the geologically separate and distinct waters of the Tennessee and the Tombigbee rivers, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers created a 234-mile-long man-made waterway through the economically depressed states of Mississippi and Alabama. Over its length, the waterway required the construction of ten locks, five dams, the flooding of 40,000 acres of woodland and the removal of over 300

¹ "Tenn-Tom's Role in Energy Crunch Emphasized," *Tenn-Tom Topics: Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority*, Vol. 2 No. 1, June, 1976, p. 7.

million cubic yards of earth. It remains the largest public works project in U.S. history. Surviving decades of litigation, funding debates, and the policy changes of numerous presidents—Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter and Reagan—the Tenn-Tom, as it is commonly referred to by its supporters, remains a marvel of the spirit and ingenuity of the Army Corp of Engineers and the southern politicians whose promise of the project as the economic salvation of the region guaranteed its construction.

Yet sheer size and its changes to the natural environments of Mississippi and Alabama are not the only things marking the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway as special. This massive engineering marvel also holds the distinct privilege of being the first major public works project built after the passage of the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The passing of NEPA and the rise of environmentalism across the nation began questioning the project’s radical realignment of the landscape of Western Alabama and Northeast Mississippi and called to question the unknown environmental consequences of combining the waters of two separate and biologically distinct rivers. At the same time, observers questioned the loss of both human and wildlife habitats, and the digging of what many saw as an “unnatural” trench through the mountainous partition between two river valleys. After NEPA, the Tenn-Tom polarized the nation into two factions, those who saw it as a boon and those who saw it as boondoggle. These adversaries warred in the nation’s newspapers, courts, and the halls of Congress altering the very shape and character of the waterway by the time it opened in 1985. As historian Jeffrey K. Stine explained, “The history of the waterway’s design and construction is thus

not only a history of what engineers can do, but also of how environmental politics came to influence what they may do.”²

From the first suggestion of its construction, the Tenn-Tom came under intense scrutiny and criticism from a small, but emerging southern environmental movement, and quickly became a national staging ground of contention between the environmental concerns of the newly created NEPA mandates and the economically driven supporters of large-scale public works projects. The battle over the Tenn-Tom highlighted the difficulties environmentalism faced within the South as it clashed with the economic promises of regional developers, who portrayed the waterway as the economic salvation of their home states. Environmentalists found opposition from an economically and politically powerful regional development group, the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority (TTWDA), which enticed the impoverished local populations to overlook the uncertainties of environmental damages for the greater promise of jobs and industry. This development group gathered local populations to their side and hampered the environmentalists’ cause keeping them from organizing a large enough response to halt Tenn-Tom construction. The environmentalists’ efforts not only challenged the waterway, but changed forever the way the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and national politics handled construction of large-scale public works projects in the following years.³

One *modus operandi* of southern leadership was to look toward public funds as a way of bringing in outside money into their traditionally poor states. Public works projects like the Tenn-Tom brought the region a financial panacea in the form of federal

² Jeffrey K. Stine, “The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway and the Evolution of Cultural Resource Management,” *Public Historian* Vol. 4 Issue 2 (1992): 3-8.

³ Ibid, Paul Sims, “1977: A Year the Canal Fought to Live,” *The Banner Independent*, Booneville, Mississippi, March 30, 1978. p. 8.

dollars. Many of these public works projects allocated funding for improving and controlling the water resources of the nation, and a strong southern Congressional coalition ensured their home states received their share of this public money. In their wake, water projects left transformed environments where the local people grappled with the day-to-day realities of their altered homelands. While conservationists argued in favor of saving the diminishing assets of an unaltered natural world, regional developers were more than willing to trade natural landscapes for gains in economic progress and the poor populations of southern states placed their support behind the promise of more jobs, not the plight of fish and wildlife. The language of regional developers embraced the Tenn-Tom's economic progress and spawned the rhetorical promise of economic salvation based upon the successful construction and development of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway.⁴

By definition, progress implies the development of an individual, society, economy, or culture in a direction considered more beneficial than and superior to its previous state. For proponents of the waterway, this meant the emergence of region's economic prominence through the industrialization of its economy. In the case of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, boosters idolized concepts of progress, creating a controversial ideological gap between the South and the rest of the nation as individual values differed from region to region. The problem of the Tenn-Tom's promise to outsiders stemmed not from the South's hope of economic advancement, but rather the price southerners were willing to pay in order to achieve it.

⁴ "Blanton Named Tenn-Tom Authority Chairman," *Tenn-Tom Topics: Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority*, Vol. 1 No. 3, November, 1975, p. 2.

During the 1970s, national criticism rose to challenge construction of the Tenn-Tom because of its inflating construction costs, questionable cost/benefit ratio, and harmful environmental ramifications. These factors combined to mar the waterway's reputation to many people outside its immediate area. As national interests changed at an ever rapidly case and reflected growing unease around large-scale water resource projects, southerners were reluctant to adjust their way of thinking especially when faced by criticism from apparent outsiders. After decades of forced change from national interests, such as in the case of its Civil Rights Movement, many southerners—especially rural white southerners—harbored misgivings about external federal interference in their daily lives. Local people saw criticism of the Tenn-Tom by national newspapers and environmental groups as coming solely from outside the South and chalked their disparaging remarks as regional competition in the former, or inconsequential in the latter as the people of Alabama and Mississippi not environmentalists would be the ones living with the aftereffects of the waterway in their everyday life. Yet, the poor economic conditions within the project area placed tremendous strain on local populations, as they lacked the finances needed to spur progress. Lagging behind the rest of the nation in income and education levels, both key signs of national progress, the populations of Mississippi and Alabama turned toward the local patronage of their political and business leaders to act a their guides toward fulfilling the economic promise of the Tenn-Tom. The populations of these two states remained largely unconcerned with changes in national opinion, such as the development of a national environmental movement, and focused solely on the promise of economics gains associated with the waterway.⁵

⁵ Nathaniel D. McClure, "A major project in the age of the environment: out of controversy,

Yet, as the Sunbelt South and the Tenn-Tom developed during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the rise of the national environmental movement marked another period of change. Fueled by the loss and degradation of natural landscapes—especially those associated with large-scale public works projects—the tumultuous years of the 1960s spawned the national environmental movement. Environmentalists’ sought a reprioritization of how federal projects were judged. They looked at the detrimental effects of federal projects on the natural world with equal consideration to the potential benefits to the human one. These arguments placed them at odds with the economic developments of the nation and the South. Despite the growth of some environmentalist groups within the South, in particular Florida, environmentalism lacked appeal within an unfavorable region solidly committed to the growth of its economic potential. The result was a period of southern history where southern politicians, business leaders, and populations struggled to assert their regional development ideologies within an arena of growing national awareness in federal expenditures and their contributions to environmentally insensitive projects. Because of the rise of environmentalism, southern politicians and developers not only had to scheme of ways to receive federal funding from a tightening federal budget, but they also had to contend with outside scrutiny of their federal projects as environmentalist began taking federal projects to the courts.⁶

Despite the South’s seemingly lagging environmentalist impulses, during the planning stage of the Tenn-Tom however, a local environmental movement did emerge,

complexity, and challenge,” *Environmental Geology* (1985) vol. 7, issue 1, p. 15-19.

⁶ For examples of other southern environmental groups see Albert E. Cowdrey, *This Land, This South: An Environmental History* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 181-182; Walter A. Rosenbaum, “The Bureacracy and Environmental Policy,” in James P. Lester (ed.) *Environmental Politics and Policy: Theories and Evidence* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989) p. 212-237. For examples of court cases see

anchored by academics, scientists, and environmental experts, rather than the more common people tied directly to the land. Environmentalists' objections and two lawsuits failed to stop the construction of the waterway, however, because of overwhelming support from industry and economic leaders, who promised the waterway would end poverty and unemployment. Promoted as a vital component for future economic stimulus in one of the poorest regions of the South, the Tenn-Tom spotlighted the transitioning conflict between environmentalism and the economic development interests of the South, a clash between the environment and economics. As Stine argued, "The history of the Tenn-Tom provides a window into the changes occurring in the relationship between environmental organizations and the federal government. It illustrates the maturation of the environmental movement and its growing facility in coalition-building...the importance of seemingly intangible societal values on such tangible things as public works projects."⁷

As Stine explained in his 1993 study of the construction, "the Tenn-Tom is the story of a symbol—possibly a monument—to the end of one era and the beginning of another." His narrative explained the effects of the changing local and national political climate during the years of the waterway's construction, the development of grassroots organizations to both help and hinder the waterway's development, its controversial and questionable economic justifications, and the role the environment (or more importantly environmentalism) played in fighting to halt its construction. Stine argued the project marked changes in not only Mississippi and Alabama, but also the nation as a whole.

⁷ See Samuel P. Hayes, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Stine, *Mixing the Waters*, p 7, 10, 11.

Technology and the environment clashed in one tumultuous episode in history and its ramifications influenced how water transportation projects are handled to this day. Stine declared, “Study of the politics and engineering design of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway reveals much about how the interplay between technology and the environment was assessed, misunderstood, and reassessed in the United States during the transitional decade of the 1970s.”⁸

While Stine’s work centered on the building of the Tenn-Tom, this thesis will examine the years after the project’s construction. Exploration of the history of the waterway after construction requires retracing of some of Stine’s footsteps. Instead of focusing on the national outlook of the waterway, it looks at the project from a more regional perspective. By studying the actions, words, hopes and dreams of local people tied intimately to the waterway, one gets a deeper appreciation of its ramifications on the region’s culture. A reevaluation of the Tenn-Tom’s origin begins with the building of its promise. During the planning and construction phase of the Tenn-Tom, local commercial interests adopted a rhetoric that developed into a kind of mantra of economic promise when discussing the merits of the waterway.

Adding their voices to this growing chorus was a coalition of southern politicians, who benefited from the seniority system of Congress and held positions of authority upon key committees responsible for appropriations and funding. No society can allow production to lag to such an extent that its existence is threatened. For many, to lag meant to die and individuals never die willingly. Most remain ready to undergo any sacrifice to overcome the difficulties which stand in the way of economic production and

⁸ Jeffrey K Sine, *Mixing the Waters: Environment, Politics, and the Building of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway* (Akron, Ohio: The University of Akron Press, 1993), p. 2, 10.

their existence. In the case of the Tenn-Tom, the environment and economic needs determined the methods, forces, and means that individuals used to bring about the region's development, expansion of its production, and the cultural results which followed. However, the necessity for the development and expansion of the waterway's economic production did not depend solely on the shoulders of faceless individuals, but on the actions of community leaders, developers, and politicians, because they were often best suited to the task they wished to attain.

Together, these forces created the Tenn-Tom's *promise*, one so pervasive that they left little room for a middle ground. The success or failure of the waterway placed opponents at different ends of the political spectrum, guaranteeing that neither side could hope for easy victory. To ensure the successful construction of the waterway, boosters promised everything to the people of the South, but in the process made living up to these expectations a gargantuan task.

During the mid-1980s and early 1990s, the years after completion of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, many believed the waterway failed to live up to impossible promises built by the regions political and business leaders. Some argued that therefore the Tenn-Tom was largely forgotten outside of Mississippi and Alabama. Critics pointed at the lack of tonnage flowing down the Tenn-Tom—only six percent of the predicted tonnage flowed through the waterway in 1985—as confirmation that it was a boondoggle of tremendous proportions and one of the greatest misuses of federal money in the history of the United States. With multimillion dollar locks filling with civilian owned pleasure craft, instead of commercial shipping barges, challengers labeled it “a nearly \$2 billion fishing whole.” In the first ten years of operation—1985-1995—

individuals—both nationally and locally—failed to realize that there was no way to have industry before the waterway was completed and most did not accept the premise that to benefit from the Tenn-Tom economically, would take years of development and maturation. Several factors added further difficulties for the regional development efforts along the waterway, including an early opening date, changes in U.S. export market, and an apparent lose of faith and rushed judgment by local communities striving to benefit from waterway trade and commerce. This thesis will look into the different responses of local communities within the Tenn-Tom area and show that the developers’ efforts during the construction were just the initial ones needed in a long battle to reap economic benefits. After the long years of construction, there was a natural letdown when it came time to live with the reality of the Tenn-Tom and not just its promise. A closer examination of the waterway shows that tonnage and dollars are not always the best reflections for gauging the true worth of a project’s economic impact. From connecting isolated rural communities to the wider world to offering people a plethora of recreational activities, the waterway offered additional benefits to local populations. Figuring out the real gains to the people of Mississippi and Alabama are difficult to substantiate and require different outlooks than those expected with the Tenn-Tom’s coming. Through the first ten years of operation the waterway’s economic promise endured, even as it struggled for fulfillment, and remained a symbol of the region’s current and future economic development.⁹

⁹“A \$2-Billion White Elephant,” St. Petersburg (FL) *Times*, February 23, 1986; “Toward the Bottom of the Barrel,” *Washington Post*, June 9, 1985; “Conservationists Say Tenn-Tom Battle Not over Yet,” Florence (AL) *Times Daily*, June 2, 1985; and David Tortorano, “Yachts Outnumber Industrial Ships on New Tenn-Tom Waterway,” San Francisco *Examiner*, June 1, 1986.

Despite poor showings in some of Tenn-Tom's economic enterprises and its inability to change the fiscal identity of the South, transformations to the natural landscapes of Mississippi and Alabama, offer counter arguments and show that the Tenn-Tom prospered in one area that few foresaw. Benefiting from the environmental and cultural resource measures set forth by the environmentalists and NEPA, recreational activities along the waterway's shores boomed from the very beginning. The Tenn-Tom's environmental measures created a bonus to both its economics (though from the unlikely source of recreational dollars) and the environment of the region (with the creation and management of numerous wildlife management areas, beaches, campgrounds, and impounded lakes). Thorough examination of the environmental tactics employed during construction show that the Corps' predicted "land enhancement," while an appalling thought to true environmentalists, was embraced by millions of nature lovers visiting its waters and woods. The Corps took lands depleted through decades of abuse, replanted them for diverse species habitats and marked them as wildlife management areas. Not to say that all animals prospered from the creation of the waterway and its subsequent changes to the land, but more often than not, wildlife gained new and protected habitats. Despite the unnatural origins of its lakes and forest, Tenn-Tom wildlife management areas saw wildlife habitats boom and saw to the reintroduction of some endangered species back into their native habitats. At the same time that these changed lands created new habitats and ecosystems, they also created scenic recreational environments that drew millions of visitors to the waterway's shores, generating new cultural resources in place of those lost during construction. These visitors to the region's campgrounds, boat ramps, and environmental education centers brought

unexpected sources of economic stimulus into the region. Their recreational dollars offered a salvation to the waterway's promise by combining the Tenn-Tom's environment with its economics.

The one enduring legacy of the Tenn-Tom's promise is that economics and environment are not always at odds with each other. Through environmental considerations, man and nature can form a reciprocal relationship. In the end, the Tenn-Tom became a project where economics and the environment did not always clash. In fact, in the years after its opening, aspects of each enforced the goals of the other. The Tennessee Tombigbee Waterway remains a symbol of not only the opening and closing of an era, but on how to build, operate, and maintain a modern water navigational system for the benefit of future generations and perhaps show how to lessen their harsh impacts on cultural and natural landscapes.

CHAPTER II

THE BUILDING OF AN UNFULFILLABLE PROMISE: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE TENNESSEE-TOMBIGBEE WATERWAY

On May 25, 1971, President Richard Nixon attended the groundbreaking ceremony celebrating the official start of construction on the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway in Mobile, Alabama. Nixon's appearance at the occasion marked his commitment to a project deemed controversial to many outside the South. By allotting \$1 million for the waterway in the 1971 budget, Nixon increased prior funding and facilitated a start to the project. Addressing the crowd at the ceremony, Nixon stated, "After 160 years of trying to talk it [the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway] to death, Congress finally acted. I want you to know that it was to the credit of both parties and several administrations that this project finally begins." After years of work and debate, construction began.¹⁰

Nixon's statement only hints at the saga of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, a story that raises one theme above all others: promise. In the promise of this mammoth project, some Americans heard economic salvation, others only environmental destruction. In the debates surrounding proposals for the waterway's construction, the economic promises of southern politicians and regional economic development groups

¹⁰ "The Tenn-Tom: Pioneering Spirit Reflected in Waterway," *The Banner Independent* (Booneville, MS), March 30, 1978, p. 8; and "'Hypocrisy' in the North Hit as Nixon Visits Alabama to Dedicate Waterway," *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), May 26, 1971, p. 1.

clashed with the competitive and sometimes dire predictions of the environmentalists, railroad companies, and fiscal conservatives. Caught in the middle of this conflict were the economically depressed populations of Alabama and Mississippi. Impassioned by the progressive spirit of the Sunbelt South, the governments of these two states were guided by the principles of economics, where the creation of jobs mattered more than the project's environmental consequences on fish and wildlife. Building the rhetoric of the waterway's promise was a coalition of southern politicians, business leaders, and regional developers, who married the economic future of the region to that of the waterway's construction and assured southerners of the economic merits of the project. Waterway proponents kept local expectations focused on their efforts and away from the concerns of their opposition. In the end, project supporters overcame criticism with the combined strength of strong Congressional leadership, dedicated local leaders, and an economically desperate population solidly behind the promised economic benefits of the waterway. For these individuals, the plight of wildlife was a luxury they could not afford when facing the daily hardships of unemployment in the stagnant economic climate of the Deep South.

Resting within the very ideological foundations of its national character, America has traditionally held faith in the perseverance of science and engineering over nature. One glowing example of this belief was the development of the nation's vast hydrological resources. In 1971, one project remained a dream in the minds of many southerners—a manmade connection between the Tennessee and Tombigbee Rivers. The first historical reference to such a project dates to the eighteenth century when the French

explorer, the Marquis de Montcalm suggested connecting the two rivers. Montcalm believed that a link between these two water systems was paramount to the success of the French kingdom. River traffic was the only viable means of moving supplies both in and out of their territorial holdings along the Mississippi River and Gulf Coast and a channel connecting the two rivers would greatly shorten that journey. However, French dominance of the territory ended shortly thereafter. In 1810, citizens of Knox County, Tennessee, petitioned Congress to shorten trade routes to New Orleans, Mobile and other ports along the Gulf by more than 800 miles by constructing a channel between the two rivers, but Congress ignored their plea. In 1874 President Grant ordered the first engineering investigation for a connecting watercourse. The conclusion of this study foretold that while the project was feasible, canal size restrictions and high costs associated with constructing a waterway over the natural divide between the two river basins made its economic justifications unfeasible. Still, the prospect of linking the two rivers remained an enduring dream to the people of Mississippi and Alabama.¹¹

The appeal of a connecting water route between these two key southern rivers strengthened as America industrialized. Throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers conducted several more studies that eventually led to Congressional approval of the waterway in 1946. The increase in legislative support was

¹¹ For example of historians writing about the perseverance of science and engineering over nature see Frederick Jackson Turner, *The frontier in American history* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1920); Leo Marx, *The machine in the Garden; technology and the pastoral ideal in America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); David P. Billington and Donald C. Jackson, *Big Dams of the New Deal Era: A Confluence of Engineering and Politics* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2006); James Doster, *Tenn-Tom Country: the Upper Tombigbee Valley* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1987); and Historical references to constructing a connecting watercourse between the Tennessee and Tombigbee Rivers found in "Pathway to Progress: History," Special Edition of the *Commercial Dispatch* (Columbus, MS), May 24, 1985, sec. History, p. 1A.

due in part to the successful development of the Tennessee River and Pickwick Lock and Dam by the TVA in 1938. The pooled waters behind this hydroelectric dam formed Pickwick Lake and raised the water level of the Tennessee River. This was a vital component to Tenn-Tom construction as the Corps discovered that it could now construct Bay Springs Lake at the same elevation as Pickwick Lake allowing the Corps to go through the divide instead of over it like previous studies suggested. This development marked a decrease in expenses and increase in economic profit potential when overcoming the largest obstacle between the two rivers. Nevertheless, opposition formed around two factions. First, Congressional members from other parts of the nation competed for funding opportunities within their own areas and blocked further funding of the project that they believed benefited only to the South. Second, the railroad industry, fearing competition in an area dominated by their lines lobbied against federally funding of transportation projects throughout the South. From the 1930s on, these factions prevented any further development of the waterway until the 1960s.¹²

In 1968, under pressure from a coalition of leading southern Congressional leaders, President Lyndon B. Johnson budgeted funds to kick start the project's engineering and design phases in order to retain the support of the region. Construction began in 1971, during President Nixon's first term. Critics of the president's support of the project, claimed this was part of his "Southern Strategy" for reelection, a means of gaining votes within the South. Nixon's supporters were quick to point out it merits to regions both inside and outside the construction area. This "missing link," waterway

¹² Ibid; and Jeffrey K Sine, *Mixing the Waters: Environment, Politics, and the Building of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway* (Akron, Ohio: The University of Akron Press, 1993), p. 1-3.

advocates dubbed it, would connect over ten thousand miles of navigable waterway systems of mid-America with the Gulf of Mexico and the ports in Mobile, Alabama. Regional developer Glover Wilkins testified at a presidential conference, “While the waterway will afford tremendous opportunities for economic expansion of the region transversed by the project, its significance far exceeds that of a regional development project, since navigation benefits are expected to accrue to at least twenty-three states in the South and Midwest. The Waterway will make many inland ports as much as eight hundred to one thousand miles closer to the Gulf Coast or the mid-continent.”¹³

In the eyes of the project’s supporters, the Tenn-Tom was a means of gaining benefits for the populations closest to the project, namely Mississippi and Alabama, but Tennessee, Kentucky and Florida as well. Similar to the social planning goals of the TVA in the Tennessee Valley, Tenn-Tom proponents looked to spark economic growth throughout the region by increasing its water infrastructure, but developers could not depend on regional interests alone to help build the waterway. To keep construction going, supporters needed to link the use of the Tenn-Tom to interests outside its immediate area and ensure support for the project in other regions. With this in mind, campaigners began associating the project with secondary benefits, such as the use of the waterway by the defense and space industries.

¹³ Ibid; “Pathway to Progress: History,” p. 1A; “Crowds in Alabama Give Nixon Warm Welcome,” *New York Times*, May 26, 1971, p. 1, col. 4, p. 84, col. 2; “Nixon to ‘Open’ Waterway Today,” *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), May 25, 1971, p. 13; William B. Street, “Tennessee-Tombigbee Canal Project is Still Treading Water,” *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), March 5, 1967, sec. 1, p. 12; and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, “Wilkins Testifies at Presidential Conference,” *Tenn-Tom Topics: Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority*, Vol. 1 No. 3, November, 1975, p. 7.

Located in the center of the “space crescent” with direct access to Huntsville and the Marshall Space Flight Center, Michoud Operations at New Orleans, Mississippi Test Operations in Hancock County, Mississippi, and the Launch Operations Center at Cape Kennedy, the waterway offered a cheaper, alternative transportation route to the Gulf of Mexico and shortened distances goods had to travel to reach these industries. These savings in time and money appealed greatly to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (N.A.S.A). Due to the size requirements for much of their equipment, NASA only used barges to transport missile and rocket boosters. With the construction of the Tenn-Tom, this shortened the route from Huntsville to Cape Kennedy by 720 miles, reducing approximately one-third the distance and time, an average savings, according to supporters of the waterway, of \$10,000 per trip.¹⁴

The defense industry targeted cutbacks and savings of a different sort. The waterway would allow the shipment of jet fuel to Columbus Air Force Base and Meridian Naval Air Station in Mississippi and Oak Ridge in Tennessee, all-important military installations. In times of national crisis, natural disasters, or war, the Tenn-Tom would serve as an alternative route to the Mississippi River. This would provide the United States with a vital military and economic link to the coastal waters of the Gulf of Mexico. In a special presentation pamphlet on the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway provided to the President and Congress in January 1969, Mississippi Senator John C. Stennis stated, “Full Development of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway would make a substantial

¹⁴ Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority, “The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Story,” (A presentation to the president and congress of the United States), presented by the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority, (January, 1969) John C. Stennis Collection: Series 46, Box 87, Folder Tenn.-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority, Congressional and Political Records, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University. p. 6.

contribution to the nation's economy and would add greatly to our military security by providing an industrial base and additional transportation capabilities.” As Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, there was no doubt that Senator Stennis was a key supporter of the armed forces in the United States. Yet, Stennis did not focus all of his support on military concerns. By combining his roles as Mississippi Senator and Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, Stennis symbolized the political efforts of other southern politicians and saw the Tenn-Tom as an opportunity to advance the economies of both his home state and the rest of the United States.¹⁵

By highlighting the economic gains of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, political leaders like Stennis, strove to encourage growth in industrialized labor, a field where the South still lagged behind the rest of the nation. Despite local and national efforts to mitigate the poverty gap between the South and other regions in the post-World War II era, the fact remained that the South lagged far behind the rest of the nation in income, education, and employment opportunities. Tenn-Tom developers used this fact as a rallying point in its favor. In 1976, Joe C. McCorquodale Jr., a speaker of the Alabama House of Representatives remarked, “The South is going to control the nation in the next 25 years. The South's going to rise again.” Echoing this statement, Senator Stennis promised at a dedication ceremony for the opening of the divide cut section of the Ten-Tom waterway on May 6, 1984, “since the Civil War, people of the southeastern United States have missed a lot of opportunities for growth, but this time we're going to be up front.” Rhetoric such as this promised that the Sunbelt South would no longer

¹⁵ Ibid.

accept the traditional industrial divide between the region and the rest of the nation. It was time for the South to take the reins of economic development initiative. A local newspaper stated, “Many people in the area seem to regard it [the Tenn-Tom] as a way out of an economic morass that has existed since the Civil War. The threat to Tenn-Tom was viewed as a threat to their personal well-being and to the future of their children.” For the common people of the project area, the promise of the waterway went beyond their personal pocketbooks; its benefits spoke of a better future for generations to come.¹⁶

Southern political leaders were not the only ones recommending the Tenn-Tom as a means for southern development. People throughout the region saw its promise as a way to spur economic development and save local economies by using governmental spending. Harry Rutherford, editor of the *Tupelo Journal*, saw the project “as the blockbuster which will enable the people of this region to break forever the bonds of poverty which have tied each succeeding generation to the past rather than to the glowing future which I feel is all America’s for the having.” Poverty gripped all but a few large plantation owners and members of the upper elite class even during the days of the region’s perceived economic preeminence. While farm labor ruled in the Old South in the Sunbelt South manufacturing and textile jobs were the leading employer of workers. While the Old South imported labor, massive out migration was a growing and consistent dilemma for most Southern states. Individuals like Rutherford editorialized that the people of the South needed social uplift.¹⁷

¹⁶ *Tenn-Tom Topics*, “Wilkins Testifies at Presidential Conference,” p. 7.

¹⁷ U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile District, “The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Story,” (Mobile, Alabama: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile District) p. 6; Leigh Hogan, “Special to *The*

Bolstered by the popularity of the project within their home region, Tenn-Tom advocates and southern Congressional leaders began to label the waterway as a “vital link” to America’s water systems. Tennessee Representative John J. Duncan declared, “Without the Tenn-Tom, the South’s capacity for future economic growth, not to mention that of the great mid-section of America to be served by this waterway, would be greatly handicapped.” The South’s image as a hampered region and impoverished territory necessitated that its leaders improve its standing and the promise of the Tenn-Tom fit their bill and looked like the only way to cure endemic Southern poverty. The call was out for the rest of the nation to fulfill a moral obligation and buttress their slumping brother. Paralleling Duncan’s stance, Mississippi Representative Charles H. Griffin acknowledged, “The development of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway is of cardinal importance to the continued economic growth and prosperity of Mississippi and the Southeastern region of the United States.” By stressing the importance of the waterway as a prerequisite for Southern improvement, Southern politicians also looked at associating regional pride with the project.¹⁸

While the waterway offered economic benefits for others outside the South, for many southern politicians their primary goal was to foster development and growth within their region. Borrowing historian John Boles’ words about advocates for regional advancement during the Redemption years following the Civil War, “there was a strong element of regional chauvinism, a desire to see the South share in national prosperity and

Clarion Ledger,” *The Clarion Ledger* (Jackson, MS) May 7, 1984. p. 1; and “The Tenn-Tom: Pioneering Spirit Reflected in Waterway,” p. 8.

¹⁸ U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile District, “The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Story, p.1-3.

be independent of northern manufactured goods.” This belief was still recognizable within the words of Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway supporters. The South’s abundance of resources remained one of its greatest assets for development. As Alabama Governor Albert Brewer bragged,

Alabama is abundantly blessed with rivers which are rapidly becoming developed waterways. We in Alabama stand on a threshold of an era of unparalleled economic growth and expansion. And our excellent resource of waterways will play a vital role in the development of our potential. The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway is the key to unlocking this treasure house of vast economic growth for it will join our waterways and the great Port of Mobile with the expanding inland waterway network of mid-America.

Advocates of the waterway saw it as an economic cornucopia and through their actions, kept the region primed for economic development. Mississippi Governor John Bell Williams remarked, "The Tennessee-Tombigbee is an ambitious project which is certainly vital to the continuation of the economic progress of Mississippi. Our efforts, those in the past and those to come, will be well rewarded when this project is completed. It will mark the beginning of a new era.”¹⁹

The building of the Tenn-Tom’s promise was not isolated to the region’s business and political leaders. Economic analyst Blanton Mizell stated, “Economic development, as shown in this project, has no political boundaries. Cooperation by the federal government, the states and local communities is necessary... You have shown that together all units of government can work for the benefit of all.” He called for all levels of government—local, state, and national—to cooperate for the benefit of everyone.

¹⁹ John B. Boles, *The South Through Time: A History of an American Region*, Third Edition, Vol. II (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004) p. 420; and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile District, “The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Story,” p. 6.

Mizell continued, “It goes without saying that this project will have a dramatic effect on the economic and population growth of a large part of the United States. This project will create new opportunities for a richer and more fulfilling life in this area, and its benefits will be felt worldwide.” Hubris of this sort resounded throughout Tenn-Tom rhetoric, but paid little heed to the mounting expectations such promises were building. Mizell finished, “The effect of this project includes most of the important ingredients for the economic viability and independence of our Nation. Transportation, industrial growth, and employment will all benefit.” While constructing the language of their promise, waterway advocates linked the image of prosperity to those both inside and outside the project’s area.²⁰

During the 1950s, Southern states recognized the need of a governing body in charge of spurring Tenn-Tom funding, construction, and economic development. In 1958, the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority (TTWDA) was established. This filled the waterway’s need for a local independent group operating within the area of its construction. The TTWDA was a “Congressionally-sanctioned multi-state compact.” Composed of the governors and five appointees from each of its five member states, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Florida, it looked to avoid the uncertainties of gaining private financing from Congress. Instead, it received its funds from the five member states. Don Waldon, Deputy Administrator of the TTWDA in 1985 explained its agenda, “The Authority had an advantage in that we had

²⁰ “Blanton, Mizell Cite Tenn-Tom As ‘Economic Turning Point,’” *Tenn-Tom Topics: Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority*, Vol. 1 No. 3, November, 1975. p. 1

only one mission and that was to get the waterway built. State agencies had the same interest in the waterway, but they had other interests to occupy their time.”²¹

The TTWDA was largely a promotional organization that backed the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ efforts on the waterway. While privately financed groups have historically created organizations to gather local support for such projects, the level of success the Development Authority experienced was remarkable. The Development Authority worked “closely with the state and local chambers of commerce.” They wanted to ensure that local businesses did not compete with one another. They balanced the responsibilities of the states and local communities of the compact. Waldon explained, “We want to look at it more from a regional perspective than a state.” Their in lay the TTWDA’s uniqueness, as a multiple state organization with Congressional sanctioning; it combined the political agenda of five states under the locus of federal authority. Waldon continued,

Not to toot our own horn, but the members of Congress will tell you, had it not been for the Authority – which is a unique organization, its one of a kind – bringing together these five states, the five governors, and you might say, the entire Congressional delegations of those five state in a unified effort toward securing the completion of this waterway – I’m not saying it would never been built, but it certainly made it easier.

Clearly, TTWDA’s advantages went beyond just its private funding.²²

With TTWDA in full operation, during the 1960s and 1970s the next line of support for the waterway lay within the local populations of the construction area. Public

²¹ Stine, *Mixing the Waters*, p. 22; and George Hazard, “Long Time Project Supporter Retires,” Special Edition of the *Commercial Dispatch* (Columbus, MS), May 24, 1985, sec. History, p. 1B

²² Ibid

relations became an important tool for the Development Authority and a means of keeping local interest active. They used various media outlets to help stimulate and maintain enthusiasm for the waterway throughout all levels of society. In promotional literature, the TTWDA popularized the Tenn-Tom as the “best means to revitalize an impoverished area.” By keeping the home fires burning, the TTWDA built upon the waterway’s promise and supplied its Congressional representatives with all the political clout they needed for lobbying for national support of the waterway. As southern politicians supported funding for the waterway within Congress, they were rewarded with votes at home. At the same time, by painting the promise of the waterway in such a positive light the Development Authority members kept the local populace on its side and away from the influences of outsiders. Under management from the TTWDA and southern political figures, the people of Mississippi and other neighboring states embraced the waterway with open arms. Blinded by the proposed benefits of the waterway’s construction, and following the lead of the TTWDA, participants eagerly packed courtrooms in support of the waterway. Don Waldon summed up the importance of local support to the Tenn-Tom, “The key word in ‘regional grass roots’ is *regional*.” From their positions as native sons, the southern politicians were able to secure local support in favor of the project with its promise of economic development.²³

Supporters of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway used a language reminiscent of New South boosters. These men and women felt the days of the South lagging behind

²³ Stine, *Mixing the Waters*, p. 23-28; and George Hazard, “Long Time Project Supporter Retires,” p. 1B.

the economic potentials of the rest of the nation were at an end in the 1970s as in the early twentieth century. A strong coalition of southern politicians, business leaders, and regional developers, added to an enthusiastic populace embracing the demagoguery of its leaders seemed to ensure the waterway's construction. The fulfillment of these promises of economic salvation seemed close-at-hand. However, before the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers could break ground on the project, opposition rose to halt construction. This opposition came forth with ominous promises of its own.²⁴

Opposition to the project came from environmentalists and the railroad industry. First, a growing group conscious of the effects human growth and technology were having on the environment, questioned the many negative environmental impacts on native wildlife that would occur during construction and the unknown consequences of combining the waters of two rivers separated for thousands of years. Additional concerns centered on the construction requirements of the waterway itself. How would the twenty-seven mile Divide Cut affect local aquifers and water levels? What impact would the sinking of hundreds of thousands of acres of land have on local wildlife populations? Despite numerous studies, no one could accurately predict the effects of the waterway on local fish and wildlife, other than to know that it would undoubtedly change the land forever. New social and political thought spurred people to begin questioning the economic benefits of the Tenn-Tom in light of its impending damage to and destruction of "intangible assets" of the environment.

²⁴ See James C. Cob, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1990*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003); and *The Southern State of Mind*, ed. Jan Norby Gretlund (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999).

During the 1960s, while a national environmental movement formed in other regions of the country, there was little evidence of the movement in the South. Environmentalists from national groups had trouble establishing a “grass roots” movement within the local populace. With the enactment of the National Environmental Act of 1969 (NEPA), a new political change occurred, one that questioned the traditional relationship between technology and nature. The growing national environmental concern embodied by environmental groups like the Environmental Defense Fund, the Audubon Society and many others, began scrutinizing the ecological consequences of American waterways and looked to spark activism within the Tenn-Tom region, but was largely unsuccessful. The local people of the territory repeatedly resisted the attempts of outsiders to influence the appeal of the waterway, no matter the validity of their environmental arguments and left most environmental opposition as coming from outside the Tenn-Tom region.²⁵

During the 1970s in an effort to spark criticism of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, local and national environmental groups began to idealize the naturalness of the Tombigbee River. A coalition of thirteen conservation organizations editorialized the Tenn-Tom project as follows:

As draining on the American taxpayer as the project is, it is even more of a drain on the rural counties through which it passes. These areas need health and educational facilities but are being taxed for a project that is the

²⁵ Stine, *Mixing the Waters*, p. 130-148; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile District, “First Supplemental Environmental Report Continuing Environmental Studies on the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, Alabama and Mississippi Overall Study,” (Mobile, AL: U.S. Army Engineers District, Mobile District), Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University: 22-30; and Stine, *Mixing the Waters*, p. 3, 7.

equivalent of “running a ditch through their land.” The Upper Tombigbee River is the largest unimpounded and unchannelized river left in the Mobile Basin. Turning the river into a canal will eliminate one of the richest riverine faunas in North America where 115 species of fish and 52 species of mussels can be found...the Tennessee and Tombigbee ecosystems will be mixed, with unknown consequences.²⁶

Environmentalist objections included the project’s lack of flood control and hydroelectric power production, the alarming effects of lowering water tables for local populations, proper soil disposal problems, loss of cultural and archeological sites, and the loss of the “largest remaining unimpounded, unchannelized river in the Mobile Basin.” Dredge material was one of the largest environmental concerns due to its acidity, infertility, and prodigious amount. As the largest public works projected ever attempted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Tenn-Toms sheer size and the large volume of required excavated material was unparalleled in U.S. history. Environmentalists promised that wherever the material was disposed, ecosystem degradation would follow. Exacerbating the problem of disposal location was the concern of erosion and its subsequent damage to water quality as impurities seeped into local wells and aquifers. Another anxiety was the oxbow lakes, which were created during the straightening of the twisted course of the River section. By digging trenches through bends in the river, the Corps created lakes out of old parts of the river no longer necessary for transportation.

²⁶ *Disasters in Water Development II: A Description of Army Corps of Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation Projects Which Will Destroy Irreplaceable Natural and Cultural Resources Along Some of America’s Finest Rivers and Valleys*, a special report by thirteen major national conservation organizations, 1977, Special Collections, George E. Allen Library, Booneville, Mississippi: 7.

While their creation established a haven for wetland wildlife, if left unmonitored they could seal up and dry out, creating the loss of more wildlife habitats.²⁷

Despite the environmental arguments against the waterway, the Corps saw the Tenn-Tom as a means of “enhancing” the land, not degrading it. Again, the Corps and supporters of the project constructed a careful promise of a land that would be altered to the benefit to both man and nature, a change environmentalists did not want. In 1976, a local newspaper editorialized the Corps’s proposed land changes: “The basins for thousands of acres of recreational waters will change the area’s landscape in the near future. Today’s scarcity of large bodies of water for fishing and boating, as well as the lack of campsites and hiking trails is scheduled to vanish under the touch of the waterway.” The Corps promised that construction of the Tenn-Tom would follow the mandates of NEPA and be built as “environmentally friendly” as possible. Even though the environmental arguments against the waterway gave environmentalists plenty of ammunition to fight the Tenn-Tom, the outpouring of enthusiasm by the local people stymied their repeated attempts to rally the common people to their causes. In another article the same newspaper stated, “Thousands of Americans are eagerly anticipating the completion of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway because of its staggering potential for industrial development. But it will also open up a wealth of recreational opportunities that could in the long run, rival industrial expansion in benefits for the public. The waterway will create 40,000 acres of lakes and five major reservoirs in an area

²⁷ Stine, *Mixing the Waters*, p. 37-43; and Ed Woodward, “The Waterway: What Does It Really Mean?” Part IV, The Environmentalists Objections, an Unpublished Manuscript, Special Collections, George E. Allen Library, Booneville, MS.

landlocked and starved for water-related recreation.” Regional developers and the Corps used the recreational benefits of the Tenn-Tom as a bonus to the economic gains of the project and as a means of canceling environmental arguments. In the end the Corps’ attempts to live up to the mandates failed to appease the Environmental Defense Fund and local environmentalists, who took the waterway to court twice, but ultimately decided to challenge not only the waterway’s dangers to the environment, but questionable economic benefits as well.²⁸

Most notable among those who questioned the motives of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Tenn-Tom’s economics was Pennsylvania State University Professor Joseph L. Carroll. In an article published in Transportation Journal, Carroll, who was concerned about government misspending, questioned whether Congress and the public should blindly trust the claims put forth by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the primary contractor for the waterway. He felt that the Corps falsely inflated the economic gains of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway proposal in order to ensure its construction. In a time of national deficit and hardship, the Corps, like many private businesses, looked at its own funding needs instead of what some economists considered toward sound economic judgment. Acting on its own volition, the Corps made several changes to the waterway’s proposed and accepted waterway layout of 1971, breaking one of the guidelines set forth by the NEPA. Carroll argued that these new plans should call for new economic and environmental evaluations. He rejected the Corps’ claims that the

²⁸ “Waterway to Increase Energy Services,” *Banner Independent* (Booneville, MS), February 12, 1976, p. 3; and “Tenn-Tom: Linking Up Our Nation,” *Banner Independent* (Booneville, MS), February 26, 1976, p. 12A.

1976 A.T. Kearny Management Consultants' economic study remained valid in spite of inflation, skyrocketing construction costs, and significant structural changes to the waterway. In addition, the Corps felt that changes in design from a "Perched canal" to a "Chain of lakes" and the additional flooding of 5,000 acres and water logging of 50,000 more were within its authority and should not require an additional Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). In the upcoming court battles over the waterway, critics and proponents alike used economic and environmental concerns in their arguments.²⁹

A traditional narrative of environmental history tells how the modern man of the twentieth century developed the American countryside with an industrious nature unaware of its detrimental influences on the land. By the 1970s, the strive toward progress no longer experienced the levels of autonomy of previous years. As the environmental movement grew throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the expertise of science no longer trumped environmental considerations in the nation's capital. Public awareness now held Washington accountable for the ramifications of environmental destructions inherent in countless public works projects. The ebb and flow of these two contesting currents created battlefields that pitted the hindering plight of the environment against the invasive path of progress. Environmentalists sought aid from many sources and in some cases joined forces with the economic rivals of public works projects in response to fighting financially strong opposition. This was just the

²⁹ Joseph L. Carroll, "Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Revisited," Transportation Journal, Volume 22, Issue 2, (Winter 1982): 5, 6-8; and Joseph L. Carroll and Rao Srikanth, "Economics of Public Investment in Inland Navigation: Unanswered Questions," Transportation Journal, Volume 17, Issue 3, (Spring 1978): p. 38.

case when the Tenn-Tom's economic and environmental promises clashed in two momentous court battles in the 1970s and 80s.

Before the passing of the NEPA in 1969, most of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' activities remained hidden to the public eye. In 1964, Project Plowshare, an alternative proposal projected by the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission of excavating a canal through the Divide section by simultaneously detonating a series of buried nuclear explosives was just one example of a potentially damaging environmental procedure proposed during the waterway's construction. Fortunately, the restudy of the detrimental effects of atomics showed them to be so inconsistent as to be "useless as a deciding factor on whether to complete the waterway." Yet, environmental questioning of the Corps tactics in this and in other cases during the 1960s began a long series of fights in courts on both the state and federal levels.³⁰

Before and during the long planning and development phase of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers experienced a level of freedom unprecedented in a public works project history. Congress's lack of oversight and scrutiny suggested that there was a "special" relationship between it and the Corps, one in which Congress let the Corps operate independently and without a watchdog. William H. Stewart believed in such a relationship and suggested that there was some reluctance for congressional committees to question the results of Corps's studies, often taking their

³⁰ "Tenn-Tom Topics," (a pamphlet by the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority), June 1964, Vol. 2, John C. Stennis Collection: Series 46, Box 87, Folder Tenn.-Tombigbee Waterway Dev. Authority, Congressional and Political Records, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University: p. 1; Stine, *Mixing the Waters*, p. 54-56; and Scott Kirsch, *Proving Grounds: Project Plowshare and the Unrealized Dream of Nuclear Earthmoving* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 163-167.

word at face value. Moreover, both the Corps and members of Congress adopted an attitude that the Corps was part of the executive branch and was responsible to Congress, but only through the executive branch. This marked them as “hands off” to other organizations and branches of the government. Stewart argued that the Corps appeared to reside in a state of “limbo,” where it was an obvious component of the executive branch, yet possessing a unique association, unlike that of any other executive agency. Before the battles over the Tenn-Tom, Congress was content to accept the Corps’s promise that its studies and findings were valid. A. T. Kearny Consultants seemingly validated this belief in their 1976 restudy of the economic impact of the waterway. With the implantation of NEPA this situation was about to change. In 1970, NEPA unbarred the once locked doors of federal works projects. Before this legislation, agencies like the Corps enjoyed the freedom to design and construct projects to their own standards. NEPA mandated the inclusion of studies of environmental importance in all federal projects. This not only made environmental issues important, it allowed individuals access to information and a forum to express their concerns on a public record, the Council on Environmental Quality. The authorization of NEPA gave environmentalists and the railroad industry the legal means needed for obtaining the Corps’ information.³¹

Joining the environmentalists’ efforts to stop the waterway, but for an entirely different reason, was the railroad industry. Stine remarked, “Federal navigation projects,

³¹ For an example of a more detail look and the special relationship the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers enjoyed in Congress see William H. Stewart, *The Tennessee Tombigbee Waterway: a Case Study in the Politics of Water Transportation*, (Birmingham, Alabama: Commercial Printing Press, 1971), p. 175; Walter A. Rosenbaum, “The Bureacracy and Environmental Policy,” in James P. Lester (ed.) *Environmental Politics and Policy: Theories and Evidence* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989) p. 212-237; Carroll, p. 6; and Stine, *Mixing the Waters*, p. 8, 54-56.

no matter how economically and technically feasible they may appear to disinterested observers, have natural critics, and the most vocal of these prior to the environmental movement of the late 1960s and 1970s were the railroads.” The railroad industry was a well-established mode of transportation within the South. Since the start of the twentieth century, the South outpaced the rest of the nation in railroad construction, bringing it on par with other parts of the nation. The region’s relationship with railroads spurred much of its economic growth. As such, the railroad industry remained a private industry concerned with competition at any level, and competition from a federally funded large-scale water transportation corridor like the Tenn-Tom agitated them tremendously.³²

In order to halt the construction of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, railroad companies allied themselves with environmentalists. While environmentalism was a concern to the Tenn-Tom because it tried to stop the economic promise of the project, to the rival economic interests of the railroads, environmentalism became a useful ally. The Association of American Railroads and the Louisville & Nashville Railroad had the financial backing that the fledgling environmental movement lacked and needed in the upcoming battles. The environmentalists realized that in order to receive the funding required to fight the combined might of the Tenn-Tom supporters, they would have to lie in bed with others. The Louisville & Nashville Railroad (L&N) in particular was interested in stopping the waterway because its railroad paralleled the proposed route of the waterway. The Association of American Railroads was also quick to oppose any subsidized waterway construction, claiming that the railroad industry never enjoyed such

³² Stine, *Mixing the Waters*, p. 15; and Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 9, 12.

benefits from the government. Fearing competition and a drop in income in a historically closed regional market, the railroads wanted to keep their one horse race to themselves, but to local people and towns within the South the days of benefiting from a railroad's presence had long passed. Now, railroads served mainly as a means of letting commerce flow past rural towns with little benefits to their economies, a fate some economists feared the Tenn-Tom would share without proper leadership. Without industries geared toward utilizing railroads or in the case of the Tenn-Tom, a waterway, for transportation, the people of the region would not benefit from the waterway's mere presence. Local communities needed to link new industries to a new mode of transportation.³³

The strange bedfellows of the environmentalists and the railroads, rallied around the fledgling power of NEPA in order to wage their fights. NEPA constructed a procedural system to ensure that all federal agencies considered the values of environmental preservations in their actions and made federal agencies systematically assess the impacts their proposed actions would have on the environment. Then agencies needed to adopt techniques that proposed alternative, less damaging ways of accomplishing their missions.³⁴

Together under NEPA, the environmentalists and the railroads took the waterway to court in two epic battles, but throughout the long years of litigation, Tenn-Tom supporters kept one image of the waterway alive and that was a picture of its economic

³³ Stine, *Mixing the Waters*, p. 21-22, 130-148.

³⁴ For more literature on the impact of NEPA see: Fredrick R. Anderson, *NEPA in the Courts: A Legal Analysis of the National Environmental Policy Act* (Baltimore, MA: D.C. Heath, 1976); Richard A. Liroff, *A National Policy for the Environment: NEPA and Its Aftermath* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976; and Stine, *Mixing the Waters*, p. 90-91, 103, 118.

promise. No matter the amount of criticism the waterway faced from environmentalists, railroads, national media, and Congress, the people of the Tenn-Tom region clung tenaciously to their leaders' guarantees of the project's benefits. Initiated in 1971, the first court case challenged the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) prepared by the Corps in agreement with NEPA mandates. Filed by the Environmentalist Defense Fund (EDF), the Committee for Leaving the Environment of America Natural (CLEAN) and Jim Williams a CLEAN organizer and assistant professor of biology at Mississippi University for Women in Columbus, Mississippi, the plaintiffs argued that the Corps had made a significant number of changes to its design without following proper NEPA legislation. The plaintiffs argued that these changes would ruin twenty-four thousand acres of forest and farmland, turn the Tombigbee River into a series of stagnant lakes, and destroy archeological and historical sites throughout the region. The Corps countered that the changes adopted were cost-cutting measures and were well within its rights and did not necessarily require a supplemental EIS. However, with the enactment of NEPA the Corps' days of freedom to decide for themselves which tactics they would employ during construction without facing outside scrutiny were over. Now they had a higher authority to answer to and they had to adjust to a new world, one where environmental considerations, not cost cutting measures took precedence.³⁵

Recognizing the character and difficulties they may face in the upcoming court battle, Southern politicians and the TTWDA worried about losing the waterway's

³⁵ For more literature on the impact of NEPA see: Fredrick R. Anderson, *NEPA in the Courts: A Legal Analysis of the National Environmental Policy Act* (Baltimore, MA: D.C. Heath, 1976); Richard A. Liroff, *A National Policy for the Environment: NEPA and Its Aftermath* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976); and Stine, *Mixing the Waters*, 90-91, 103, 118.

promise, lobbied to have the case heard in Aberdeen, Mississippi, close to the headquarters of the TTWDA and smack dab in the middle of the waterway's strongest support base. Proponents of the waterway feared that a case heard in Washington would give an edge to the growing national environmental movement, who had a strong presence in the nation's capital, but not in Mississippi. By moving the court case to the South, the TTWDA could flood the courtrooms with enthusiastic supporters of the Tenn-Tom project. An early ruling by the District Court found the Corps to be in compliance with NEPA standards, but in December of 1971, the 5th Court of Appeals issued an injunction that kept construction on the middle section of the waterway delayed for eighteen months. Federal District Judge, John Lewis Smith Jr., the man who issued the injunction stopping waterway construction, felt that the EDF had made a "substantial showing that the Army Corps of Engineers hadn't fully complied with environmental and fish and wildlife laws." This provoked a negative response from many of the waterway's supporters who feared delays and stoppages would spell disaster for their carefully constructed promise of economic prosperity. In response to the ruling by the 5th Court of Appeals, Mississippi Senator James D. Eastland labeled the injunction as "a case of blatant judicial tyranny." He continued, "It is deplorable that a Federal judge has, with one stroke of a pen, thrown a roadblock in the path of this great and visionary project." Echoing the Senators statements were Alabama Representative Jack Edwards, who claimed, "nothing, in my estimation, could create a more serene and beneficial effect on the environment" than the Corps' efforts on the Tenn-Tom and felt that the waterway's

promise was “being detoured from the road of progress by one judge and a handful of unbending ecologists.”³⁶

The problem Keady and other judges faced when making rulings on Tenn-Tom was that there was no precedent established by NEPA. As a newly created legislation, these new judgments would set the bar for NEPA standards, a bar that all future court cases would follow. The problem judges faced in making their rulings was that no one knew how powerful NEPA was meant to be, to what extent its policies could force change, and how sharp its teeth should be. After months of deliberating, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers finally received the ruling they were looking for and continued digging the waterway. Attacks by environmentalist, railroads, and economic critics threatened the construction of the waterway, without which there could be no promise.³⁷

Opposition to the waterway quickly regrouped. In November 1976, a second lawsuit filed by a coalition of the L&N Railroad and the EDF of New York again moved to stop the construction of the waterway. This time, legal action declared that the Corps had not only violated NEPA mandates with alterations to its design and construction, but also challenged the economic feasibility of the project by addressing the inflating

³⁶ “First Supplemental Environmental Report Continuing Environmental Studies on the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, Alabama and Mississippi Overall Study,” U.S. Army Engineers District, Mobile; Jeffrey K. Stine, “Environmental Politics in the American South: The Fight over the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway,” *Environmental History Review*, 15:1 (Spring 1991): 1-24; Sharon Stallworth, “Legal Hassles Constant Shadow: Environmental Concerns Not the Only Cause for Alarm on the Tenn-Tom Waterway,” Special Edition of the *Commercial Dispatch* (Columbus, MS), May 24, 1985, sec. History, p. 6A -7A; “Judge Stops Tombigbee Work,” *News Free Press* (Chattanooga, TN), September 21, 1971; and “Conference Report on H.R. 10090, Public Works—AEC Appropriations,” *Congressional Record—House*, 117 (September 22, 1971): 32722.

³⁷ Stallworth, “Legal Hassles Constant Shadow: Environmental Concerns Not the Only Cause for Alarm on the Tenn-Tom Waterway,” p. 6A -7A; and Stine, “Environmental Politics in the American South: The Fight over the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway:” 1-24

construction costs and questionable cost/benefit ratio. This time the lawsuit led the 5th Court of Appeals to rule on July 12, 1981 that “the plaintiffs have established that the Corps has blatantly violated the NEPA and its own regulations by refusing to prepare a supplemental EIS on the major changes since the 1971 EIS.” The Court went on to say that pending completion of a final impact study, the Corps “cannot cause waters from the Tennessee River to mix with the water of the Tombigbee River.”³⁸

Again, the Corps was caught making new design changes to the waterway’s layout without conducting additional impact statements. The Corps faced the difficult challenge of constructing a cost efficient waterway, but one that also took proper environmental precautions. During construction, the Corps encountered numerous obstacles that required engineering expertise and ingenuity to overcome, but did not always dawn on the Corps to conduct environmental investigations into their new techniques. Through the process of building the Tenn-Tom, the Corps found that it had to adapt not only new techniques of construction, but also a new way of thinking about the way they affected the environment. Litigation lasted for seven years, but ultimately the courts ruled in favor of the Corps after it produced a final impact statement.³⁹

While the two court cases kept the Tenn-Tom in litigation for nine of its first twelve years, it did not halt its construction, or stop its promise. Despite their failures, the environmentalist did succeed in some ways. In 1985, Nathaniel D. McClure IV wrote:

³⁸ Stine, “Environmental Politics in the American South: The Fight over the Tennessee-Tombigbee Watway:”: 1-24.

³⁹ Stallworth, “Legal Hassles Constant Shadow,” p. 6A -7A.

The constant legal scrutiny made the Corps acutely aware of the need to adhere to the spirit and intent of NEPA and other environmental statutes. The opponents were constantly searching for evidence of error, omission, or failure to comply with the statutes. Attorneys for the plaintiffs consistently submitted letters to the Corps, commenting on the waterway and alleging various deficiencies. It can be argued that all of the environmental amenities incorporated into the Tenn-Tom would have transpired even without the litigation, but realistically the reinforcement afforded by these legal attacks probably had their influence.⁴⁰

After losing two court battles, the environmentalist and railroads conceded defeat. This prompted TTWDA Administrator, Glover Wilkins to respond, “The front reasons for the opposition were economic issues. But, those weren’t *the issue – the issue* was competition. The Louisville and Nashville was concerned about who was going to have coal from Appalachia to the eastern tidewaters.”⁴¹ This statement seemed to dismiss the concerns of the environmentalists, but Wilkins was quick to point out the validity of their arguments. He acknowledged their efforts by saying, “Now there was some sincere environmental concern, and a lot of national environmental societies expressed their concern. I think it was good they did because their case was heard. As a result, we wound up with a waterway that is about as environmentally palatable as could be possible.”⁴²

The significance the two court cases against the Tenn-Tom were significant in influencing its promise. Despite its opposition which threatened the promise of

⁴⁰ Stallworth, “Legal Hassles Constant Shadow,” p. 6A; Sharon Stallworth, “Tenn-Tom Waterway Authority Promotes Development: Waldon Heads Canal’s Best Friend, Defender,” Special Edition of the *Commercial Dispatch* (Columbus, MS), May 24, 1985, sec. History, p. 2A; and Nathaniel D. McClure IV, “A major project in the age of the environment: out of controversy, complexity, and challenge,” *Environmental Geology* vol. 7 issue 1, 1985: 18.

⁴¹ George Hazard, “Long Time Project Supporter Retires,” p. 1B.

⁴² Stallworth, “Legal Hassles Constant Shadow,” p. 6A.

economics by trying to halt the waterway, they guaranteed that environmental protection would be a lasting thing, a legacy shared in all future public works projects. Throughout the years of planning and construction of the Tenn-Tom project, the Corps and waterway supporters viewed the promise of the waterway and its subsequent changes to the landscape of Mississippi and Alabama as environmental “enhancement,” not degradation or destruction. The Corps felt that they had made proper concessions dictated by NEPA and enacted the proper environmental considerations on all levels of the project, while at the same time remaining true to the engineering demands of their trade. At the start of construction in 1970 Colonel R.P. Tabb ordered the Corps to adopt tactics where the “greatest effort should be spent where we have the greatest chance to make project adjustments to better harmonize with the environment. Study in detail where the rock hits the water but don’t try to chase every ripple to the shore and beyond.” The Corps tackled construction of the waterway with their engineering genius, but with little knowledge of environmental concerns. When faced with the mandates of NEPA and forced to make appropriate changes, they brought in a conglomeration of outside experts. They looked for these biologists, scientists, and archeologists to come up with the best strategies to live up to NEPA’s environmental standards. While environmentalists may have lost the fight to stop the waterway’s construction, they did ensure countless other considerations and alterations to lessen its impact on the environment.⁴³

⁴³ Col. R. P. Tabb too Mobile District Engineer (2nd Endorsement, Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Environmental Impact Study), June 19, 1970 (Technical Studies Workplan TTW folder, file 1501-07, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile District Headquarters, Mobile, AL.

With victory assured in the court battles, the Corps diligently worked around the clock to push the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway project past the point of no return. In other words, they attempted to achieve a level of construction on the project in which it would not be feasible to halt, because it would take more money to stop the construction process than to continue with it. While competition from environmentalism and the railroad industry succeeded in delaying the project in two court battles, the enduring economic promise carried it through in the end. With the construction of the waterway confirmed by the court decisions, waterway boosters turned their concerns to new ways of ensuring its promise.

From 1983-1985, during the last years of the waterway's construction, boosters began altering their language around the waterway's promise. Economic analysts concerned about local efforts in utilizing the waterway added their voices to the growing chorus. They warned that despite the assured completion of the project, the people of the Tenn-Tom region needed to prepare for another hard-fought battle, this one concentrating on regional economic development. Predictions about this new fight were often warnings. In order to understand the waterway's effect on the local economies, regional developers needed to step-up their efforts in preparing sites and courting new industries into the area. The result was a new discourse developed around issues pertaining to the waterway not only during the years of its construction, but also in the forthcoming years following its completion. Throughout this new discourse one nagging theme haunted the efforts of developers and that was how to live up to their promise.

As described earlier, the congressional leaders of Mississippi concentrated their efforts mainly on the primary task of earning federal funding for the construction of the waterway in order to guarantee the waterway's promise of more jobs, industry, and even environmental protection. In their eyes, these developments would remain largely a local concern best handled at the state level. This did not mean that they abandoned local considerations altogether. Many politicians experienced apprehension over the economic development of their home states. Mississippi Senator Eastland supplied, "Two of the counties in my district, Kemper and Noxubee, who are economically depressed, lacking sufficient sources of income, are desperately in need of the economic shot in the arm." The endeavor to truly profit from the Tenn-Tom's construction was not going to be an easy task for anyone. The earlier assurances of the waterway's economic benefits glossed over the fact that to ensure development the local communities would have to exhibit patience and make a concerted effort to market themselves to these new industries. In recognition of the fact that the Tenn-Tom's industrial development would remain a continuous struggle in the development of Mississippi, Senator Stennis foretold, "It's going to be a real challenge to participate in and enjoy the fruits of that growth."⁴⁴

In the later years of the waterway's construction, some experts began doubting the ability of Mississippi's leaders to enact the changes necessary to ensure native benefits from the waterway before its completion. Robert McArthur, a political science professor at the University of Mississippi argued, "The difficulty Mississippi has is we have no strong coordinating element between the state and local levels." His doubt fixated on the

⁴⁴ *Tenn-Tom Topics: Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority*, Vol. 1 No. 3, November, 1975: 3; and Leigh Hogan, Special to *The Clarion Ledger*, p. 1.

fact economic growth along the canal depended on how the state government coordinated its developmental efforts. McArthur continued, “What you need is some way in which the state can set priorities for development and the local developers can follow those priorities if they want state and federal assistance.” In a state historically reluctant to follow the suggestions of outsiders, rural Mississippians in the impacted Northeastern sector of the state looked toward supervision from local sources. To them, it remained imperative that these supervisors were native sons and daughters, insiders who held the same conservative goals and expectations as the local populace.⁴⁵

Arguing against the economic arrogance accompanying the Tenn-Tom, McArthur warned that the people of the Tombigbee Valley should not “feel the opening of the waterway will make us like the Ruhr Valley in Germany.” He worried that many believed that Northeast Mississippi would become “an industrial heartland instantly.” After many long years of listening to the proposed benefits of the waterway, Mississippians looked for an instant gratification in reward for their steadfast support of the project. The picturesque vision of the Tenn-Tom’s economic benefits painted by the politicians had snowballed into mountainous expectations within the hearts and minds of Mississippians. McArthur tried to caution them, “Just because we’ve got the waterway doesn’t mean we’ll get all the industries we want.” Adopting the warnings of Stennis, he counseled, “It’ll be longer than many people think it will be, but it will come if we get all our horses together.” The nagging question remained. Would the leaders and the people

⁴⁵ Hayes Johnson, “Waterway to open Monday after 13 Years of Hard Work,” *The Clarion Ledger* (Columbus, MS), January 13, 1985, p. 16A.

of Mississippi be able to harness their horses into a working strategy that would profit by the waterway's construction?⁴⁶

Agreeing with McArthur's view, Mississippi Governor Bill Allain expressed a similar sentiment that the state needed "some board or district, or overall umbrella operation to bring it all together." From the beginning, Allain realized the delicate ground that he was treading on with the people and business leaders of Mississippi. "I want you to know up front that we are here to assist you and cooperate with you and act as a coordinator for *your* local efforts," was the sentiment he delivered to a crowd gathered at Mississippi University for Women in September of 1984. He suggested that he was not there to deliver "great words of wisdom from Jackson," but rather to offer suggestions. In the face of regional interests, Allain was quick to point out that the state government was "not here to tell you [the local leaders] how you *must* develop, how you *should* develop," but rather offer the use of a "repository of information about development along the Tenn-Tom." By adopting a stance of passive suggestion, rather than an aggressive leadership role, Allain looked to circumvent an inherent reluctance to act that was prevalent in local business interests in a regionally divided state. Business leaders were having a hard time convincing local people that new efforts were needed in order for local economies to gain the benefits of the Tenn-Tom developers' promise.⁴⁷

As a supporter of the waterway, Governor Allain continued the pledge of its promise, "The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway will put Mississippi in front of other

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Hayes Johnson, "Tenn-Tom will speed industrial development, Allain says," *Clarion-Ledger* (Columbus, MS), September 28, 1984.

states vying in the battle for industrial development and will improve the state's economy." He continued, "It's one of the greatest opportunities Mississippi has ever had... We can get ahead of Tennessee and Alabama in getting industries." Yet, it seemed a lingering doubt darkened his thoughts. Despite his bold statements on the importance of the project, Governor Allain feared the Tenn-Tom development would come to resemble the western, undeveloped side of the state. Allain's concern dated back to the days of his youth. Looking back upon the days of his childhood in Natchez, a city located on the banks of the Mississippi River, the governor remembered the fact that the "state's greatest natural resource" remained a "virtually untapped" theatre. Allain recalled, "There's no development of the Mississippi side of that river. We used to go down there and wave at the boats as they came by." He warned, "That's all we're going to be doing [in northeast Mississippi] unless we have enthusiasm in developing the Tenn-Tom." It seemed that the Mississippi and other state were indeed lacking a coordinating body charged with the development of the Tenn-Tom's promise.⁴⁸

Both McArthur and Allain seemed to forget one institution that had worked for the waterway on the local level, a regional organization responsible for grass root efforts since the 1950s, the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority. The TTWDA, which aggressively lobbied Washington during the waterway's construction, did not dissolve upon certainty of the waterway's completion. Deputy Director of the TTWDA, Don Waldon, admitted to a growing apprehension about the development of Mississippi along the Tenn-Tom. He supplied, "at first there was some concern that the

⁴⁸ Ibid.

state would dictate the development of the waterway.” However, with Allain’s and other’s assurances that the state government would take a passive role in the process, Waldon gathered the local mayors and business leaders into a combined sphere of regional influence under the leadership of the TTWDA. Coordinating their efforts with local communities, the TTWDA fought for economic gains with the same tenacity they had shown in the court battles and Congressional funding debates opposing the waterway’s construction. Together the TTWDA and local business leaders drafted what they thought were the best strategies for development along the waterway and continued grooming the people of Mississippi into associating the Tenn-Tom with the salvation of their economic future.⁴⁹

During the construction years of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway one theme dominated the rhetoric of politicians, regional developers, local business leaders, the railroad industry and even the environmentalists and that was the promise of the waterway. To some the promise meant salvation from an economic moroseness that had plagued the region since its decline after the Civil War. To others, the waterway meant the promise of changes to and the possible destruction of natural wildlife habitats for the sake of mediocre and unjustifiable economic gains. In 1983, during his final ruling dismissing the second lawsuit targeting the waterway, Judge William C. Keady stated:

We must leave to the verdict of history, which may probably not represent an informed judgment until the next century, whether the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway will prove to be the great boon and national treasure which its supporters in and out of Congress, have both vigorously and consistently claimed, or whether as predicted by its foes, it will be a

⁴⁹ George Hazard, “Long Time Project Supporter Retires,” p. 1B.

colossal injury to the area's environment brought about by wasteful expenditure of public funds.⁵⁰

In the end, the powerful coalition of southern politicians, highlighting the political strength of the Solid South combined with the financially secure lobbying efforts of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority to outfight the fledgling efforts of environmentalists bolstered by a competitive spirit and the financial backing of the railroad industry. In order to ensure their victory, Tenn-Tom boosters built a gargantuan mountain of expectations in the waterway's promise. They did this because they had to. After decades of striving to achieve a dream of connecting the rivers, developers finally succeeded, but the inflated promise that carried the waterway could easily bury it under the crushing weight of so many hopes and dreams. In the years after its opening, the question remained...which vision of the Tenn-Tom's promise would hold true?

⁵⁰ Reprinted from Nathaniel D. McClure IV, "A major project in the age of the environment: out of controversy, complexity, and challenge," *Environmental geology*, vol. 7, Issue 1, 1985, p. 19.

CHAPTER III

FULFILLING THE PROMISE: LIVING WITH THE ECONOMIC EXPECTATIONS AND EXASPERATIONS OF THE TENNESSEE-TOMBIGBEE WATERWAY

On the morning of January 10, 1985, a bitterly cold wind swept through the Tombigbee Valley, as the tugboat *Eddie Waxler* cast off from Mobile, Alabama to make the maiden voyage on the newly opened Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. On this frigid winter day, hosts of cheerful well-wishers braved the freezing weather to meet and welcome the towboat throughout its journey up the waterway. For many, the completion of the Tenn-Tom warmed their hearts with the glowing promise that a new future had dawned for a region of America where economic opportunity was a bleak reality. Each stop at one of the waterway's ten brand-new locks heralded a new round of optimistic speeches and celebrations from excited greeters.⁵¹

For one group meeting the boat on its multi-day sojourn, more than frosty winds stung their hearts and brought tears to their eyes. As the *Eddie Waxler* passed under a bridge near the northern end of the waterway where U.S. Highway 72 crossed overhead, they sat huddled together for more reason than to just ward off the weather's chill. They all came to see one thing, the culmination of a dream that had cost them so dearly. As the towboat floated under the bridge, a prophetic message

⁵¹ Kathy Nathan, "After 74 years, the riverboats are back!," *The Aberdeen Examiner* (Aberdeen, MS) December 27, 1984.

drifted down from the throng. Dropped from the hands of a member of the group was a hand-written poem on yellow notebook paper, it read:

For the past, the times that I knew as a child
I played, I lived, and I grew
In a land where the waters now flow,
I bid you, "Hello."
For that past is now gone,
As for the future, you now travel on,
Both a sad and happy day.⁵²

The writer of this poem was Treva Jane Belue and like her, the onlookers gathered at the bridge were all natives of Holcut, a small rural village located in the hill country of Northeast Mississippi. More than a decade earlier, during the formative stages of Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway development, Holcut's residents found that they lay in the pathway of the waterway's promised economic future. While the Tenn-Tom comprised 110,000 acres of land from both Alabama and Mississippi, requiring great sacrifices from many of the inhabitants of both states, no one could claim to have sacrificed more to the project than the people of Holcut, who literally gave up their homes, farms, and beloved community to the waters of the project.⁵³

While Holcut was never a large population center or area of regional economic importance, it was a small rural community, indicative of the many small towns dotting the waterway's route. The village center consisted of a single shirt factory, a couple of country stores and several dozen uninspiring houses. A local newspaper writer described

⁵² George Hazard, "First Barges Move Up Waterway," *Commercial Dispatch*, (Columbus, MS), January 16, 1985, sec. A, p. 1; Carolyn B. Patterson, "Bounty or Boondoggle: The Tennessee Tombigbee Waterway," *National Geographic*, (March 1986): 366.

⁵³ Lambert C. Mims, "Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway: Boon or Boondoggle," (Speech delivered before the New Rotary Club, New York City, New York, November 29, 1984.) *Vital Speeches of the Day*, Volume 51, Issue 8: 242.

Holcut as follows, “Home, in these parts, is not six rooms and a two-car garage down the street from the quick stop. It is where your father was born—‘your people,’ as they say, have always been here. They dug the well. They planted the trees. They built the house. You know all the neighbors. They are families—generations of families—like yours. That is what becomes a community. Holcut was a community.”⁵⁴ The people of Holcut were typical rural Southerners, individuals who eked out meager livings in the traditional southern occupations of agriculture, blue-collar jobs, and a limited number of factory jobs. The one trait that marked Holcut’s residents was that they hailed from one of the poorest sections of Mississippi and therefore the entire country. When progress came knocking on their doors in the form of the Army Corps of Engineers and the economic promise of the waterway, the townspeople were asked to give up their land in order to reduce construction costs. Located on the natural ridge separating the two river watersheds, Holcut was at the wrong place at the wrong time. Construction of the Tenn-Tom required the Corps to cut a 39-mile long channel through the hills of Northeast Mississippi. Due to the high cost of large-scale excavations, engineers selected a route that avoided solid rock formations. Instead, they chose a route consisting of an area composed of the softer, silty-sand of the Eutaw Formation. Holcut lay on the shortest route between the two rivers.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Lonnie Wheeler, “The U.S. Bought a Town—It wasn’t for Sale,” *The Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, MS) April 15, 1977, p. 6B.

⁵⁵ Patterson p. 366; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, “Tennessee-Tombigbee Corridor Study: Human Resource Study of Educational and Vocational Needs of Residents in the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Corridor,” September 1983, Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University; The Eutaw formation was created at the end of the Crustacean period when the sea encompassing much of the Southern U.S. receded. The soil deposits left behind by the sea’s

Spurring the region's march toward progress during the 1970s and 1980s was the economic promise of the waterway. The promise was so pervasive within the region that most people held faith that what ever was best for the waterway was best for them. If this meant that individuals like Holcut's residents needed to surrender their town for the promise of a better economic future for both themselves and their neighbors, then so be it. A Corps negotiator for land purchases remarked on the common appeal of the waterway: "Certainly there are some people who don't want to sell their property. As a general rule, it may create some hardships...But I'd say that 90 percent of the time you get favorable reaction from them." Caught within the huge surge of regional optimism limited by a parochial view of the economic promises of the Tenn-Tom, the people of Hocut found little support in any efforts to save their homes. When informed that they had to sell their homes, most of Holcut's residents simply did. In 1977, Lonnie Wheller reported, "They sold—some of them immediately, because they figured they had to." Although many sold their land without much fuss, some tried to fight for their homes. Hocut native, Weldon Claunch defied attempts at purchasing his home saying, "I don't have anything for sell. If I hadn't wanted that spot in the first place, I wouldn't have gotten it. I don't have any property for sell." In another article, Wheeler wrote of other residents losing land to the coming of the waterway. She described how Mr. and Ms. Moore natives of Fulton, Mississippi faced the uncertainties of losing their home and how their reluctance to give it up placed them outside the social norm. Wheeler stated, "And

recession created a formation of sandy material 40 to 100 feet deep. The Corps removed 58 million cubic yards of this formation during the construction of the Divide Cut.

so everybody Mrs. Moore knows is in favor of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway project. She would be, too, she says—if she knew she didn't have to leave her house on the hill. In town, at a store recently, she was asked to sign a petition in support of the waterway. "I had to tell them that I'm just not in favor of signing it. I can't be. It's hard for me to be different. But recently, I've been feeling like I have my rights, too."

Unfortunately, one of the ramifications of federal projects like the Tenn-Tom is that people lose their land and a person's rights often get trampled along with their dreams of keeping their homes.⁵⁶

In the Holcut area, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers purchased 1,500 acres of land. They displaced roughly one hundred people in twenty-eight homes. Most of these individuals were lucky and only had to move "up the road" a ways to new land and homes. Low population density and decades of migration out of the region left former residents with many opportunities for resettlement in neighboring communities. While a few individuals along the waterway's route tried to oppose its construction, the townspeople of Holcut largely recognized the futility of such endeavors. In part, their complacency was a product of familiarity. Losing land to government projects was a common experience to the people of the Tombigbee Valley. They recognized that they traveled down a similar path to their northern neighbors in the Tennessee Valley. Forty years before, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) acquired large tracts of land in the region and those valley residents who resisted

⁵⁶"Tenn-Tom 'takin the old home place many times over,'" [unknown publication and date, probably 1978] Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Vertical Folder 1978, Mitchell Memorial Library, Special Collections, Mississippi State University; "You Can Live Without Land...But Not Without a Hill," *The Clarion Ledger* (Jackson, MS), April 15, 1977, p. 6B.

achieved nothing in the end other than the federal condemnation of their land and eviction by governmental forces. The people of the Tombigbee Valley recognized the fact that when the Corps came, it came with “an offer they can’t refuse.” In Holcut, Archie Burlison, owner the general store confirmed this belief, saying, “It was either take the last offer, or they would put up a condemnation order and I would have to go to court.” The only decision the court would ultimately decide was the price of an individual’s land. Landowners were offered “fair market value” as determined by outside appraisers. Yet, this gave little consideration to person’s individual attachment to the land. Holcut native James Pardue stated, “You can’t put a price on the sentimental value.” For individuals like Pardue, Burlison, Claunch, and the Moores, the only life they knew was living on the same patch of land for most if not all of their lives. They were born there, grew up there, and most planned to die there. It was an enduring belief common to many of the region’s inhabitants, a dream that was coming into conflict with another dream just as old and enduring.⁵⁷

To Holcut’s citizens meeting the waterway on the bridge that day in 1985, the plan of combining the waters of the Tennessee and Tombigbee Rivers was a long time in coming, and was an idea that they had lived with and waited for decades to manifest. J.V. Grimes, an older resident of Holcut, explained, “I had heard talk about the canal ever since I was big enough to hear anything. But I never thought about it taking our home.” Grimes had lived at the same piece of land since 1918, but when the Corps came in 1975, he sold like the rest. Remembering his home, Grimes stated, “I had just got it like we

⁵⁷ Wheeler, “U.S. bought a town,” p. 6B.

wanted it. We had a little orchard and a garden started. We had to leave all that fruit—I'd worked sixteen and a half years. We had the finest orchard around.” Despite the many regrets described, by the time the Corps officials arrived at Holcut's doorstep, most of the area's residents recognized the benefits of going along with the project. The government paid individuals for their land, relocation expenses, and tried to help them find replacement homes. While the fair market price offered by the government was supposed to be enough to replace the homes lost by former residents, some residents learned that it was not enough to replace their older homes. The new homes and land they were purchasing were bought at modern prices. The money they received for their older homes, many of which were passed down by family and kin or paid for years ago, patched together by the same hard labor required to eek a meager living from the land bought considerably less than needed to replace them. The government's shortcomings in making reparations to Holcut's citizenry left many bitter over their loss.⁵⁸

Rovel Pardue remarked about loosing his home, “I didn't like it. I didn't like it worth a damn. They said they would set everyone up just as good as they was. By God, I had to go into debt.” Arnie McAnally after moving to a new house “up the road” from Holcut said, “It's not like livin' down there. I been down there all my life. Yeah, I miss it. But, I ain't got no griping to be done. I sold it to 'em. But it cost me more than I thought to build back up. A lot more. I wouldn't sell now for what I did.” The pain of loosing their homes was doubled by the loss of their limited personal wealth. They felt

⁵⁸ Ibid.

that going into debt to make way for the waterway was the exact opposite of the promise of its economic progress, a burden that they alone were asked to carry.⁵⁹

In 1977, citizens watching the Corps tear down and haul off Holcut's buildings found it a difficult sight and most had trouble recalling the image of waterway's promise of progress as their community died. The heavy earth moving equipment moved in and started reshaping the land gouging a humongous trench through the countryside. With the future of the waterway still in doubt at the time, Arnie McAnally commented on the Corps' efforts around the former site of Holcut saying, "They don't ruint [sic] the country. I don't want to see 'em stop it now." One last vestige of Holcut outlasted many of the others and that was the community's general store. At morning, lunch, and dinner waterway workers stopped at the store to buy drinks and grab a quick bite to eat. While this was a slight boom for one former resident, it was only a temporary one, as the store was eventually torn down like the other buildings. But for several years during the late 1970s, the store served as a meeting place for some of its former inhabitants after they sold their land. These individuals hung around the store socializing with other past residents and trying to find work on the waterway or even the occasional odd job in order to pay their bills.⁶⁰

Many of the town's inhabitants tried to find work along the Tenn-Tom, but most were unsuccessful. This added to the bitterness many of them felt toward the waterway. Talking of the loss of his home and the waterway's promise of jobs, James Pardue said,

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

“Okay. They’ve got it. They’ve got your land, we’ve got the waterway. Okay. Let’s get going. Let’s get a job and make some money. They say the waterway brings jobs. Well, then, how come we can’t get some of ‘em? I talked to a guy on the fence crew today—he’s from Phenix City, Alabama. That’s all the way to the Georgia line. All we want now is jobs. That’s what we’ve looked for all our lives. You give up for progress, and then you can’t help it progress.” Unfortunately, the number of jobs available along the waterway remained limited in an economically strapped region. While the government contracts tried to encourage contractors to employ local workers as much as possible, several factors worked against Holcut’s citizens. Most of the labor along the Tenn-Tom required a high level of skill from their workers and many of the area’s residents were unskilled and poorly educated. This was especially the case in the area surrounding Holcut, because it offered an extreme challenge to engineers trying to overcoming the obstacle of the divide between the two rivers. A second factor working against the predominantly white population of Holcut’s citizens was the implementation of aggressive hiring of minority workers throughout the project area. Created as a means to ensure fair labor practices in companies receiving government contracts on the waterway, it forced many companies to change their hiring criteria. Many of these outside contractors had to favor minorities when hiring local labor to ensure that they met the government’s quota. Roy Medley described his frustration about seeking a job working for the waterway: “What makes me mad is that they take your home and land, then tell you that you can’t work for ‘em.” Medley a former Air Force computer operator and trained heavy equipment operator tried to find a job as a “grease monkey or anything,”

but could not find steady employment on the waterway. Skilled or not, Holcut's former townspeople found it exceedingly difficult to find the benefits of the Tenn-Tom's promise.⁶¹

Despite being 234 miles long and the largest public works project ever completed by the Army Corps of Engineers, the Tenn-Tom could not fulfill everyone's expectations for employment. This problem only exaggerated in the years following the waterway's completion as the people of the region felt their economic hopes went largely unfulfilled. The numbers of jobs provided both during construction and in the years after its opening had trouble measuring up to the waterway's constructed dream, one that seemed to promise that everyone would experience economic boon. This was an impossible task as the waterway could never conceivably provide jobs for everyone.

Realizing that they would largely miss out on the new jobs provided by the watery, Holcut's citizens began asking for another concession. Instead they began asking for a memorial or landmark honoring the loss of their village and they were still waiting for it that day on the bridge in 1985. Commenting on his desire to see their wishes fulfilled that day, Congressman Jamie Whitten commented, I'm in favor of a marker. I want people to know that folks lived here and that sacrifices were made for progress." With permission and help of the Army Corps of Engineers, the former residents later enshrined the memory of their community's fate in a noble light, viewing their loss as a sacrifice, a means of giving themselves, the region, and the nation a chance to improve. With its fate sealed in 1976, Holcut became "the only community acquired for

⁶¹ Ibid, Stine, p. 176-197.

construction of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway.” A road marker at the former site of the town salutes “Holcut and its former residents for the greatness they displayed in sacrificing for the future.”⁶²

The story of Holcut’s sacrifice is important because it describes one of the secondary consequences of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway and speaks of the underlying personal costs associated within the construction of its promise and emphasizes the limitations of waterway’s economic reach. The sacrifices of Holcut’s residents and the many other individuals who gave up their homes demand historical analysis in order to determine if their losses were justified. Their struggles in finding the promised economic benefits of the waterway were a fate shared by many others in the years after the waterway opened. It also shows that there was a small voice of dissidence among local populations and its resonance was the planting of seeds of doubt in the minds of some local residents. The personal costs of the waterway throughout the region began to add up, forming a small but growing counter narrative. These individuals were not blinded by the guarantees of the waterway’s economic leaders, and they bitterly waited the fulfillment of its promise. Despite popular opinion, not all people subscribed to the belief of waterway’s promise and these individuals would soon be joined by others unhappy with the waterway’s economic shortcoming in the years following its opening. Rushing to benefit from the opening of the waterway, communities strove to gear their economies toward this new form of industry.

⁶² Patterson, p. 373-374; and Marker at Hocut Memorial Park, U.S. Department of Archives and History, 1985, Tishomingo County, Mississippi

Opening amid a sea of expectation, the Tenn-Tom quickly fell victim to a rushed interpretation, turning expectations to exasperations when economic transformation failed to manifest. Despite Mississippi Governor Bill Allain's 1986 warning that "every town along the waterway can't have a port with an industrial park filled with factories," people all along the waterway expected instant benefits. As communities industrialized, locals of all sorts rushed their judgment of the Tenn-Tom. They largely failed to see what some experts claimed were secondary benefits of the waterway.⁶³

During the early years after the project's opening, communities located up and down the waterway's banks struggled to adjust their business efforts and develop new industries necessary to capitalize on the waterway. Lack of funding and the waterway's early completion date however, left most developers unprepared for economic activity. It would take several years of maturation before most communities developed the industrial parks, ports, and marinas necessary to take advantage of the waterway's promise. After poor initial showings in commerce plying the Tenn-Tom's waters, doubters quickly wrote it off as a colossal failure. Yet the supporters and dreamers of the project remained convinced of its benefits and looked at different factors to justify its construction and mitigate the waterway's perceived economic shortcomings. These two differing and often conflicting interpretations of the Tenn-Tom's economic benefits reveal the uncertainties major public works projects face in a society with a critical eye toward the negative aspects of federal expenditures. For people outside the immediate area of these projects the transformations to local communities remain hidden and outside their notice.

⁶³ Patterson, p. 375.

While national media described the Tenn-Tom as a colossal failure, local developers remained committed to its economic promise.

On May 6, 1984, at a ceremony honoring the completion of the Divide Cut, Mississippi Senator John C. Stennis proudly proclaimed, “I stand here in confidence that this project and its future uses 10 years, 100 years, 200 years, 300 years and even a good while more, will serve this area and serve this area well.” Throughout the years of its construction, supporters of the project showed economic hubris of this sort when extolling the virtues of the Tenn-Tom’s economic benefits, but the conviction of Senator Stennis’s words predicted the permanency of the waterway and hinted at how long regional boosters would need to remain committed to the ideals of the waterway’s promise. Stennis continued, “It will give a better opportunity to the people in northeast Mississippi to have the things that make life worthwhile. I’m confident of that.” Despite his bold prediction, in the years preceding the Tenn-Tom’s opening, Stennis and other waterway advocates struggled to industrialize the region and develop the auxiliary water infrastructure needed to capitalize on the waterway’s benefits. After receiving the huge amounts of federal monies during the construction of the waterway, the cash strapped states of Alabama and Mississippi lost their wellspring of outside money. The lion’s share of developmental dollars needed to build the auxiliary infrastructures and facilities necessary to capitalize on the waterway’s economic promise had to come from local sources. Without outside aid, development costs were too much for these states of Mississippi and Alabama to handle. Further complicating their efforts was the earlier-than-expected completion date of the waterway, changes in the national and global

economic climate, and harsh national criticism of the project. These setbacks combined and quickly labeled the Tenn-Tom as a failure, a boondoggle of monumental proportions.

The grandeur of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway's engineering feats accomplished during construction lost preeminence and became buried under its harsh economic criticism. For a world with little patience, the Tenn-Tom needed to provide instant gratification to the nation, the region, and the local populations. When it became apparent that these changes were not immediate, national critics joined by some local business leaders eager for economic stimulus lost faith in the waterway's promise. The early difficulties supporters of the waterway faced seemed to leave the communities located along the banks of the Tenn-Tom with the grim reality that development was slow in coming, and many wondered if it would ever come at all. During the early years of operation, Alabama and Mississippi communities found themselves stranded with many half-finished or deserted port facilities, while local populations waited for the expected economic bonanza foretold in the waterway's coming. People all along the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterways began to resemble the underdeveloped Mississippi River side of the state, a reminder of the painful image of Holcut's residents standing on the banks of the waterway waving at the passing boats and their symbolism of economic promise passing them by.⁶⁴

Despite local residents' joy during the opening of the waterway in 1985, there were earlier warnings that the waterway's promise for Mississippi and Alabama's economic progress was going to an arduous journey, one that would require great

⁶⁴ Hogan, "Special to *The Clarion Ledge*," p. 1.

fortitude from their developers. In the years leading up to the waterway's opening, experts tried to counsel local developers that they needed to remain focused on the job at hand. These warnings placed a priority on the responsibility of providing industries interested in locating to the banks of the waterway with viable installations, ports, harbors, and industrial parks and responsibility of these developments would fall squarely on state and local developers' shoulders. "I think from this day on, the responsibility is going to be the local and state governments," agreed Dan Sanders, president of the Amory Chamber of Commerce. By itself, the waterway was only a transportation corridor, it would fall to the local efforts of regional, state, and individual municipality developers to mould themselves into areas that businesses would want to locate. Tim Weeks, the economic development coordinator of the *Daily Journal* in Tupelo, Mississippi informed readers that the waterway would be just a "large ditch" navigated by barges flowing past their communities, if people did not do their part in bringing in industries. He cautioned:

It is hoped the waterway will have a significant long-term effect on the economy of a rural region that has languished behind national levels of wages and income. It is important to realize that growth in the waterway region will be limited only by world and national economic conditions and the vision and energetic participation of our own people here in Northeast Mississippi. We have no control over the former. However, on the local and regional level we are in control of our own destinies. It is up to us to aggressively seek to turn 'potential' into realistic economic growth.

This meant that communities had to improve roads, schools, and other key institutions, grooming themselves as a region capable of supplying not only a valuable transportation corridor, but also a quality workforce with appropriate auxiliary infrastructures and

facilities. “Industries need more than the waterway,” Weeks added, “Without an all-out development effort, the Tenn-Tom will never make a dynamic impact on our economy.”⁶⁵

In 1983, Carroll LeTellier, former head of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ South Atlantic Division, cautioned that “the path ahead may be even more difficult” than even the difficult years of the waterway’s construction. After hearing the news of the surrender of the second lawsuit contesting the waterway he asserted, “The times ahead are not for celebration but for hard work.” Afraid that the cooperative spirit that worked so well in ensuring the construction of the Tenn-Tom would fracture after its opening, LeTellier coached, “Now is not the time for states and communities to become competitors.” Pivotal to LeTelleir’s argument was his insistence that the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority (TTWDA) remain active in securing cooperation between local industrial developers and businesses interested in utilizing the waterway in the long years after its opening. LeTellier argued that “it is imperative” to keep the TTWDA together as “a strong, powerful, and knowledgeable body” which could rally local interests to a common cause and watch over the varied developmental interests of the region.⁶⁶

Answering the region’s need for a well-informed and unified development agency, the TTWDA remained in operation in the years after the completion of the

⁶⁵ Unknown article from *Aberdeen Examiner*, (Aberdeen, MS) 13 December, 1984, reference found in Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Scrapbook 1984-1997, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Management Center, 3606 West Plymouth Road, Columbus, Mississippi; and Tim Weeks, “Waterway spells growth,” *The Daily Journal* (Tupelo, MS) November 26, 1984.

⁶⁶ “Tenn-Tom needs 5-year plan,” *Mobile Register* (Mobile, AL), May 29, 1983, p. 6A; Craig Dunlap, “Hardest Work ‘Ahead’ for Tenn-Tom Backers,” *The Journal of Commerce*, November 21, 1983.

waterway. Changing their primary focus away from lobbying Congress for construction funds, a task that carried them through the first twenty-five years of their existence, the TTWDA turned their efforts toward regional economic development. At a Tenn-Tom development conference in November 1983, LeTellier predicted, “The future battles will be to insure that the Tenn-Tom is developed in an orderly fashion, with planning to provide for local needs all along the waterway’s corridor.” Local communities responded with efforts toward building needed infrastructure like bridges and roads, industrial parks, ports and marinas, but the uncertainty of limited financial backing hampered their contributions. For its preliminary mission, the TTWDA turned its focus to a five-year plan that would stress maximum cooperation between states, communities, and regions of the Tenn-Tom. In order to avoid unnecessary conflicts or regional competition that would hamper economic development, the TTWDA mapped out new plans and strategies for communities to follow before the waters flowed in 1984. With these new schemes in mind, the Development Authority attempted to charm industries and entice outside interest to the region, employing whatever tactics they could in order to get businesses to move to the waterway’s shores. They kept their powerful propaganda engine alive, doing their best to illuminate the waterway’s benefits to outside interests. For local business leaders they stressed the importance of long-term goals. They saw development along the Ten-Tom as a marathon not a quick sprint. Don Waldon, the new TTWDA president, echoed the warnings of others and clung to the belief that the future of the waterway would be as troublesome as its past. Waldon stated, “A lot of people may not appreciate this, but it may be as great a challenge to develop the waterway as it was to build it.” He

warned doubters that while the road ahead was uncertain, through careful planning and sheer determination the region would live to see the Tenn-Tom's promise materialize.⁶⁷

Complicating the efforts of the Development Authority and other developers was the accelerated pace of construction on the waterway. In 1981 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers under pressure from their political backers who were concerned over losing federal funding, erected floodlights and worked day and night to push the waterway past a "point of no return." This ensured the construction of the waterway, but completing it two years ahead of schedule resulted in the Tenn-Tom opening before many of the port facilities and auxiliary infrastructures of local communities were finished. In a financially depressed region, the waterway's states, cities, and communities struggled to meet the funding requirements needed to match the Corps' accelerated pace. However, this problem did not affect everyone in the region equally. For states linked to the Tenn-Tom's waters, but not located on its banks, the early opening did not adversely affect their preexisting industries and ports. Benefiting from the nature of their geography, states like Tennessee, Kentucky, and Ohio had long ago constructed the facilities they needed to conduct water commerce and they enjoyed the added bonus of having established businesses within their borders. For the new waterway communities of Mississippi and Alabama, their facilities were either not-in-place or stuck in the early stages of planning. Mississippi in particular had difficulty building up its infrastructure as most of its cities were former landlocked ones or at best equipped only for shallow river or creek portages. The early opening of the waterway meant that the industries that

⁶⁷ Hayes Johnson, "Waterway to open Monday after 13 Years of Hard Work," *The Clarion Ledger* (Jackson, MS), January 13, 1985, p. 1A.

were interested in utilizing the waterway either had to wait for development or turn to other areas for their facilities.⁶⁸

Working under the watchful eye of the TTWDA, local communities' geared their industrial efforts toward capitalizing on the waterway's economic benefits through a variety of ways. In Pickens County, Alabama local developers looked at overcoming physical barriers blocking them from the waterway's promise by constructing a bridge across the waterway. Residents of Pickensville, an isolated, rural community, anxiously watched the construction of a \$75 million Weyerhaeuser pulp and paper complex, located just across the waters and the Mississippi state line. Physically blocking and separating the residents from access to the plant's 550 jobs was the Tenn-Tom. In order to get to the plant, Alabama residents had to travel many miles, either north to Columbus, Mississippi and back south to the plant, a trip of 40 miles, or south to Macon, Mississippi and back north, a trip equaling 59 miles. Another alternative for residents was crossing the waterway "via a rickety, wooden ferry...accessible by a winding gravel road." Yet, even this alternative disappeared in 1979, as rising water levels of the Tenn-Tom's Aliceville Pool left "residents who worked or conducted business across the river virtually stranded on the east bank."⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Stine, *Mixing the Waters*, p. 73, 151; Congressional Record—Senate, (25 February, 1986), p. S 1615; Cass Petersen, "The Fizzling of 220-Year-Old-Dream: As Shortcut to Gulf; Tenn-Tom Waterway Failing to Bring Prosperity," *The Washington Post*, December 26, 1986, p. A9; and Craig Dunlap, "Hardest Work 'Ahead for Tenn-Tom Backers,'" *The Journal of Commerce*, November 21, 1983, 1A.

⁶⁹ Megan Pratt, "New Pickensville Bridge Opens Area to Economic Boom: Span Shortens Winding Trip Between States," Special Edition of the *Commercial Dispatch* (Columbus, MS), May 24, 1985, sec. Industry, p. 4.

In 1985, the construction of a bridge meant the shortening of the trip to 12 miles for Alabama residents. A local newspaper reported, “A bridge over the river has long been a dream for Pickens County leaders, who saw the need for the structure many years ago in anticipation of growth from the opening of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway.” The waterway meant to be a tool to connect isolated Mississippi and Alabama counties to other parts of the nation, required structures like bridges and improved roads to link surrounding communities to a growing transportation network, plugging them into the massive network of national and global trade and commerce. A Pickensville business owner, Jerry Fitch, saw the potential benefits of the bridge to his economically depressed city. He stated, “Pickensville will be exposed to new areas across the river for the first time. It is going to open up a different world for them and us.” Another boon aiding the construction of the bridge was that it shortened the route timber and wood products had to travel to and from West Alabama and East Mississippi, but despite the benefits of new bridges and roads to businesses and communities, the primary way to manifest the waterway’s promise was through building ports, harbors, and marinas on the waterway itself.⁷⁰

In 1985, Columbus, Mississippi developers concentrated their efforts on building a public port. Utilizing an island left open after the straitening of the Tombigbee River, Columbus used the leftover bend in the old river channel to “provide 7,000 feet of water frontage at minimal costs.” Columbus took advantage of dredge material created during the waterway’s construction to build the land of their industrial park site, 177 feet above

⁷⁰ Ibid.

sea level, which was considerably higher than the waterway around it. This brought the park above the 100-year flood level mark, a measure agreed upon to protect the site from future harm. Despite this cost cutting technique, the Lowndes County Port Authority still needed \$6.2 million to construct its new facility. The Columbus Port would host new docking facilities, cranes, and other heavy equipment necessary to conduct river commerce, as well as provide land for industrial facilities and warehouse space. Such amenities required tremendous investments from the communities wanting the facilities, however.⁷¹

Raising the funds necessary to complete the port was a monumental task for Columbus. As a city located in an economically depressed state, local leaders looked for money from both its local taxpayers, as well as from the state to finance their developmental efforts. This meant that local developers often turned to their state and federal leaders for help. In 1985, Henry Weiss, president of the Port Authority in Columbus recalled one money-raising trip: “We had a good trip to Washington at the end of April. The most encouragement we got came from Senator John Stennis. He told us that as far as he was concerned, the Tenn-Tom Waterway would not be complete until there was a port in Columbus.” Business leaders did not look for all their funding to come from their home states, however. Columbus placed an application for financing from the Farmers Home Administration for the sum of \$339,000. They also received a grant of the same size from the Appalachian Regional Commission. Despite developers’

⁷¹ “Industrial Foundation Ready to Help,” Special Edition of the *Commercial Dispatch* (Columbus, MS), May 24, 1985, sec. Industry, p. 4.

best interest, the port did not open with the waterway in 1985. After the waterway's opening, the city's Chamber of Commerce Chief, Charleigh Ford assured local people that, "We have every intention of building a public port at Riverside Industrial Park. I feel almost certain there will be a port there one way or another."⁷²

Still, failure to meet the early opening date of the waterway hindered the city's efforts to capitalize on its benefits and hampered the initial fulfillment of the waterway's promise. Remarking on this delay, Ford stated, "Obviously, when we get the port finished, things will be better. You can show people a planned industrial park, but you really impress them by showing them the actual thing. We have no doubt the port will be there, but there's just something about seeing the actual facilities." The construction of a port was vital for Columbus, because without it, the city would remain isolated on the banks of the Tenn-Tom and find itself watching the waterway's benefits flow to other communities. Finally completing a port and industrial park in 1986, the city provided new industries a place to locate. Investors hoped by building proper facilities they would move to Columbus and provide new jobs to its residents. Cities all along the banks of the waterway needed to gear their communities for river commerce if they wanted to participate in the waterway's promise, a daunting task in an atmosphere lacking financial wealth. But without facilities, there could be no industries, but meeting the early opening

⁷² "Weiss Envisions Columbus as a Healthy Port City," Special Edition of the *Commercial Dispatch* (Columbus, MS), May 24, 1985, sec. Industry, p. 9.

date of the waterway with readymade amenities did not guarantee that communities could or would capitalize on the Tenn-Tom's promise.⁷³

Only one city met the early completion date of the waterway with a completed port and industrial facilities, but even its success appeared limited. In June of 1985, the City of Amory, Mississippi opened the state's newest harbor by constructing a \$2.4 million port on the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. This once booming railroad town led the charge for expanding its transportation facilities to take advantage of the waterway. Being the first city to complete the facilities for industrial development related to the waterway was not Amory's primary motivation. Rather, concern over losing its potential benefits due to the accelerated opening date remained the pressing issue. Amory Mayor Thomas Griffith stated, "I can't explain our being out in front except maybe that we worked harder than some folks. We didn't really try to get ahead. We were just trying to get ready ourselves." Believing that in order to truly benefit from the economic potential of the waterway, Griffith urged both community business leaders and incoming industries to match the early completion date of the Tenn-Tom. He remarked, "We didn't want the boats to toot their horns at us and that be the only benefit we got from the waterway." He held to the picturesque promise that the day for another economic boon was on Amory's threshold.⁷⁴

⁷³ "Industrial Foundation Ready to Help," Special Edition of the *Commercial Dispatch* (Columbus, MS), May 24, 1985, sec. Industry, p. 4; "Weiss Envisions Columbus as a Healthy Port City," Special Edition of the *Commercial Dispatch* (Columbus, MS), May 24, 1985, sec. Industry, p. 9.

⁷⁴ Hayes Johnson, "Amory's gamble is paying off: Port city is glad it put its money on the Tenn-Tom," *Clarion-Ledger*, June 30, 1985, sec. History, p. 1, 6.

In 1985, the Tenn-Tom had already proven its potential for benefiting the local people and business leaders of Amory in their industrial developmental efforts. As the canal progressed through the region in the early 1980s, the proposed port site benefited from the same side effect of the waterway's creation as Columbus. Once a low and swampy location, the Amory port site was transformed by the construction of the canal section. Workers dredged material from the waterway onto the city's property, building the site above the area's flood levels. Construction of the port facility became the culmination of economic efforts between the city of Amory and incoming businesses, whose arrival marked the city's move toward water commerce; it also marked cooperation between the city and the Corps of Engineers. To the leaders of Amory, the goal was to develop industrial land first, then see which industries showed interest in the area. Griffith explained their strategy, "We didn't start out to build a port. We set out to develop industrial land."⁷⁵

In 1977, Amory's leaders, prompted by the hope of enticing industries to their planned waterway access point, gambled their economic future and purchased 123 acres of land from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Using the town's right to eminent domain, Amory purchased land from local owners along the waterway and then exchanged it with the Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps needed this land for waterway construction. The city then traded it for an equal amount of land on the waterway's banks benefiting both parties. The city paid between \$900 and \$1,000 per acre, \$125,000 total. With their commitment to the future of the waterway facilitated,

⁷⁵ Ibid

Amory waited with heightening anxiety while the lawsuits and lack of government funding decided the fate of the city's \$125,000 economic wager. Griffith remembered, "If it hadn't been completed, we'd be sitting here with 123 acres worth nothing."⁷⁶

Even though the future of the waterway was still in question in 1977, Griffith and other Amory business leaders felt confident that their Congressional delegations would triumph and ensure its completion, but delayed in committing its money for as long as possible. With several industries expressing growing interest in the city's industrial development, Amory and the U.S. Army Corps settled their financial arrangement in 1983. Working closely together for mutual benefit, Amory and the Corps developed a friendly business arrangement. Griffith stated, "We dealt with these people for seven years through word of mouth and never passed a dime." In 1983, with several factories expressing their desire to locate to Amory's industrial sector, the Corps condensed "about 12 months' work in 30 days" to expedite the bureaucratic processes of land ownership. When, Weyerhaeuser Company stepped forward with a proposal for a \$10 million wood-chipping plant, the city started site preparations. Needing local funds to ensure the industry's presence in Amory, Griffith turned to the voters for support of a \$550,000 city bond for economic funding needed to construct the adequate infrastructure to meet Weyerhaeuser's needs. The people of Amory responded with overwhelmingly support for the bond, with it winning 89% of the votes.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

The massive show of support from the voters of Amory reinforced stereotypical images of the region's stance in favor of the waterway's promise and confirmed their belief in local business leaders efforts to capitalize on it. As Griffith put it, "For people to support something that strong, that said they were *interested* in the Tenn-Tom." At the backbone of this local effort were business leaders such as E.C. "Cookie" Emerson. His role in the successful development of Amory's port was twofold. First, as the former president of Amory's Chamber of Commerce, Emerson gained funding for industrial development with grants for \$790,000 from the Economic Development Administration, \$625,000 from the Appalachian Regional Commission, and \$338,000 from a Community Development Block Grant. In a secondary role, Emerson, acting a member of the TTWDA Board of Directors, looked to promote interest in the waterway throughout the region. The support network that he could pull from provided the necessary influence to achieve the goals of the city of Amory, as well as that of the Development Authority and the state. Emerson claimed, "It was just a heckuva lot of people going after this thing. We never let them [the waterway's opposition] rest. If they shut one door on us we'd go to another one." Basking in the confidence provided by the support of the voters and local business leaders, Emerson felt that many individuals saw the Tenn-Tom as the economic "salvation of northeast Mississippi." He continued, "I'm sold on the thing and I'll say about 99 percent of the people are."⁷⁸

Potential industries interested in utilizing the Tenn-Tom saw benefits in moving to Amory. In addition to Weyerhaeuser's facility, Tom Soya Grain Company built a

⁷⁸ Ibid.

\$700,000 grain terminal and dock in Amory. Vice president of the company Ray Lucas said, “It has a hard surface road, a railroad, and water.” With access to three out of four transportation means, Amory looked to be an ideal location for the new industry. For lumber industries, like Weyerhaeuser, the Tenn-Tom “essentially paved a toll-free highway from the southern woods all the way to the Far East, making previously landlocked forests as accessible and convenient as McDonalds’s.” These examples seemed to prove that the Tenn-Tom was linking isolated rural communities to the wider global market, but gaining businesses using the waterway did not spell automatic success.⁷⁹

With all the advantages Amory experienced over other communities along the waterway, the town expected to benefit from the waterway’s promise from the very start. However, reality quickly staunched much of these good feelings. In 1985, the two new industries locating to the town brought in only a handful of jobs. The Tom Soya terminal created only six new jobs. The Weyerhaeuser wood chipping facility provided twenty-two full time workers and about three times as many support personnel gained employment. In all, Amory gained a roughly a hundred new jobs from the waterway that year. These numbers were very different from the economic promise expected with the coming of the Tenn-Tom and fell well short of the expectations of local citizens and business leaders.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Eric Bates, “Exporting Southern Forests,” *Double Take*, Vol. 3, Winter (1996): 88.

⁸⁰ “Pathway to Progress: Industry,” Special Edition of the *Commercial Dispatch* (Columbus, MS), May 24, 1985, sec. Industry, p. 1, 15.

For a city located in one of the poorest regions of America, paying \$550,000 to attract fewer than a hundred jobs at Weyerhaeuser was not the realization of the promise they expected. Incensed locals, who felt that all of the Tenn-Tom's promises were becoming thinly veiled lies, looked back at the promised figures in the promotional literature supplied from regional developers. In 1985, a local newspaper quoted the preliminary figures expected with the coming of the waterway. In 1977, the Appalachian Regional Commission predicted the project would bring in 135,000 new jobs with personal income and private investment jumping \$2.9 billion by the year 2000. While Amory was just one city looking to gain jobs from the Tenn-Tom, as the leading city in the Tenn-Tom development arena, this meager gain did not reflect well on the potential job making of future industries and the promise of the waterway appeared to be crumbling under its expectations.⁸¹

Despite the mediocre growth in jobs, Mayor Griffith was optimistic during the waterway's first year of operation. From the very beginning of the town's experience with commerce along the Tenn-Tom, Griffith dismissed the mythical promises that the waterway was to be a "bonanza for any town" or a "California Gold Rush." Griffith's words suggested that during the first years of business along the Tenn-Tom, there remained an ideological difference between the economic expectations of the local populaces and the reality of the type of industries that would come to utilize the waterway. Local populations seemed exasperated by the lack of jobs produced by Tenn-Tom industries. For populaces familiar with the labor-intensive textile industries of their

⁸¹ Ibid.

recent past, the high capital and material costs, but low job production of waterway commerce was shocking. The large and expensive machinery needed for wood chipping and grain storage facilities for instance, meant building new expensive infrastructures for incoming industries, a cost that local communities had to share in order to entice new forms of commerce into their areas. For the cash-strapped communities along the waterway's shores, construction of ports and the waterway itself, despite their already large investments, were not enough to guarantee that businesses would come. Communities had to offer other incentives such as building facilities or tax breaks to entice industrial expansion into the region.

The waterway's leading bulk commodities of lumber, oil, and coal, exports large in tonnage, did not translate into a large number of jobs. Moreover, these shipments were of largely raw materials, which demanded less labor from the region than processed ones. Expressing concern along this line was Thomas "Bud" Phillips, Columbus-Lowndes Industrial Foundation President, who stated in 1985:

While I recognize the Tenn-Tom as a major artery for forest products, I am a bit disturbed that we are shipping raw materials out of Mississippi. Our efforts are and will continue to be to have the wood products manufactured into finished products before being shipped from our community. If you export finished products, you're making more jobs, and that's a prime task of the industrial foundation. In the meantime, I realize we will have to take advantage of the raw material market.⁸²

With little knowledge into the background of the new types of industries expressing interest in the Tenn-Tom, the people of Northeast Mississippi seemed unprepared for the lack of employment opportunities. Griffith warned, "We're

⁸² "Industrial Foundation Ready to Help," Special Edition of the *Commercial Dispatch* (Columbus, MS), May 24, 1985, sec. Industry, p. 4.

confronted with dealing with a populace that is used to industry that is labor intensive.”

After decades of dedication to the Tenn-Tom, communities wanted instant gratification in the form of hundreds of jobs, not just the handfuls that were manifesting. When jobs failed to manifest themselves, the specter of doubt grew in the back of the populace’s minds. They appeared to ask, is this all? Was this the culmination of the decades of promises, struggles and bitter litigations? In the first year of operation in 1985, the mayor of Amory remained firm in the belief that the Tenn-Tom would “eventually boost the economy of northeast Mississippi.” He prophesied, “We spent the first 100 years of our life as a railroad town. We’ll spend the rest of our life as a railroad and waterway town.”⁸³

Yet despite Griffith’s cautious words of patience and beliefs of a better day to come, many business leaders quickly became impatient with the lack of economic growth in their areas. After only a single year of grappling with economic shortcomings, Mayor Griffith and Amory’s local business leaders started expressing their growing sense of exasperation and those of the local populaces, who failed to see any impending growth in jobs from waterway industries. Griffith admitted to a local newspaper, “We’ve all experienced some changing times...projections in reality just didn’t fit. The waterway was billed to be an economic development tool, and it still has that potential. But it’s not going to be the Utopia we all thought it was.” These words seemed to spell the end of the waterway’s promise, but in actuality, Griffith was only bemoaning the early shortcomings of the waterway. Individuals, like Griffith, were falling victim to the

⁸³ Ibid

waterway's towering promise of economic salvation, which unfortunately left them vulnerable to the uncertain economic eddies of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. Not long after the waters started flowing, business leaders and local populations began looking for the promised benefits. When it became apparent that they were not materializing people began to rush to judgments. What failed was patience. After the long years of debates and construction, people failed to hold off their interpretation of the waterway before it had time to develop.⁸⁴

While in the years leading up to the waterway's opening the TTWDA's labors kept local industrial efforts varied and noncompetitive, it failed to help most communities match the accelerated completion date. Without ports, ships and industries had nowhere to conduct their business. By the time some communities constructed their facilities; the window of industrial interest had closed. However, even having ready facilities did not always spell developmental success. During the first two years of operation, the industries that appeared on the Tenn-Tom were more interested in the region's raw materials, not its cheap labor source. The small gain in jobs crushed the early celebratory spirit of waterway's supporters during this time and some began to turn their backs on the waterway's promise as an economic bonanza. At the same time, communities began questioning whether the Tenn-Tom's shortcomings were a natural progression one necessary for the progression of the Tenn-Tom's promise, or a truer reflection of its image as a boondoggle of tremendous proportions. In 1986, Griffith continued lambasting his belief in the long-term promise of the Tenn-Tom. He lamented, "I would

⁸⁴ Petersen, "The Fizzling of 200-Year-Old-Dream," p. A8.

swap this bugger any day for an interstate highway.” For the supposed “Railroad Capital of the South,” as Amory once proudly proclaimed itself, a change in outlook was underway again. “You’ve got to haul it [industry] by truck down a road,” Griffith continued. “Towns grow on highways, not railways and waterways.” This was a truly ironic statement considering the city’s origins and Griffith’s earlier beliefs in the waterway’s promise.⁸⁵

In terms of economic success in the opening years, critics labeled the waterway a colossal disaster. In the first year of operation, the Tenn-Tom shipped only 1.7 million tons of cargo. This measured only 6-percent of the 27 million tons of shipments predicted to travel through the waterway in its first year of operation. In a January 1987 editorial, the *Washington Post* called the project “the nation’s largest wet elephant.” Criticizing the waterway’s output the editors wrote, “the waterway has provided passage for only 4.8 million tons of cargo in almost its first two years of operation, and a fifth of that was stone for its own banks.” In an effort to explain to cynics why the waterway was not progressing as fast as many thought that it should, Don Waldon, Administer of the TTWDA, supplied, “I think the waterway is being completed at a time when the economy is in poor shape, especially for exports and coal.” Coal in particular was a vital component figured into the cost-benefit ratio of the waterway. Yet in the first year of operation, the Tenn-Tom recorded only 500,000 tons of coal traffic, falling well short of

⁸⁵ Ibid

the predicted rate of 17 million tons. Waldon continued, “We couldn’t have opened at a worse time, but on balance, we think that everything is coming along real well. I’m not saying it will take 50 years, but we have to realize it’ll take a few years for this waterway to mature.”⁸⁶

The Development Authority knew that when the waterway first opened, barge traffic was going to be “slow in coming.” Another member of the Development Authority, Assistant Administer Darlene Scogin explained their expectations of waterway traffic: “I don’t expect them [barges] to be lining up at the locks to use it.” The early opening date conflicted with most shippers’ agendas as they were locked into preexisting contracts. Another consideration was the newness of the waterway itself. Riverboat pilots clung to a long existing belief in having personal knowledge of the rivers they traveled. They formed closely-knit communities and swapped tales about trouble spots along America’s water systems. The novelty of the Tenn-Tom was that they had to learn about the system, search out its flow, scout its waters and get a feel for traveling along its channels. This would help them determine the most efficient and economical barge configurations used along the waterway and how to avoid any trouble spots. This was just another process that would take time for industries to work through.⁸⁷

⁸⁶David Rogers, “Rivaling Cleopatra, A Pork-Barrel King Sails the Tenn-Tom,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 31, 1985; Fred Grimm, “Waterway Boosters Roll Out Pork Barrel,” *Miami Herald*, June 3, 1985; Hayes Johnson, “Waterway to Open Monday After 13 Years of Hard Work,” p. 1A; Congress, Senate, Senator Moynihan of Illinois speaking on “The Bitter Lessons of Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway” to the Senate, 99th Cong., 2nd sess. *Congressional Record* (25 February 1986): S 1614; *Congressional Record—Senate*, (25, February, 1986): S 1614; “Wet Elephant,” *Washington Post*, 5 January 1987; and Petersen, “The Fizzling of 200-Year-Old-Dream,” p. A8.

⁸⁷ Roland Wilkerson, “Waterway use expected to build slowly,” *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), November 25, 1984.

While numbers tell one story, economic development specialist, Joseph Birindelli offered an alternative explanation. In 1986, he stated that, “the barge traffic shouldn’t be expected to be there yet.” Birindelli preached patience when looking at the waterway’s benefits. “It takes time,” he explained, “The economic picture has changed in 10 years.” This theory was simple in approach, but in actuality, no economic expert could accurately predict the path that the economy would follow next. Construction started during the energy crisis of the 1970s and experts predicted that the rising energy prices would increase the demand for coal. By the time the waterway opened in 1985, national concerns had turned to other worries and the coal bonanza never materialized. A victim of drooping foreign markets in coal, lumber, grain and other bulk shipments, the Tenn-Tom’s opening coincided with a change in the global economy. With an emphasis for American exports heading to Southeast Asia, the Tenn-Tom linked to the wrong ocean. This impact would lesson in later years with the creation of the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement trade block, when the agreement opened up parts of Latin America to more prodigious trading and as Asian companies grew more interested in the chip wood coming out of southern forests.⁸⁸

Despite the lack of traffic flowing through the Tenn-Tom’s waters during the first couple of years, waterway supporters looked at its success in different terms than tonnage. In 1986, Pat Ross, Assistant Director of the TTWDA, claimed the potential of the waterway to the future of the distressed regions of Alabama and Mississippi was just as important as the amount of cargo it was shipping. At a Senate hearing that year, she

⁸⁸ Petersen, p. A8; and Bates, p. 88.

argued that the Tenn-Tom was “no boondoggle.” Ross stated, “Up to now, people in this part of Alabama and Mississippi have lived in depressed circumstances, emotionally and economically. The waterway at least holds out the hope of industrial and economic development. You can’t just look at the tonnage.” She continued, “Part of the problem is that we finished two years ahead of schedule, so that some industries and companies have been slow to invest in loading and unloading facilities.” Ross and others predicted that in time, as new industries located along the waterway and came into use, tonnage in the form of their exports would increase accordingly. For developers, the hope of the Tenn-Tom was just as important as its promise. With the waterway built and as long as it was maintained, poor and depressed southerners had a chance at economic salvation. This thinking was different from the promise built during the years of construction. In the first years after its opening, waterway supporters changed from endorsing it as a promise and adopted it as an emblem of hope. To them, the Tenn-Tom became a key promotional tool for the future development of the region, and its potential benefits in the years to follow were as important as any actual jobs created in the early years. At the same time, construction of the Tenn-Tom meant that southern leaders were no longer accepting the South’s wayward economic past. They would do whatever it took to give the South the economic shot in the arm it desperately needed. With the waterway built, it now meant

the formation of an important framework and all that remained was for future businesses to build upon this new foundation of trade, commerce, and industry. Despite harsh criticism and poor initial figures, Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway's promise seemed accessible to southerners willing to give it time to mature.⁸⁹

Believing in the long-term benefits of the waterway, the TTWDA continued to support development along its reaches. Sticking to their early plan of not leaving the full socio-economic benefits of the region to happenstance, the Development Authority undertook aggressive marketing schemes. As the primary supporters of the project after its opening, they held firm in their conviction that the waterway's merits would withstand the test of time. Through assertive advertising and marketing, the Development Authority promoted the waterway as an atmosphere ripe for development. They stood undaunted by the initial poor showings of the waterway's commerce and resolutely stood by its merits. Confirming their belief, the Tenn-Tom saw a steady increase in tonnage during the first fifteen years of its operation (See Table 1). However, the tonnage figures remained well below those predicted during the waterway's construction, which forecast that the Tenn-Tom would ship 28 million tons in 1986, 32.3 million in 1990, and 44.7 by 2000. Compared to its real figures, flowing through its waters, this was a huge disparity, but supporters pointed to other benefits of the waterway in order to explain and mitigate its tonnage shortcoming.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Congressional Record: S 1615

⁹⁰ Ibid, p.6, 8.

Table 1

History of Tonnage Flowing on the Tenn-Tom from 1985-1999.⁹¹

Year	Tonnage
1985	1,701,431
1986	3,650,361
1987	4,099,780
1988*	9,920,393
1989	5,168,192
1990	4,694,867
1991	5,225,949
1992	6,393,491
1993	7,662,080
1994	7,905,068
1995	8,702,371
1996	8,931,466
1997	9,154,222
1998	9,313,514
1999	8,927,008
Total	101,450,193

One shining example of this was that the waterway showed remarkable resilience in being virtually drought-proof. Over the years, as other shipping routes in the U.S. experienced blockages due to “weather, manmade, or natural disasters,” the TTWDA bragged, “the Tenn-Tom’s well engineered 10 locks and dams and regulated channel depths keep vital commerce flowing.” This was evident in the summer of 1988, when a severe drought forced shippers along the upper Mississippi and Ohio River Valleys to seek alternatives to the shallower and poorly navigable Mississippi River. Major General

⁹¹ *Progress Report, A bright spot in the Sunbelt*, brochure prepared by the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority, 2000, Special Collections, George E. Allen Library, Booneville, MS. p. 8; the asterisk marks the year of severe drought, where lower water levels on the Mississippi River lead to a tremendous growth of barge traffic on the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway.

Robert M. Bunker stated, “The importance and vitality of the waterway was reinforced during the drought this past year. Low water levels on the Mississippi forced shippers to seek alternative routes to deep ports. The Tenn-Tom Waterway, with stable water depths, proved to be a valuable asset to the nation.” This created a bonanza year for the waterway and confirmed it as an added bonus to the nation’s economy in the event of a disaster. Alabama State Docks Director John B. Dutton echoed this sentiment saying, “In fact, the waterway was the only dependable barge route to the U.S. Gulf for most of the summer. This is a time for us to showcase our facilities, what we can do, and what the Tenn-Tom can do.” Long time supporter of the project, Alabama Representative, Tom Bevill remarked that the waterway “paid for itself twice” by 1989. He argued the first time was when the waterway’s opened and railroad companies reduced their rates “in fear of competition.” The second occurred during the 1988 drought when “the waterway saved many companies from folding.” Bevill bragged, “So that old pork-barrel project’s doing pretty good.” He remarked that that some businesses “were able to stay in business because the Tenn-Tom was there as an alternative route.” While several businesses claimed that they survived the drought of 1989, because of the waterway, it remains very questionable whether these savings were enough to compensate for it expenses to taxpayers. With construction costs equaling \$1.96 billion combined with the millions of dollars spent in maintenance and operation costs over the years the waterway’s price tag was climbing. It seems unlikely a single year of alleviating restricted the restricted flow

of barge traffic on the Mississippi River and a reduction of railroad shipping costs hardly seem to compensate for its expenditures.⁹²

Still experts began finding other ways in which people began to benefit from using the waterway. Shippers using the Tenn-Tom the year of the drought also discovered another huge advantage in utilizing the waterway on return trips. Empty barges began to ply the slack waters of the waterway and enjoyed reduced fuel costs in their return trips home back north into the heartland of America. In fact, many barges of commerce ship down the Mississippi River, but return via the Tenn-Tom avoiding the same currents they utilized on the way south. While these carriers do not reflect in the tonnage figures of the waterway, they contribute to reduced operating costs, lower transportation fees, thus providing benefits to the welfare of the nation.⁹³

According to supporters of the waterway, another added benefit of the Tenn-Tom was the one resource abundantly found within its shore. In 1988, Mississippi legislature passed House Bill 1307 solving a growing crisis for Tupelo, Mississippi, the largest urban center within the waterway's corridor. The bill enabled all municipalities within the Tupelo region to draw their principal water collectively from the waterway. Before this legislation, Tupelo faced a shortage of water, limiting any potential growth for the city as the aquifer that supplied their water was being depleted by the city's demand.

Harry Martin, President Emeritus of the Tupelo Community Development Foundation

⁹² "Tenn-Tom Waterway Has Best Year Ever," [unknown publisher and date, probably from Port of Mobile in 1989] article found in TTW Scrapbook 1986-1992, Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Management Center, Columbus, MS ; Brad Clemenson, "Corps picks Tenn-Tom as project of year," *The Mobile Press* (Mobile, AL) February 8, 1989; and Brad Clemenson, "Corps picks Tenn-Tom as project of year," *The Mobile Press* (Mobile, AL) February 8, 1989.

⁹³ *Progress Report*, p. 6

declared, “You’ve got to have water for growth.” From 1988 to 2000, Martin attributed an increase of 14, 376 jobs to the city because of the new wellspring of water provided by the Tenn-Tom. The significant increase of jobs in Tupelo seemed to confirm what experts were claimed from the beginning, that tonnage did not always reflect the waterway’s benefits to the region.⁹⁴

As for industrialization along the Tenn-Tom, according to the TTW Authority itself, in fifteen years, the waterway created over \$4 billion of new and expanded industrial development. This was a large sum of outside money coming into the region, providing financial aid to depressed regions. In addition, most of these industries were heavy manufacturing operations that benefited from large volume barge traffic and they employed skilled labor, which demanded higher salaries than traditional industrial and textile jobs of the region. This contributed to not only more jobs, but also a higher standard of living for the employees of waterway industries.⁹⁵

By the mid-1990s, supporters of the waterway could even point to figures that would belie the growing belief that the waterway was an economic flop. In a short film made for public broadcasting, the TTWDA showcased the benefits of the waterway.

Tim Weston, Director of Port Itawamba located in Fulton, Mississippi claimed:

We have seen nearly \$4 billion dollars of capital investment in new and expanded industries and nearly 50,000 new jobs. Many of these new companies [are] located in historically economic[ally] distressed rural communities, bringing in new companies, jobs, and hope. The TTW has allowed our region to diversify its industrial base, being largely responsible for the recruitment for companies like Boeing, International

⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 10.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Paper, Weyerhaeuser, Kerr-McGee Chemical and Leggin and Flak. Without the Tenn-Tom it's not likely that these companies would have located in our area. [It] brought more jobs, better jobs, and a higher quality of life for our people.

In an economic study done in 1995, Economic Analysts from Troy State University and the University of West Alabama found that the waterway contributed millions of dollars to the local, regional and national economies and provided thousands of jobs during the five-year period from 1990 to 1994. Calculating the direct, indirect (income and jobs created because of purchases made by firms using the waterway), and induced (income expenditures of employees gaining jobs created by access to the waterway both direct and indirect) impacts of jobs and compensation, the study showed a remarkable growth (See table 2). The single largest employer of the waterway was the wood and wood products industry, which accounted for eighty percent of the waterways workers.⁹⁶

Table 2

Summary of the Total Economic Impact of Waterway in 1994.⁹⁷

	Jobs	Compensation (\$million)
Immediate Area	18,867	484.5
Four-State Area	22,275	583.8
National	43,222	1,164.5

Contradictions between the perceptions of the supporters and detractors of the fulfillment of the Tenn-Tom's promise clouded people's opinion. For some the realities

⁹⁶“Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway,” *American Environmental Review* (Boca Raton, FL: A presentation of WJMK); and Paul Garner and Mac Holmes, “An Analysis of the Annual Economic Impact of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway,” a joint publication between Troy State University and the University of West Alabama., p. 5-20.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 20.

never lived up to their expectations. To others it was only a matter of time before the promise cultivated and placed all exasperations by the weigh side. Hollie Allen, the director of the University of North Alabama's Industrial Research and Extension Center explained her outlook on the Tenn-Tom: "I never thought the Tenn-Tom was going to be a rip-roaring explosion. I remain confident that growth is going to occur and that will generate tonnage. We've only scratched the surface to this point with a little development here and there." Different factors combined to hamper the fulfillment of the Teenn-Tom's promise to the people of Mississippi and Alabama. Mounting expectations, an early opening date, changes in the global economy, and the difficulties of building the necessary auxiliaries businesses needed to conduct there business, all played a part in fulfilling the waterway's promise. In 1989, TTWDA President Don Waldon stated:

Debate on major public policy issues, such as the Tenn-Tom, evoke honest differences of opinions on the pros and cons of these kinds of projects. With the exception of some interests outside the Tenn-Tom region, the vast majority of those affected by this waterway are strong supporters of the project. Tenn-Tom has always enjoyed bipartisan support of the region's elected officials. Not one governor from the five-state region of the waterway has ever opposed the waterway. Every congressman and senator from the Tenn-Tom corridor have always supported the project primarily because of the strong grass-roots support the project enjoyed. Can all of these people be wrong? I doubt it.⁹⁸

People's expectations, their exasperations, their countless hopes and dreams, all dealt with progress and when progress did not manifest from the start with the Tenn-Tom that is when their thoughts changed. That's when the promise changed and that's when people began forming their own ideals about what the promise meant. No sooner had the

⁹⁸ Don Waldon, "Tenn-Tom Waterway has already proven its value to state, industry," *The Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, MS) March 12, 1989.

water started flowing, then the critics of the waterway started constructing its view as a failure. Soon after, local people began to see the Tenn-Tom in the same light. They didn't give it time to mature. They rushed their interpretation and who could blame them? After the decades of living with the promise of the waterway, when were they expected to benefit from it? People from all walks of life turned away from the belief of the waterway as the economic salvation of the region. However, consciously or not, they began turning to its other resources to gain some improvements in their life.

As developers along the Tenn-Tom struggled to transform the economies and economic path of one of the poorest regions of America, a real transformation was happening in an unlikely place. As businessmen and women encouraged industrial growth in the various communities located on the shores of the Tenn-Tom, an old rival from the years of construction was providing influences of its own. The natural environment and the environmental considerations put forth by NEPA were sparking an alternative interpretation within the minds of some local people in the Tenn-Tom region.⁹⁹

With its official opening in 1985, the Tenn-Tom opened its waters to “anyone who wants to use it.” Taking the waterway up on its offer, many pedestrian-owned watercrafts flocked to the nation's newest waterway. Looking to explore a part of the country closed to water traffic before the creation of the Tenn-Tom, these boaters saw first hand the scenic beauty of northeast Mississippi and southwest Alabama. This influx of pleasure crafts caught many of the local business leaders off guard by their sheer

⁹⁹ Tom Gordon, “Tenn-Tom gradually proving its worth,” *The Birmingham News* (Birmingham, AL) May 4, 1989.

numbers, leaving many communities to grapple with new efforts on how to capitalize on this new form of traffic. The environment was adding its voice to the interpretation of the waterway's promise, but this time as an ally. In the years following the opening of the waterway, the natural environment and the changes to the land of Mississippi and Alabama offered some an alternative salvation. Cookie Emerson, member of Amory's Chamber of Commerce, remained a perceptive business leader for his town and the TTWDA. Emerson was one of the few who predicted that recreational activities could bring profits to the economies of the local communities. In 1985, he stated, "When you've got fishermen, campers, and everybody coming in here, even the man selling snow cones on the corners will benefit." Yet despite his recognition, the recreational exploits of the Tenn-Tom caught many communities unaware of its true potential for changing currents of thoughts.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Roland Wilkerson, "Waxler tow set for initial trip on Tenn-Tom," *Commercial Appeal*, [u.d., probably 1985], from a copy in John C. Stennis Collection: Series 46, Box 64, Folder Tennessee-Tombigbee Industrial Development, Congressional and Political Records, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University; Petersen, p. A1.

CHAPTER IV

THE PROMISE THAT IS: THE TALE OF TWO RIVERS, THE ENVIRONMENTAL LEGACY OF THE WATERWAY, AND RECREATION

In August of 1988, *Lakeland Boating*, a magazine dedicated to covering the navigational interests of freshwater boating enthusiasts from the Great Lakes and its connecting waterways, dedicated an article to the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. Entitled “The Incredible Tenn-Tom,” the author, William Prentiss, proclaimed, “Midwestern boaters eager to reach the Gulf of Mexico and warmer climates will find a great new shortcut on the Tenn-Tom.” Describing the Tenn-Tom as a “Waterway Wilderness,” Prentiss was joined on his sojourn by Gene Agnew a boater familiar with waters of both the Mississippi and the Tenn-Tom. Agnew expressed his opinion of the advantages of traveling on the Tenn-Tom instead of the Mississippi River. High seas, rough water, and heavy commercial traffic made journeying on the Mississippi with pleasure boats an arduous task. Remarking about his three journeys along the Tenn-Tom, Agnew stated, “You could probably run it at a good cruising speed in a little more than a couple of days, but we enjoy the scenery and the water.” Another difference on the Tenn-Tom was barge traffic or more importantly their ability to control their loads. Again, Agnew explained some difficulties of navigating the Mississippi River over the Tenn-Tom: “We were in a narrow place when I spotted this towboat approaching.

Remember, a towboat is really a pusher, and the captain's control over his load is affected by wind and current. I called him to ask which side of the channel he would prefer. He was back to me in a couple of seconds. He said, 'Captain you can either go on the bank or outside the buoy line because I'm taking the whole channel.' Needless to say, I got out of the way. I haven't heard of any such problems on the Tenn-Tom. The towboats have good control over their barges because the Tenn-Tom is a 'slack water stream.' That is, it barely moves." However, travel along the Tenn-Tom offered obstacles of a different and smaller sort.¹⁰¹

Midwestern boaters were not the only watercraft to visit the waterway in large numbers. Anglers from all over the country flocked to its waters in search of bass, crappie, white perch, and other fish, and the Tenn-Tom quickly developed a national reputation as a "hotspot" for fishermen. It produced state records and corporate sponsored bass tournaments. Captain Daniel Webster, another midwestern yacht cruiser, commented on the number of fishing boats he encountered in his travels. He said, "Sometimes you can run into two hundred in a day." Together, the combination of large and small recreation craft floating on the Tenn-Tom meant that new traffic rules and regulations were necessary, requiring travelers to remain respectful of one another. During his journey Agnew commented about the situation saying, "The northern section have a lot of small boat traffic—mostly fishermen. The rule is watch the wake." In fact

¹⁰¹ William Prentiss, "The Incredible Tenn-Tom," *Lakeland Boating* (August 1988): 43, 44.

boating safety became a large concern of the Corps and local law enforcement agencies all along the waterway.¹⁰²

Ease of travel and safety issues were only considerations for midwestern boaters journeying through Alabama's and Mississippi's new water system. In another article detailing the Tenn-Tom's naturalness, another Midwestern boater commented on his travels. James T. Swartzwelder, a pilot for the Gateway Clipper Fleet said, "It's a beautiful waterway and a nice alternate route for pleasure boaters." A third Midwestern visitor, Donna Caruso, summed up her experience as follows: "While a notation I spotted on one chart may be true—that 'you will become so attached to the Tenn-Tom Waterway that you will want your ashes scattered there,'—the waterway does hold its own brand of beauty. As we snaked down the Mississippi and Alabama borders, gray cranes constantly flew across our path, deer and even an alligator turned up on the shores once we got further south. We admired an array of waterfalls created from the dams at the locks as well as craggy coves of cypress stumps, eight rivers that enter into the waterway, and some very southern tourist sites." The splendors of the southern environment were on

¹⁰² Donna Caruso, "Through America's Heartland: The Tennessee-Tombigbee takes this cruiser through the romance and history of the deep South," [unknown publication and date, likely early 1990s] article located in Tenn-Tom Scrapbook 1984-1997, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Headquarters, Plymouth Bluff, Columbus, MS; and "Waterway boaters are responsible for wakes," *The Itawamba County Times* (Fulton, MS) April 12, 1989; "Aliceville's Trophy Largemouths," [unknown publication and date, probably 1989] article located in Tenn-Tom Scrapbook 1985-1997, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Headquarters, Plymouth Bluff, Columbus, MS; and Mike Bolton, "What a catch! Two monsters in 30 minutes," [unknown publication and date, probably 1989] article located in Tenn-Tom Scrapbook 1985-1997, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Headquarters, Plymouth Bluff, Columbus, MS.

display to these visitors and the visual “naturalness” of the waterway’s design was turning out to be another factor drawing people to the region.¹⁰³

Recognizing the draw nature was having in attracting people, boosters began to advertise these added cultural advantages to people inside and outside of the project area. Local newspapers wrote of the native recreational and cultural resource benefits and began constructing a new charming personality for the Tenn-Tom. These papers wanted to personify the waterway as a place where one would want to experience the nature, history, and culture of the Tombigbee Valley. One example of this occurred in March, 1986, when Columbus, Mississippi’s *The Commercial Dispatch* carried an article saying: “the waterway has thousands of acres of water ready and waiting for you to enjoy. Experience the serenity of the park’s surroundings, but please do not pinch the turkeys or ride the deer.” Embellishments, such as the example above, sculpted a different interpretation of the waterway’s purpose, one significantly different from its industrial roots.¹⁰⁴

From its opening in 1985, there were many attractions drawing numerous recreational boaters to the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway’s shores. First, many boater enjoyed the benefits of reduced mileage in reaching America’s Gulf Coast. This was especially important for large number of boaters traveling to and from the Great Lakes as

¹⁰³ Ruth Heimbecher, “New Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway opens inland America,” *The Pittsburg Press* (Pittsburg, PN) [u.d., likely June 1987], clipping located in Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Scrapbook 1986-1992, Plymouth Bluff Headquarters, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Columbus, Mississippi; and Caruso.

¹⁰⁴ “Thoughts of Fun Outdoor,” *The Commercial Dispatch*, (Columbus, MS) March 16, 1986.

they were able to avoid the heavy commercial barge traffic found on the lower Mississippi. In addition, they enjoyed lowered fuel costs through shortened journeys to Florida and other popular vacation spots throughout the Caribbean. For those located closer to the waterway, the new lakes built behind the Tenn-Tom's numerous locks and dams created large bodies of water where none existed before. These offered nearby fishing grounds and a myriad of opportunities for locals to enjoy water sports and activities of all sorts. The Tenn-Tom also offered recreational visitors better aesthetic conditions because it was designed with environmental considerations in mind. Visitors quickly discovered that the waterway was "nicely bordered on both sides with woods and low hills, few houses, towns, or signs of industry," a more "natural" setting than that experienced along the Mississippi and other rivers.¹⁰⁵

While this description of the Tenn-Tom was not the promised economic portrayal that developers envisioned, it does suggest that there was an alternative way of living with the realities of the booster's original promises. During the first ten years of the waterway's operation, local communities began gearing their economic interests to include ways of capitalizing on this new influx of outside traffic flowing by their shores. Through these additional efforts, people began to realize the unforeseen benefits in having the waterway in their region. Through these years of development, recreational facilities and opportunities of the Tenn-Tom increased the quality of life throughout the region, offering them additions to the South's cultural resources. While the grandiose

¹⁰⁵ Caruso.

predictions of commercial river traffic and job opportunities of the Tenn-Tom's promise remained elusive, slowly rising figures gave some reason for optimism. In the meantime, communities began enjoying the benefits of more than just jobs and industry coming from the waterway and flocked to its woods and shores to partake in the Tenn-Tom's abundance of leisure activities and they were not alone.

In 1988, the Corps of Engineers reported that their locking facilities were operating at maximum capacity, but it was not commercial traffic filling their locks. That same year, the TTWDA reported that the five million visitors, almost twice the number predicted by the experts, were visiting the Tenn-Tom. Privately owned yachts, sailboats, and houseboats of tremendous size and even ocean going cruise ships "up to 180 feet long" sailed the waterway in increasing numbers. At first, the novelty of the Tenn-Tom played a large part in this transit recreational traffic, but visitation remained steady over the years. Throughout the 1990s, in spring and fall at least a hundred boats a month migrated from the north or south and many boaters sailed the waterway for the cultural and natural attractions it offers, utilizing it as more than just a transportation corridor. The recreation arena beckoned developers who started seeing another opportunity for locals to cash in on the waterway's promise. In 1988, searching for new businesses interested locating to the Tenn-Tom for its recreational aspects, Pat Ross, TTWDA assistant administrator, said, "We believe there is excellent opportunity for marinas and other facilities to serve boaters, camper, and fishermen, and we welcome inquiries." Predictions were that more pleasure boat traffic would soon flow into the Tenn-Tom, bringing outside money into the region. Ross continued, "Our lockmaster counted quite a

lot of full-size motor yachts (in excess of 35 feet) making the full run through the system in 1987. These craft were all registered in states other than Alabama and Mississippi.”¹⁰⁶

There was never any doubt that millions of people would come to visit the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, but few expected them to come in the numbers that they did. Prior to its construction, the best estimates predicted three million visitors would come to enjoy the hunting, fishing, boating, swimming, and camping experiences provided by the waterway’s recreational facilities. These numbers greatly underestimated the appeal of the Tenn-Tom as the numbers would soon double these figures. During construction, environmental considerations caused developers and the Corps countless hardships and placed numerous hurdles for them to overcome. Adopting tactics to “protect and enhance” the environment, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers underwent a change in policy during the “age of the environment.” Throughout the Tenn-Tom corridor, the Corps made radical changes to the shape, character, and identity of the natural landscapes in Northeast Mississippi and Western Alabama.¹⁰⁷

While controversial at the time, the environmental tactics and strategies forced upon the waterway by NEPA and the two court cases implemented a new future for the Tombigbee Valley. In essence, these considerations created an environment that was both bountiful and beautiful, with both economic and environmental consequences in

¹⁰⁶ Ibid; and Heimbecher.

¹⁰⁷ Prentiss; During the early 1980s the logo of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers held the words: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Does the Job: Protect & Enhance the Environment, one example of this was U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, “Mobile District News,” (Mobile, AL) February, 26, 1981; the *Age of Environment* was coined in Nathaniel D. McClure, “A major project in the age of the environment: out of controversy, complexity, and challenge,” *Environmental Geology* (1985) vol. 7, issue 1.

mind. In the years after the waterway's opening, the Corps continued adopting innovative ways of increasing its recreational appeal. At the same time that the Corps and boosters built ports and industrial parks, they also groomed the Tenn-Tom's waters to be excellent fishing grounds. They also planted forests to provide habitat for a diversity of wildlife, and provided recreational facilities and opportunities for people to enjoy and learn not only about the project itself, but the region's environment and history as well. Adopting strategies that would enhance the waterway's appeal to a variety of people, the Corps created a project that integrated itself into the culture of the region and built a future where people, economics, and the environment coalesced into a new promise.

From the beginning, the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway promised the region economic stimulation by bringing jobs and industry into a region in need of both. At another level, the Tenn-Tom also promised a lot more. To a select few, the fulfillment of the waterway's promise went beyond the limited amount of jobs it provided. They saw the other ways it began to improve the quality of life of local people. New recreational opportunities allowed countless individuals both inside and outside the region a way of experiencing and enjoying the waterway, nature, and the region's history. These activities touched more people's lives in ways beyond what simple economics could. People swam, fished, and boated on its waters. They hiked, camped, and hunted its lands, and in the process they spent money. They bought boats, gas, food, and supplies, creating new economic opportunities for local communities. All of this was done in the name of the Tenn-Tom.

The environmental changes forced upon the Tenn-Tom became advantages in the years after its opening. It benefited both man and wildlife by intertwining industrial development with recreational pursuits. It accomplished this by altering the land, but also by altering its promise. Reflecting changes in the way people were thinking about the environment and spurred by new federal legislation, in the ten years after its opening the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway embraced an environmental legacy. Its supporters argued that despite its controversial beginnings, the waterway was nature personified. While there was some environmental damage caused by its construction, in many cases, the waterway created an “enhanced” environment. The Tenn-Tom mitigated damages to land hurt not only by its construction, but through years of poor land husbandry as well and transformed them for the benefit of local environments and economics. This transformation started with changes to the land of the Tombigbee Valley, a conversion that takes hundreds of years of explanation in order to understand. By tracing the changes in the land from earliest history of the region and the two rivers of the project, one can understand how the environment and economic combined to make the promise that is.

The creation of the Tennessee and Tombigbee Rivers dates back to prehistoric times. Isolated by a drainage divide of crustaceous-period terraces, both the two father rivers of the waterway and the inhabitants of these river valleys progressed along paralleling, but contrasting paths. The grandfather river of this system is the Tennessee, which has historically played a more significant role in America history. From native cultures to early European settlement and finally to its modern image, the Tennessee by

its sheer length, size, and resources dominated riverine customs throughout much of the South. The Tombigbee, while smaller in length and water volume, remained significant to transportation traffic due to its conveyance with the Black Warrior River to the east and eventually the Gulf of Mexico to the south. For some American Indians and early European settlers, the Tombigbee was a more convenient route to the coast than that taken by the Tennessee. Despite their separation, the two river valleys harbored similar cultures, agricultural pursuits, and even conflicts. While the fate of the Tennessee River at the hands of the TVA is well chronicled by historians, the fate of the Tombigbee is less documented even though they share the common legacy of being harnessed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.¹⁰⁸

In the cases of both the Tennessee and Tombigbee Rivers, the sacrifice of the old rivers facilitated their resurrection as a single modern navigable water system. While the change of these two rivers from old to new is not necessarily remarkable in American river lore, they provide two poignant looks at the ideals fostered in their transformation by man's hands. The first was the promise of economic salvation fostered through connecting impoverished regions of the South to the rest of the nation through advanced water infrastructure. The second was the transition of old free flowing river to a newly regulated and controlled waterway, an "enhanced" environment that would bring a myriad of benefits and provide social uplifting. These changes to the land altered the navigability of the rivers and reshaped their environmental character. Throughout the

¹⁰⁸ David S. Brose, *Yesterday's river: the Archaeology of 10,000 Years Along the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway* (Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Museum of Natural History, 1991)

twentieth century, the federal government reshaped the landscape of America into one more befitting an industrialized nation. Roads, rails, and waterways connected the nation into a collective organism capable of sustaining its exterior international requirements with the pulse of its interior machinations. While in the centuries before the twentieth, man tamed the land with axes, plows, and fences, in the modern era they used massive earthmoving machinery like bulldozers and excavators built with the uncompromising strength of steel and concrete, and operated under the erudite supervision of engineers and scientists. These experts, armed with superior knowledge and technology, so radically changed the landscape of America that when people paused and looked around, they hardly recognized their surroundings.

In 1946, historian Donald Davidson remarked that the Tennessee River was in fact “two rivers in one.” The first, hidden in the undercurrents of the other, was the river of old, which Davidson named the river of “legend.” Drowned beneath the Tennessee River of today, it is lost to all but the fond memories of a dieing few or immortalized on the pages of numerous books. In earlier times, this veiled Tennessee River was wild and unpredictable; it defied attempts to harness it for thousands of years. Formed with the departure of the crustaceous sea that covered much of the inland of the North America, the Tennessee River disregarded the common logic associated with the majority of rivers east of the Mississippi. The Tennessee distinguished itself from other rivers of the region by its sheer length and the erratic path it followed while crossing through much of the south. Springing out from its headwaters in the Appalachians to the east, the Tennessee flowed generally in a southwestern direction, until it reached Muscle Shoals,

Alabama, where it turned west and then surged northwestwardly, the reverse of its original southerly course. Running as far north as south, the Tennessee eventually meets up with the Ohio River near modern day Kentucky. Its waters ultimately mix with the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico.¹⁰⁹

Throughout its course, many hazards and obstacles thwarted human navigation along the river. Would-be boat pilots called these fear-inspiring navigational hazards “the suck,” “the narrows,” and “Muscle Shoals.” Changing unpredictably from a wide river with slow moving waters to narrow pinched areas full of rapids and shallow shoals, travel on the river was at best a dangerous task and simply impossible for many more. However, transportation problems ended with the coming of the New Deal legislation of the 1930s or more importantly its brainchild the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Under their machinations, the old Tennessee River of legend shed its physical body and transcended into the intangible realm of memories and dreams, a fate that its little brother, the Tombigbee, would share forty years later.¹¹⁰

The second river of Davidson’s narrative is the manmade river systems of today’s Tennessee River known as the “river of statistics.” A colossal wonder of the world, constructed through the expertise, ingenuity and imagination of man. Like Disney’s “imagineers” diligently working to create a realistic fantasy environment for millions of park visitors, the TVA conjured up and sculpted a new river more compatible with their

¹⁰⁹ Donald Davidson, *Then Tennessee: The Old River: Frontier to Secession*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1946), 5.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.5-10.

idealized vision of the wants and needs of modern man. Today, more a chain of lakes than a river, the Tennessee River and its accompanying Valley are docile and friendly to its inhabitants and spectators. The placid pools of captured water, held back from their natural flow by huge, monolithic dams offer an entirely different experience of the Tennessee River than those of its earlier days. These giants of “God’s Valley” allow easy navigation over the once burdensome obstacles of the original river, another historical dilemma conquered through the expertise of technology was the valley’s unpredictable flooding. The constant flooding of the river, so disastrous to countless generations of farmers but initially responsible for the valley’s fertility, no longer pose a problem to valley residents. With the sinking of thousands of formerly dry acres along the Tennessee Valley, the TVA regulated the unpredictable consequences that rainfall had on water levels, ending the threat of floods. The TVA’s Tennessee River left an undeniable legacy on the Tombigbee as its development in the 1930s and 40s blazing a trail for the development of the Tenn-Tom in the 60s, 70s and 80s.¹¹¹

A similar story of two rivers, the river of “legend” and “statistics,” holds true for the Tombigbee River. Just like the Tennessee, the first river was the river of old; one vanished into the realm of fable. In fact, Tombigbee is a name rarely used today, as the river itself has been absorbed by the moniker Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway and the Tombigbee-Black Warrior River System to the south. Smaller than the Tennessee, the Tombigbee was a serpentine river that moved south from the northeast hills of

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 12; Wilson Whitman, *God’s Valley: People and Power along the Tennessee River*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1939).

Mississippi through the Black Belt Prairie of central Alabama and Mississippi. The frequent flooding of adjacent flatlands and woodlands left a riverside edged by bluffs and cane thickets. The upper part of the river, too shallow for navigation for most of the year, swelled during the rainy winter months, allowing seasonal passage as far north as Cotton Gin Port, Mississippi near modern day Amory, Mississippi. The headwaters of the Tombigbee River flowing out of the hills of Northeast Mississippi were too sporadic, tangled, and shallow to meet transportation needs. The populations on this stretch utilized its waters for operating water mills and water plant machinery. The muddy waters of the river often overflowed their banks and swept aside brush and debris creating countless dangers along its length. These snags, coupled with sandbars and shallows, made navigation a risky prospect. Yet, despite these less than desirable conditions, the Tombigbee remained a free flowing river, one of the few left east of the Mississippi long after the transformation of the Tennessee.¹¹²

Like Davidson's "river of statistics" the second river drowning the Tombigbee of old is the Tenn-Tom itself. The Corps' layout of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway divided it into three distinct sections: the River, Canal, and Divide Cut, each of which called for a different criteria and means of construction in order to overcome the geographical obstacles of the countryside. Each section demanded different environmental considerations during the design and construction of the waterway. Because of the mandates set out by the NEPA, the sections were engineered with a

¹¹² Stine, *Mixing the Waters*, p. 34; and *Tishomingo County, Mississippi, 1836-1997, Volume I* (Humboldt, Tennessee: Rose Publishing Company, 1997) p. 28.

thought toward alleviating the harmful environmental impacts and each called for unique and separate measures. As such, the waterway's three sections grappled with their own set of environmental shortcomings, such as spoil disposal, aquifer drawdown, water quality, erosion, and sedimentation. At the same time that the engineers grappled with the individual considerations of each section, they had to maintain a constant watch over other larger environmental concerns that encompassed the project as a whole, including the overall loss of wildlife habitat, impacts on endangered species, and the transfer of water and organisms from two biologically distinct river systems. With their efforts, engineers had to balance quantifiable impacts—those problems which were predictable and evaluated for, such as spoil amount and acreage changed—with qualifiable ones—those more intangible in nature, such as uncertainty of biodiversity consequences caused from the mixing the waters of the two rivers separated progressing along distinct biological paths for thousands of years and the extinction of wildlife species resulted from this incorporation. In particular, the qualifiable terms by their very nature remained largely unpredictable during construction and only time would tell what would happen.¹¹³

What remained important was that the Corps designed the waterway to look and act as naturally as possible. They cultivated its image and groomed the surrounding landscapes into an Arcadian paradise, which lessened the presence of their alterations to the land. In essence, the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway was like conducting three projects in one and it took a tremendous amount of ingenuity for the engineers to balance

¹¹³ Gerald J. McLindon, "Creative Spoil: Design, Construction Techniques, and Disposal of Excavated Materials," *Environmental Geology* vol. 7, Issue 2 (1985).

the different criteria of each section into an economically feasible, yet environmentally friendly project, but their achievement would pay dividends in drawing men and animals to the project area.¹¹⁴

The southernmost part of the waterway, the River Section, so called because its construction remained inside the original river's boundaries, stretches for 149 miles and included four lock and dams in order to circumnavigate a 117-foot elevation change. Flowing through a countryside of flat alluvial river bottom land with small rolling hills and bluffs geologically sculpted by centuries of floods, the old river, near its convergence with the Black Warrior River, required maintenance and expansion in order to fit into the project's plans. For the individuals located along this stretch of the project, riverine life played a significant role within their culture. It was this stretch of the Tombigbee that steam powered paddle boats plied their trade and cotton exporters of the Black Belt shipped their wares to coastal ports. In more recent times, inhabitants of this region enjoyed the recreational benefits of fishing and pleasure boating. The Corps widened and straightened the old river's twisting path by dredging a channel three hundred feet wide and nine-feet deep, into the existing Tombigbee River. In the course of dredging, the River section excavated 84,279,000 cubic yards of dredge material, which took 9,068 areas of land to create disposal areas.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile District, *Second Supplemental Environmental Report: Continuing Environmental Studies, Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, Alabama and Mississippi, volume I, Overall Study* (Mobile, AL: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile District, October 1977), p. 1; and For further detail of the waterway's sections see Jeffrey K. Stine, *Mixing the Waters*, p. 36-64; and Nathaniel

In older projects, the Corps cleared river banks of trees and foliage and the spoil (excess earth created from dredging and excavation) was dumped in a continual line along the banks of rivers. This created an ugly “scar” of lifeless land visible from the water and any passing roads in project areas. There was little consideration for erosion, seepage, or damage into adjacent wetlands. While this was a tactic utilized by both public and private construction companies prior to 1970, under the environmental mandates of NEPA, the Corps was forced to turn to different tactics. During the development phase of the Tenn-Tom, the Corps adopted several changes to lessen the adverse environmental impacts of its construction. First, the Corps limited its widening and deepening to the bare minimal needed for proper navigation. Next, it utilized a hydraulic dredge in a box cut design, which undercut the bank, allowing upper material to slough down, creating a naturally sloped and stable bank, suitable to avoid erosion and allow proper plant growth. Where possible, the Corps only cut along one bank, leaving the other side in its natural state. Dredged material was pumped into preplanned disposal sites for the good of the environment and then hidden from the view of any travelers on the river and any roads within the area. At the same time, the Corps chose disposal sites with environmental friendliness in mind. Three disposal sites utilized abandoned gravel pits and three more were contained in old mines, which eliminated safety hazards and in some ways improved environments already degraded by human consumption. Also, four

D. McClure IV, “A Summary of Environmental Issues and Findings: Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway,” *Environmental geology and water sciences* Vol. 7, Issue 2 (1985).

additional sites used excavated material to create industrial sites suitable for regional development needs.¹¹⁶

However, the bulk of dredge materials needed designated and prepared disposal locations throughout the years of construction. The River Section, being composed of river floodplain land consisting of bottomland hardwood forests, a prime location for wildlife habitat, mandated careful consideration to lessen environmental damage to surrounding areas. The largest concern plaguing the disposal of spoil was that these soils typically were heavily leached of valuable nutrients and of a higher acidic pH than typical topsoil. This meant that the soil was unsuitable for growing plant life. Engineers adopted a two-cell system where the first cell was a container for holding excavation material and the second provided “sedimentation retention, turbidity control and water quality protection.” In addition buffer zones of natural vegetation surrounded disposal sites and provided three functions. First they created a transition zone between the terrestrial disposal site and natural aquatic landscape. Second, it provided a seed source for natural vegetation to eventually take root in disposal sites and third, it provided an aesthetic screen, hiding the site from view. While traditional disposal of spoil related to river system maintenance and construction damaged surrounding lands drastically, the efforts along the Tenn-Tom River Section created an environment that within four to five growing seasons was completely revegetated. In addition, during the transition years of

¹¹⁶ U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1982, *Final supplemental to the environmental impact statement*, Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, Alabama and Mississippi.; navigation, 2 vols.: Mobile, AL and Nashville, TN; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1984, *Continuing environmental studies*, Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, Alabama and Mississippi. Third supplemental environmental report, 13 vols.: Mobile Alabama.

the spoil sites returning to their natural state as hardwood forest, they offered wildlife a different old field habitat, which appealed to a diversity of animals. So, despite potentially negative environmental damages associated with spoil disposal, the River Section created an atmosphere of helpful and inventive uses of materials. In an article in *Environmental Geology*, Gerald McLindon remarked, “At this time, it is obvious that the measures taken [in the River Section] have heightened biological production and diversity. The operation has resulted in environmental protection and conservation that will sustain the resources of the area.”¹¹⁷

The middle section, called the Canal Section, is forty-six miles long, twelve-feet deep and three hundred feet wide beginning just south of Amory, Mississippi and ending north at Bay Springs Lake. Narrower, curvier, and shallower than its lower reaches, populations along this stretch of the Tombigbee were a mixed lot, a combination of river delta and hill country farmers. For the most part, riverine culture and economics was not as large a feature of the people in this section. In an area filled with numerous rocky springs, creeks, and streams, populations historically used water to power mills rather than to ship exports. The headwaters of the Tombigbee River spawned from the hills in the northern part of this section. Navigation along this part of the river was unpredictable at best as only during the flood season of winter did commercial craft even attempt to sail these shallow waters. The Corps created five locks and corresponding pools, overcoming

¹¹⁷ Stine, *Mixing the Waters*, p. 93, 97; McClure, *A major project...*, p. 22; McLindon, p. 97-100; and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1983, *Wildlife mitigation feasibility study and environmental impact statement for the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway*, Alabama-Mississippi, vol. 1 of 3: Mobile, Al and Nashville, TN.

a 140-foot elevation change and constructed the section by building a “Chain of lakes” connected by a manmade canal. By adopting this concept, the Corps looked to enhance the natural beauty of the environment by providing favorable terrain to fish and wildlife as well as leaving the waterway’s appearance in a more “natural” state. The canal and the “Chain of lakes” lay to the east of the Tombigbee River itself and this area remains the only place where the old river survives for any considerable stretch. Paralleling instead of overlaying the original snakelike course eased the Corps’ design and aesthetic considerations and allowed the original river to keep its serpentine shape, but not its original flow. However, the more easily built and navigable canal and “Chain of lakes” required the purchase and flooding of nearly double the acreage of land predicted by the initial designs.¹¹⁸

In 1985, Gerald McLindon declared that “most of this area was considered excellent wildlife habitat” before construction began. This section changed the physical landscape of 11,854 acres with 8,117 becoming lake pools, 2,524 encompassing a series of levees, dikes, locks, and spillways, 898 for spoil disposal, and 315 for recreation areas. Of this land, only 2,500 acres were used for agricultural purposes, the rest was composed of bottomland hardwoods, other forestlands, and the occasional gravel pit. This section required the removal of 47,951,000 cubic yards of excavation with a large portion being used to construct the infrastructure needed for the “Chain of Lakes” system. With a

¹¹⁸ U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1977, *Continuing environmental studies* Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, Alabama and Mississippi, Second supplemental environmental report, 9 vols.: Mobile, Al.

desire to keep all parts of the waterway as aesthetically pleasing, while reducing impacts on local environments, the Corps blended waterway structures into the landscape and constructed a levee system along the west side of the navigation channel. In order to stop erosion and ease the Corp's efforts in care and maintenance of the levees system, designers called for a "natural revegetation" of the banks where applicable. However, care was taken to ensure levee integrity. This meant that the waterside of the levee would be composed of grasses only, while the land side would consist of a transition from shrubs, small trees, medium trees, to an unrestricted zone. This was to ensure that the roots of plants would not undermine the structural integrity of the levee and cause erosion and the possible collapse of the levee. Despite the term "natural revegetation," it was "anticipated that some control will be exercised over the types of plant species growing on certain parts of the levee, in order to maintain an adequate 'root-free zone.'" Overall, the adoption of the "Chain of Lakes" concept over a "Perched" canal meant a minimizing of environmental and aesthetic ramifications, as the majority of spoil was reused for infrastructure purposes. The reduction in disposal sites and the promotion of proper land use created a "good-quality" wildlife habitat area in this section, a slight reduction from its excellent rating prior to construction.¹¹⁹

The Divide Section is northernmost section, and for visitors today undoubtedly the most likely awe-inspiring. It is comprised of a thirty-nine mile long trench from the twin pools of Bay Springs Lake to the south and Pickwick Lake on the Tennessee River

¹¹⁹ McLindon, p. 97-100.

to the north. The channel runs twelve feet deep with a span 280 feet wide. The deepest cut on the waterway occurred near the town of Paden, Mississippi and is 175 feet deep and fifteen-hundred feet wide. The Divide Cut was a tremendous undertaking, as the average depth of the cut equaled around 50 feet in depth. Producing 150 million cubic yards of spoil, the cut equaled one-half of the total accumulated during the waterway's construction. Engineers moved more earth from this section than was removed during the entire construction of the Panama Canal. As one telling example of the amount of earth moved from the Divide Cut, the spoil was enough to produce a two-lane highway from the Earth to the moon. The major navigational purpose of the Divide cut was that it linked the man-made lakes Bay Springs and Pickwick Lake; two Corps built lakes on the same elevation level, easing navigation between the two water systems of the Tennessee and Tombigbee Rivers. The only navigational feature in the Divide Section is Bay Springs Lock and Dam. While typical locks along the Tenn-Tom have an average lift of twenty-eight feet, Bay Springs Lock and Dam was a major exception with a lift of eighty-four feet. Bay Springs Lock and Dam was set in a 100-foot-high rock filled dam, 2,500 feet long. This earthwork created Bay Springs Lake which alone encompassed 6,700 acres of land. This lock completed the tiered stair-step approach that utilized ten locks and dams to overcome a total elevation difference of 341 feet from one end of the waterway to the other.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Ibid.

The design of the Divide Cut channel required innovated thinking from the project's engineers. In efforts to avoid erosion problems stemming from the slopes of the cut, the Corps adopted an upside down pyramid approach. Then the tiered slopes of the cut were seeded with vegetation, while the actual banks were covered with filter cloth and lined with stones in order to combat turbulence caused by passing watercraft. The contoured banks of the Divide Cut have a "back slope and lateral slopes to surfaced drop ditches and piped systems to collect and deliver surface water to the pool in a controlled manner. While this section is the most aesthetically unpleasing in natural appearances, designers looked to create more "natural" landscapes away from the banks and into the surrounding land.

During construction, the disposal of so much spoil in the Divide Cut became an important point of contention between experts. While initial reactions from surveyors saw the large number of disposal areas as having an adversely negative affect on the surrounding countryside, an examination from a multidisciplinary team determined that the quality of most of the surrounding land was already in poor condition to begin with. Much of the land used in the disposal of Divide Cut spoil were those of previously logged out forestlands, fallow fields, or poor soil quality pasture and croplands. A brief historical sketch of region conducted by Dr. Harold A. Thomas of Harvard University explained the land's poor condition. Starting in the 1820s and 30s the region experienced a rapid population growth. Most families settled in the Northeast Hills of Mississippi in order to avoid the seasonal flooding and hordes of mosquitoes plaguing the bottomlands to the south. With the soils found in the hill country marginal and being less fertile than

neighboring floodplain areas, farmers adopted a custom where land was cleared used to the point of exhaustion. Then farmers would move to fresh land and repeat the process. Land left behind by this practice quickly gullied and eroded under the heavy rainfall of the region, pouring heavy sedimentation into creeks and rivers downstream. Unlike other sections of the project area, the populations settling along the divide never experienced any form of riverine culture in their day to day life. The only water resources in the region were swamplands and small, fast flowing tributaries whose waters fed the creeks and rivers located downstream.¹²¹

Because the land of the Divide Cut area was poor in environmental qualities, placing excavated soils in the hollers and valleys adjacent to the waterway was not damage to a pristine wildlife habitat, but a restoration and replacement of land lost through decades of poor husbandry by the local people. Utilizing a “valley fill” operation, engineers planned to create mounded areas of spoil disposal in neighboring depressions and let natural erosion reform the land, which would “replicate undisturbed hill country.” The next considerations for disposal sites were their “environmental acceptability, capacity, average haul distance, and degree of difficulty for hauling equipment,” as the area of highest quantities of spoil were the areas of the deepest cuts and the most difficult terrain. Again, engineers designed disposal site with aesthetic buffer zones in mind and hid disposal sites from the waterway and nearby roadways.¹²²

¹²¹ H.A. Thomas, Jr., 1972, Proceedings in the matter of EDF et al vs. Corps of Engineers, U.S. District Court, Northern District Mississippi, TR, p. H11, Aberdeen MS.

¹²² McLindon, p. 99.

Unlike other areas where landownership was limited due to surrounding cities and populations, the isolation of the Divide Cut section allowed the Corps to purchase large tracts of land. This enabled them to retain ownership of numerous sites and enact long-range land management programs for the many disposal areas needed. With the abundance of land required for disposal sites, the Corps then turned these changed lands into wildlife management areas, a mitigation procedure endorsed as a means of replacing lost wildlife habitats throughout the entire project area. The long-range goal of these areas was the establishment of vegetation which supported a “superior” wildlife management zone. In order to accomplish this goal, the land including disposal sites, recreation areas, and the neighboring countryside was organized under one managing authority, with a single mission of bettering wildlife habitats for all areas of the waterway.¹²³

It is important to note that during the design and construction of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway the Corps engineered and cultivated the waters and land of the project area into an environment geared toward both the needs of man and natural wildlife as well. The transformations of the Tennessee and Tombigbee rivers and the Corps’ environmental strategies on the Tenn-Tom played a crucial role in the rise of the waterway’s recreational appeal, but it was only one part of the story. In the years after the Tenn-Tom’s opening, these tactics changed and the Corps and developers stepped up cultural resource management missions. While some recreational and educational

¹²³ U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, *Wildlife mitigation...*

facilities were included in the design and construction phase of the waterway, their numbers increased steadily from the mid 1980s to the early 1990s, as the Corps and developers saw the need for additional facilities to meet the demands of the public and to fulfill its newly appointed cultural resource management mission.

If environmental considerations conducted during the construction of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway was dictated by the passage of the NEPA, in the years after its opening new considerations fell on equally revolutionary legislation, the Water Resource Development Act of 1986 (WRDA-86). Enacted a year after the Tenn-Tom opened in 1985, WRDA-86 reshaped not only the Tombigbee Valley and the Tenn-Tom Waterway, but radically altered the ideologies and organization of the Mobile District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. This act specified that the Corps had to develop mitigation plans for destroyed wetlands as a project proceeded, instead of afterwards as in the case of the Tenn-Tom. Additionally the WRDA-86 demanded changes in cost sharing with the local state governments, forcing state agencies to pick up a higher share of a project's costs and maintenance. Then Congress forced the Corps to look at mitigating the damages of past projects, demanding they replace lost and damaged lands with new pristine ones in order to protect and preserve them for future generations.¹²⁴

In the case of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, WRDA-86 mandated that 46,000 acres of wetland belonging to the Corps be set aside for fish and wildlife habitat

¹²⁴ *As Mobile Goes, So Goes the Corps: A Look at Change Inside a Government Agency: US Army Corps of Engineers Mobile District, 1985-2003* (Brockington and Associates, Inc: Atlanta, 2006) p. 1-15; For more on the history of cost sharing with non-federal entities, see Martin Reuss and Paul K. Walker, *Financing Water Resources Development: A Brief History*, a report prepared for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1983.

due to the massive loss of hardwood bottomland habitat caused during the project's construction. In addition, Congress provided funding for the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Wetlands Mitigation, expanding the scope of the project's acreage beyond its initial lofty projections. Under WRDA-86 the Corps received authority to purchase an additional 88,000 acres of bottomland hardwood forests in Mississippi and Alabama. This additional land was to atone for similar woodlands lost during the construction of the waterway, but ironically, not all of the land purchased was in the project area. Initially receiving \$66.2 million for purchasing the 88,000 acres for the Tenn-Tom project, the Corps actually received \$92 million for expenses after inflation.¹²⁵

The purchase of these additional lands in the later 1980s provided many benefits for the people of the region, as well as the many visitors exploring the richness of the South's history and resources. Wildlife biologist Jeff Magnum stated that the Corps managed "over 87,000 acres of land not only to provide for wildlife mitigation, but also to provide recreation for consumptive and non-consumptive users of wildlife. As a result of this, many species of wildlife including game and non-game, as well as threatened or endangered species have been benefited." Belonging to the federal government, wildlife mitigation lands were protected but open to public use. Hunters and sport fishermen in particular enjoyed the benefit of increased accessibility to public lands in a region that had been limited in this resource. These individuals quickly realized that the lands of the

¹²⁵ *As Mobile Goes*, "Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway," *American Environmental Review*; N. D. McClure IV and N.L. Connell Sr., "Environmental restoration measures on the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway—an update," *Environmental Geology* (February 2001) vol. 4, p. 567.

waterway offered an abundance of game animals and fish. Geared toward protecting and preserving the environment, the Tenn-Tom Wildlife Project formed from a collection of disciplines and created the Project Delivery Team. Consisting of biologists from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and from the respective state wildlife services, the Project Delivery Team gathered a collection of experts including foresters, civil engineers, architects, a hydraulic engineer, an attorney, a realty specialist, an archaeologist, and resource managers and placed more than 150,000 acres of land under their management and direction. This team became responsible for a wide-ranging number of activities such as hunting programs, waterfowl impoundment, bird and wildlife management, agricultural planting, wetland controls, and other aspects of forestry management.¹²⁶

One important need that the team saw was handicap facilities and programs. With this in mind, amenities for handicapped individuals were included at all campgrounds and fishing stations were specifically designed to meet special needs. In addition, easy access points to the water were installed in specified areas during the 1980s. One of the more popular and wide-reaching programs associated with the Tenn-Tom were special hunts designed specifically for handicapped individuals. By providing disabled individuals with the facilities, supervision, and opportunities they did not have before, the popularity of these hunts stretched to individuals outside the waterway's immediate area. A former manager of the waterway for the Corps remembered, "In 1988, we initiated special hunting days in early deer and turkey season to give the immobilized handicapped a

¹²⁶ "Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway," *American Environmental Review*; McClure IV and Connell Sr., p. 567.

chance to hunt. Relatives and on-site biologists help the hunters in an area set aside near Gainesville, Alabama.” The popularity of this program made it an annual event.¹²⁷

The advantages of access to public lands went beyond those of hunters, fishers and those in need of special amenities and programs. Once again, Jeff Magnum explained the Corps strategy. He said, “Well we manage these areas to provide optimum wildlife diversity and wildlife habitat. In doing so, we provide a lot of recreational opportunity for users of these areas including hikers, bikers, birdwatchers, hunters, fishermen, and just anybody else who enjoys the outdoors. This will leave us with a rich legacy for future generations.”¹²⁸

To ensure this legacy, the Corps built two environmental education centers, one on Bay Springs Lake located between the Divide and Canal sections and the other at Plymouth Bluff, near Columbus, Mississippi. Cabins, nature trails, gazebos, classrooms, and eating facilities are maintained by an educational consortium of Mississippi universities. Danny Hartley, Project Biologist for the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, explained their significance. He stated:

¹²⁷ Douglas W. Staller and J. Calvin Lunceford, “Opening Day 1988: Perfect,” *The Neshoba Democrat* (Philadelphia, MS) December 21, 1988; David Carter, “Hunters enjoy their special day,” *The Tuscaloosa News* (Tuscaloosa, AL) January 19, 1989; John Phillips, “Spend summertime researching all, winter hunting, fishing sites,” *The Birmingham Post-Herald* (Birmingham, AL) July 5, 1990; “Tenn-Tom, Corps Provide Lots of Hunting,” *The Commercial Dispatch* (Columbus, MS) December 9, 1984; “Deer Hunts,” *The Opp News*, (Opp, AL) November 17, 1988; “Tenn-Tom Today,” *The Amory Adviser* (Amory, MS), December 8, 1988; and “Physically handicapped hunt set Dec. 31,” *The Meridian Star* (Meridian, MS) December 14, 1988.

¹²⁸ “Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway,” *American Environmental Review*; and McClure IV and Connell Sr., p. 569.

An important part of the Tombigbee Project was the construction and operation of two culture environmental centers. These areas are operated by the local universities here in the area and they cater to a large group of individuals, aiming from schoolchildren all the way to corporate executives. Their broad goals are basically environmental, cultural, and historical education. Their other goal is just to get people back to the area to show them that large-scale civil works projects such as these can be constructed and operated in an environmentally sensitive manner.¹²⁹

Opening in 1986, the Plymouth Bluff Facility on Columbus Lake in Mississippi was notable because it was located at a historic site that caused a relocation of the Tenn-Tom during construction. To avoid cutting directly through a bluff housing important fossil records, the Corps altered the waterway's route leaving the bluff and old river untouched for a stretch. Maintained through the combined efforts of the Project Management Team and the Mississippi University for Women, the facility joined with the Nature Conservancy Program to preserve the ancient fossil bed and erected a \$4.75 million facility stressing environmental awareness and education. Management and maintenance are the direct responsibility of the university, a cost sharing feature dictated by WRDA-86. Along with the cabins, conference center, open-air auditorium, and trails, there are scenic views of the old Tombigbee River and the Plymouth Bluff Paleontological site. The museum contains fossilized mollusks, foraminiferans, and sharks' teeth some 65-100 million years old. Educating the people of the region incorporated a sense of "civic environmentalism" into the region, where state and federal

¹²⁹ "Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway," *American Environmental Review*; and "Corps, University Properties Together," *The Commercial Dispatch* (Columbus, MS) December 21, 1984

agencies fostered environmental thought within local populations. Yet, environmental awareness was not the only educational agenda for sponsors of the waterway.¹³⁰

At Pickensville, Alabama, the Bevill Visitor Center, named after Alabama Representative Tom Bevill, serves as a replica of an antebellum plantation house and depicts the historical importance of navigation on inland waterways throughout the Southeast. Behind the center is one of the region's most popular National Historic Landmarks—the U.S. Snagboat *Montgomery*. The retired “steam-powered sternwheeler” is an 80-year old Corps of Engineers ship that cleared the waterways of the Southeast of trees and other dangerous debris. Both the center and the snagboat offer visitors a look into the history of the region, reminding visitors of the richness of southern history. In northeastern Mississippi, near Fulton, the Corps constructed the Whitten Historical Center, which displays the federal government's influence in bringing economic development to the region. The center focuses on the influence in Mississippi of such diverse agencies as the Tennessee Valley Authority, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the National Park Service. Other centers are the Waterway Management Center located in Columbus, Mississippi, which looks to the overall management of the waterway and the Bay Springs Resource and Visitor Center which concentrates on

¹³⁰ *As Mobile Goes*, p. McClure IV and Connell Sr., p. 569; and “Beaver Trappers,” *The Starkville Daily News* (Starkville, MS) January 22, 1986.

recreational and natural resources on the Tenn-Tom. These resource centers are open to the public and offer a wide range of benefits from educational programs to research opportunities and leisure activities, as well as provide some additional jobs to the region.¹³¹

The advantages of the Tenn-Tom stretched to more than the people of the region. Other special projects involving close partnering between federal and state agencies were targeted at the wildlife of the area. In an annual publication, Daniel E. Cimarosti stated the waterway's agenda. He said, "We have protected or enhanced habitat so that many animals' needs are satisfied not only for food but for breeding and escape. We accomplish some of this by planting food plots, subjecting areas to prescribed burns, planting trees, and placing nesting structures. With the help from the Mississippi Department of Wildlife Canada geese, white-tailed deer, and turkey have been stocked in areas conducive to their propagation." In 1991, federal and state wildlife agencies brokered a deal that would reintroduce endangered species back into the region. Responding to a federal directive attempting to reintroduce bald eagles to Alabama and Mississippi, the Project Management Team joined with the Sutton Avian Research Center in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, to "place fledglings hatched in captivity into artificial nests in an attempt to encourage the bald eagles to return to the area after they depart." Hacking is a term used for reintroducing a species into its natural environment. The Federal Eagle Hacking Program erected towers on lands along the waterway and constructed holding

¹³¹ *As Mobile Goes*, p. Bob Paulson, "Aliceville Visitor's Center Focuses on Waterway Life," *The Commercial Dispatch* (Columbus, MS) March, 25, 1986.

cages that simulated natural nesting sites. In 1992, forty-six immature eagles were placed in the towers at several points along the waterway and nearby lakes. After banding and a thirteen week acclimation period, the birds were released into the wild. Within a year, nearly a dozen banded pairs of eagles were nesting in the areas where they were released and the bald eagle was successfully reintroduced back into the region.¹³²

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the strategies of land and wildlife “enhancement” employed by federal and state agencies imparted a park like feel to the waterway and people began to associate a connection between the Tenn-Tom and leisure activities. Another pastime gaining tremendous importance was camping. Prior to the construction of the waterway, the region had very few facilities and sites to meet outdoorsmen needs. The Tenn-Tom Waterway mitigation efforts created some forty recreational areas, most of which permitted overnight camping. Along with camping opportunities, the Tenn-Tom also created several beaches, although none were in the original plans for the waterway. The advantages of these new campgrounds to communities were that they provided locals and outsiders a chance not only to enjoy the outdoors, but it also encouraged spending in the communities in the vicinity. One newspaper reported, “Campgrounds such as the one at Blue Bluff often become known nationwide and attract ‘snowbirds’ or retirees who spend the winter months in Florida and other Sunbelt states, stopping at campgrounds along the way.” Seeing the benefits of

¹³² McClure IV and Connell Sr., p. 567; Daniel E. Cimarosti, “Tenn-Tom Today,” [unknown publication and date, likely 1986], clipping located in Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Scrapbook 1986-1992, Plymouth Bluff Headquarters, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Columbus, Mississippi; Megan Pratt, “Experiment Would Put Eagles On Tenn-Tom,” (Columbus: MS) *The Commercial Dispatch*, 24 March 1991.

having campgrounds in their communities and cashing in on transit recreational traffic, business leaders quickly began trying to get in on a piece of the action and new facilities became big news in small towns. Corps ranger, LuAnn Lackey summed up their appeal to rural communities saying, “The facilities are there for the community to use, and it will reap the economic benefits. Campers will naturally buy food and gas from the town closest by.” This meant that communities were interested in gaining access to recreational facilities, as well as linking their profits to the economics of the region.¹³³

The environmental strategies and tactics employed during construction and the years after WRDA-86 had transformed the land. They also had a side effect. They began to change the way local people began to envision the waterway’s promise. From the start it promised economic salvation and jobs. But on a deeper level it promised a lot more. Proponents not only saw it providing jobs, but also as a way of improving the quality of life for people in an economically distressed part of the country. The many recreational and educational facilities provided locals with new cultural resources. In part, this was to mitigate those lost during construction. However, without the emphasis created by federal legislation and funding, the region had little hope of developing them the Tenn-Tom. The advantages of the environmental measures turned largely into positive impacts

¹³³ Megan Pratt, “Blue Bluff Opens With Long Line of Campers,” *The Commercial Dispatch* (Columbus, MS) [u.d. probably early 1990s] article located in Tenn-Tom Scrapbook 1985-1997, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Headquarters, Plymouth Bluff, Columbus, MS; Barry Burleson, “Fulton campground open dedication Friday,” *The Itawamba County Times* (Fulton, MS) March 8, 1989; Jeanette Campbell, “Three campgrounds available along Tenn-Tom,” *The Itawamba County Times* (Fulton, MS) March 29, 1989; and “Tenn-Tom Campgrounds,” *Mississippi Outdoors*, July/August 1989; and Patricia Cavanaugh, “Campground almost complete; opens in spring,” *The Itawamba County Times* (Itawamba County, MS), October 5, 1988.

on the people and wildlife of the region and development geared toward intertwining industrial and recreational pursuits.¹³⁴

In 1990, estimates placed the number of visitors to the recreational facilities to be over seven million people. This was remarkable because many of the planned facilities were still on the drawing board or in the process of construction. The Corps, regional developers, and local business leaders began to see the potential recreational traffic had on the growth of the economic future of the region. One area of recreational economic importance was the tremendous amount of civilian owned boat traffic on the waterway. From the very first days of operation, engineers noted that pleasure boats accounted for a large percentage of waterway traffic. For example, in 1985, 433 commercial boats passed through the Aberdeen Lock of the Tenn-Tom. Dwarfing this number was the 1,280 pleasure boats plying the same waters and utilizing the same lock. While part of the heavy traffic was attributable to the newness of the waterway, in the years to come, day pleasure craft still made up the majority of traffic on the Tenn-Tom's channels and lakes. The byproduct of the waterway's layout and the environmental considerations utilized in its construction combined with the strategies, programs, and facilities adopted after its opening, created a haven for recreational visitors. Taking advantage of the wide canals and lake impoundments created behind five dams, boaters flocked to the waterway to enjoy its many recreational opportunities. Largely overlooked for its potential economic benefits to the people of Mississippi and Alabama, the waterway's recreational

¹³⁴ Jeffrey K. Stine, *Cultural Resource Management*.

value was virtually untapped in its earliest days and remained another slow developing economic resource.¹³⁵

In 1986, Amory Mayor, Thomas Griffith admitted to a local newspaper, “The travel industry is something we’re in our infancy in. There are a lot of places doing a lot with what they’ve got. The Tenn-Tom is a tremendous attraction. We need to survey our assets. We may be surprised at what we’ve got that can be an attraction.” Developers were just beginning to see a way in which their communities could harness the environmental appeal of the Tenn-Tom and promote recreation as a means of profit. Griffith continued, “We’re interested in tourism and recreational development up and down the waterway. For instance, we’re interested in talking to hotel people. Hotels are something we’d like to see along the Waterway.” The draw of recreation and tourism was a proven commodity of the South. In 1985, the state of Mississippi invested \$1.5 million dollars in tourism which brought in an estimated profit of one billion dollars in revenue. That same year, Alabama budgeted \$3.1 million for tourism which resulted in a profit of \$3.6 billion.¹³⁶

In the years leading up to the waterway’s opening, the Corps and regional developers had concentrated some of their efforts on the enrichment of cultural resources for local people such as the campgrounds, boat ramps, and environmental education

¹³⁵ U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile District, “Tenn-Tom Recreational Development Draws Over 7 Million, *Information* August 19, 1991; and David Treadwell, “‘Tenn-Tom’ Isn’t a Draw for Commercial Traffic, But Pleasure Boaters Love It,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 1986.

¹³⁶ Treadwell; and “Tenn-Tom potential still untapped,” *Amory Adviser* (Amory, MS) [u.d., likely 1986], clipping located in Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Scrapbook 1986-1992, Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Headquarters, Plymouth Bluff, Mississippi.

centers, but largely ignored the economic potential of such sites. In addition, like industries looking for adequate facilities, watercraft found amenities missing for their needs. As the Tenn-Tom became a haven for pleasure boaters, water-skiers, and bass anglers, instead of a busy barge canal lined with bustling ports and industries, developers saw another chance at fulfilling the promise of economic salvation. As the pleasure seekers traveled through a landscape described as “more park-like than industrial,” they spent money along the way. Large yachts began to outnumber the barges passing through the waterway’s locks and dams during the spring and fall months and towns along the waterway’s length began scrapping their plans for industrial ports in an effort to convert their investments into “marinas and resort complexes.”¹³⁷

In fact, the heavy recreational traffic began to worry some Corps officials. Within the first couple of years of operation, the Operations and Maintenance Chief of the Corps’ Mobile District, Freddy Jones stated, “This volume makes for significant wear-and-tear on the lock and its equipment.” The Corps was concerned over the number of smaller recreational craft using the locks to reach certain areas of the waterway. In 1986, the Corps began utilizing brochures and local newspapers to educate locals about proper uses and reduce the number of recreational lockages. Jones continued, “On weekends, it seems like we’re working around the clock with pleasure boats. So we’re going to be putting out some educational material on how the pleasure boater can help us operate the locks efficiently.” The Corps encouraged boaters to make longer trips once through a lock or travel to alternative boat ramps instead of using the locks. “We would encourage

¹³⁷ McClure IV and Connell Sr., p. 569; Petersen, p. A1.

pleasure craft to make longer trips once they lock through,” he said. Jones also expressed a concern about the affects heavy recreational traffic would have on commercial boats using the waterway. He said, “We also need to get the word out on the logistics of including this heavy recreational traffic in what we hope and think will be an increasing commercial volume. We are also publishing a pamphlet explaining navigation rules and the cooperation needed between recreational boaters and industrial users.” Recreational traffic was here to stay and the Corps had to adjust its strategies in dealing with boat traffic of all sorts.¹³⁸

However, this unexpected influx of traffic flowed with another set of problems. Just like their failures to develop commercial ports and facilities, communities along the waterway failed to provide for pleasure crafts as well. In 1986, Waldon stressed an area of concern for the Development Authority. That year, the Tenn-Tom had only “three marinas on the waterway.” Waldon felt that this created an experience where “a lot of these people end up tying up to a tree” in order to stop for the night and left travelers nowhere to pick up supplies from the communities dotted along the waterway. Lack of facilities stretched beyond just places for boats to tie up. Boat retailers, sporting good supplies, dry dock, and repair shops were all missing for those interested or in need of there services. The people of Mississippi and Alabama were missing potential profits from the transit pleasure-seeking visitors. Addressing a large yacht plying the waters of

¹³⁸ George Hazard, “Corps of Engineers Looking at Heavy TTW Lockings,” *The Commercial Dispatch* (Columbus, MS) [u.d., likely 1986], clipping located in Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Scrapbook 1986-1992, Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Headquarters, Plymouth Bluff, Mississippi.

the Tenn-Tom, Waldon explained to a newspaper, “If they have money to spend on a boat like that, they have money to spend here.” While the lack of economic facilities geared toward recreation were slowing, the communities’ efforts to capitalize on recreational dollars remained reason for optimism. Seeing a source of potential profit passing by untapped, Waldon declared, “Until we get a facility to let them spend their money, we aren’t getting the benefits.” This reminded developers and business leaders of the retarded industrial efforts to capitalize the economic benefits of the Tenn-Tom, reminding them that the Tenn-Tom remained a work in progress, however if they built them, people and dollars would come.¹³⁹

Although pleasure boaters will never carry the financial burden of the Tenn-Tom, they do offer an extra source of revenue for the impoverished communities along its corridor. Unlike their commercial counterparts, pleasure boaters do not pay federal fuel surcharges that are supposed to cover construction and operation costs of inland waterways. However, they are becoming an increasingly poignant factor in what many local business leaders imagine as “their best hope for some economic benefit from the long-awaited canal.” Even in 1985, Mayor Griffith of Amory held a somewhat fortuitous outlook toward the Tenn-Tom’s recreational aspect. Commenting on the emerging and unexpected benefits of recreation Griffith supplied, “Ten years ago, bass fishing was not anything like it is today. There’s no end to what it’s going to do.” For the expectations

¹³⁹ Petersen, p. A9.

of the people of Mississippi, there is no telling what the future would foretell for them and the Tenn-Tom.¹⁴⁰

Table 3

Total Economic Impact of Recreation by 1991.¹⁴¹

	Direct	Indirect	Induced	Total
Local				
Compensation	\$22,970,000	\$11,590,000	\$63,720,000	\$98,280,000
Jobs	1,427	451	3,012	4,890
National				
Compensation	\$43,180,000	\$21,800,000	\$119,800,000	\$184,780,000
Jobs	2,682	849	5,662	9,193

Despite its attempts to remain dedicated to its commercial roots, the Tenn-Tom became a paradise for “yachties.” Cruising downstream in the autumn and upstream in the spring, recreational boaters describe the waterway as “more scenic and less troublesome than the busy Mississippi River.” The costly environmental mitigation tactics the Corps adopted during the construction of the project turned out to benefit the economies of locals throughout the region. The environmental appeal of the Tenn-Tom helped stimulate economics, instead of hampering it. By 1991, recreational spending totaled \$98,280,000 dollars and created 4,890 jobs [see Table 3]. Turning their attention

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Garner and Holmes, p. 20.

on this new form of economic gain for the people of Mississippi and Alabama, Don Waldon and the TTWDA stated, “The waterway has captured practically all the transit pleasure boating” through the South.¹⁴²

In 1994, these thoughts were confirmed in the economic study of the Tenn-Tom’s financial impact [see Table 4]. A poll from the local recreation areas showed that in seven years visitor spending contributed \$89,741,230 to local economies and \$168,720,870 to the nation overall. By 2000, the number of recreational dollars coming into the region and nation as a result of the Tenn-Tom equaled \$200 million each year. In addition, that same year reported that nearly 2,000 large pleasure crafts travel its waters annually. In fact, tourism and recreation remains one of the fastest growing sections of the Tenn-Tom’s promise.

The transformation of the land facilitated the change in the outlook of its economics. The tactics employed in each section carefully sculpted the Tenn-Tom aesthetic qualities into a park-like setting. But that was only one part of the story. Agencies combined tactics under cultural resource management creating additional facilities and programs to offer people and animals added benefits. Together, the strategies adopted, changed the environmental character of the land in Northeast Mississippi and Western Alabama both during and after construction of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. At the same time, they changed the very culture of the region by improving its quality of life. From the way people recreationally utilized its waters to the

¹⁴² Petersen, p. A9.

educational programs sponsored by its supporters, the environment of the Tenn-Tom was having profound effects on the way people interpreted its promise.

Table 4
Spending Attributed to Recreation in 1991.¹⁴³

	Visits	Spending/per visit	% local	\$ Spending Local	\$ Spending Total
Dayuse Trip	2,414,623	21.50	80	41,531,516	51,914,395
Dayuse Durable	1,844,921	47.44	45	39,385,374	87,523,052
Camper Trip	85,574	82.57	62	4,380,824	7,065,845
Camper Durable	85,574	259.63	20	4,443,516	22,217,578
Total				89,741,230	168,720,870

¹⁴³ Garner and Holmes, p. 19.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

At its very heart, the story of the Tennessee-Tombigee Waterway is a tale about two rivers and the building of a promise. For centuries, dreamers envisioned constructing a canal to link the two rivers opening a shorter alternative to the Gulf Coast to much of the hinterland of America. “Land enhancement” was the banner that the Corps carried in justifying their changes to the land. The Corps promised to resurrect in the place of the old Tombigbee River a modern water system composed of interconnecting lakes, canals, locks, and dams that would link the traditionally closed markets areas of Northeast Mississippi and Western Alabama to a national water system economy, spurring new growth in trade and industry. That was the foundation of the waterway’s promise.

After the Tenn-Tom’s construction began in 1971, the Corps adapted its plans in order to make the proper environmental adjustments to protect natural and cultural resources. While environmental measures increased the waterway’s costs and prolonged construction, they ensured the Tenn-Tom was built as environmentally friendly as possible. While economic progress and the environment clashed in the beginning, the years after the opening of the Tenn-Tom hinted at a different outcome, one that shows these forces working in tandem to salvage and fulfill the waterway’s promise.

Constructed memories and recollections of people speak volumes into the popular conceptions (or in some cases misconceptions) that define the lasting legacy of events. Most Alabamians and Mississippians if asked about the lasting affects of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway would answer in one of two ways. The first group would speak of the project's economic shortcomings. They would tell how the waterway's promise of new jobs never lived up to its hype; how it failed to meet the region's economic expectations. These residents still recall the turbulent years of its construction—1971-1985—but seem to fail to notice the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway's influences on the industrial growth of the South in the years after its completion. Instead of potential or industrial development, most memories appear clouded by the disappointments and frustrations community developers experienced during the early years of Tenn-Tom's operation, 1985-1995. Locals largely view these efforts as a failure to transform the economies of Northeast Mississippi and Western Alabama. It seemed waterway's expectations spawned a sense of resentment within local populations who believed in a promise too large to achieve.

The second group would offer a different interpretation and turn their recollections away from economics entirely. They would focus on the waterway's more Arcadian resources. For millions of visitors flocking to the shores and waters of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, a plethora of recreational activities abound. From beaches to boat ramps, man-made lakes and campgrounds, wildlife management areas and nature trails, the scenic and natural beauty of the Tenn-Tom's environment spoke of other benefits to the area's inhabitants and visitors alike. It is easily agued that as much

as the project appeared to have failed to transform the economic environment of the region, it did radically reshape some aspects of the cultural landscape of Western Alabama and Northeast Mississippi. The project altered native land and in the process created new ecosystems and cultural resources, opening a formerly closed section of America to the wider world around it. At the same time that people enjoyed the new aquatic benefits of the waterway, wildlife was protected and cared for through mitigation efforts. In the end, a recreational and wildlife heaven for man and animals was spawned.

Despite the popular conceptions of most people, boosters like the TTWDA would argue that the waterway has indeed lived up to its promise. All that was needed was a period of maturation. Within the first years of operation, Don Waldon stated, “The state’s leading newspapers, if concerned about the state’s future, can provide an invaluable service in promoting a more positive image for Mississippi instead of shooting us in the foot as in the case of the Tenn-Tom.” Cohesiveness and cooperation was what local people needed and development groups like the TTWDA would remain in operation to uphold the Tenn-Tom’s promise. In 1997, Rubye Del Harden, general manager of Northeast Mississippi Community Newspapers spoke of the positive aspects of the Tenn-Tom. She said, “The Tenn-Tom has helped induce some \$2.5 billion dollars of new and expanded industrial development in the waterway corridor since 1988.” She also went on to tell how recreational visitors contribute “nearly \$170 million to the economy because of the additional economic spending each year.” The waterway was supplying economic change, but it had a long way to go if it was to change its tarnished image. In the early 1990s, Don Waldon predicted, “It will be used, but you just have to be patient.

Analyzing the costs is based on 50 years of operation.” Agreeing with Waldon’s stance was Alabama Representative, Tom Bevill, who firmly remained behind his support of the project. He stated, “It’s there, and it’s going to stay there. I think it’s a good investment.”¹⁴⁴

Transformations to the land of the Tombigbee Valley did not start or end with the Tenn-Tom, but ultimately these alterations provided a wellspring of opportunities for its many people and offered the local populations some of the social uplifting they so desperately needed. In the early 1990s people began to look at the Tenn-Tom differently. A local newspaper expressed the lack of “lamentations” by people within the waterway corridor in regards to the small amount of tonnage flowing through the areas locks. Instead, individuals looked at other benefits. “It’s great for water-skiing,” commented one local, Scott Thompson. To people not directly tied to the economics of the Tenn-Tom, talk centered on its great recreational appeal, including skiing, hunting, camping, and fishing opportunities.¹⁴⁵

Expressing these same feelings a few years earlier in 1988 was James Chatham of Midway Marina in Fulton, Mississippi. During the same year that severe drought caused the Ten-Tom to experience a boom in barge traffic, a local newspaper questioned Chatham whether he felt the increase would affect noncommercial boaters. Asked

¹⁴⁴Rubye Del Harden, “Waterway is a boon to progress,” *The Amory Adviser* (Amory, MS) July 2, 1997.; “Waiting for the payoff,” [unknown publication and date, probably 1992] article located in Tenn-Tom Scrapbook 1985-1997, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Headquarters, Plymouth Bluff, Columbus, MS.

¹⁴⁵ “Waiting for the payoff,” [unknown publication and date, probably 1992] article located in Tenn-Tom Scrapbook 1985-1997, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Headquarters, Plymouth Bluff, Columbus, MS.

whether he concerned or not about the increased traffic, Chatham stated that he did not “think the situation [was] anything pleasure boaters need to be alarmed about.” He added that he believed “most of the commercial traffic will return to the Mississippi when water levels rise” back up. This was a truly ironic statement considering why the Tenn-Tom was built for in the first place. Still, locals derived what benefits they could from the waterway and recreational boating became high on their list.¹⁴⁶

In fact, throughout the 1980s and 1990s recreational concerns such as boating safety issues and drowning were as commonly reported in local newspapers as the economic gains of the Tenn-Tom. Local and federal efforts in instituting safety programs also increased within recreational areas. When the waterway opened in 1985, the waterway averaged sixteen water-related fatalities each year. By 1995, this average had dropped to just one a year after the manned recreational areas were completed. One of the educational points emphasized along the Tenn-Tom was public safety, especially with regard to using life vests and mixing alcohol with recreational activities. In 1997, as recreational areas continued to grow, and user fees collected by the Corps at recreational facilities totaled more than \$700,000. Despite the fact that the waterway flowed through some of the most economically depressed and rural areas of the South and did not have any major urban centers from which to draw visitors, it averaged some 3.1 million visitors a year throughout the 1990s. By 1998, the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway ranked fifth in user fees earned among all Corps projects nationwide. But despite the

¹⁴⁶ Petersen, p. A1; Marie Harmon, “Tennessee-Tombigbee Facing Jam: Waterway’s Pleasure Boaters Must Wait for Commercial Traffic” *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), June 28, 1988, p.1

gain of jobs and recreation opportunities, the people of the region still suffered from limited economic opportunities.¹⁴⁷

In 1989, Amory business owner Tommy Swann remarked, “When they were building this thing [the Tenn-Tom] I just thought this tree [one located outside his business] would be loaded with money, and all I’d have to do is pick it.” In reality, little economic change occurred in most of the poor rural communities during the first five years of waterway operation. Merchants throughout the region saw it as a disappointment. Swann continued, “The waterway came with promises of prosperity, but now that the project has become a reality, the promises have proven as empty as an old mussel shell.” The glowing future of the waterway’s promise and the people’s hopes for the future of the next generation remained in question. “All of my children had to leave Amory to get a decent job, whereas I had hoped something would happen with a plant or something where they could work here,” stated Swann, who spent most of his life in anticipation of the Tenn-Tom. “We have people still leaving even after it was built. That hasn’t changed at all,” he finished. Newspapers reported that if the waterway was the states economic hope, “the state’s future looks bleak”. As bleak as economic opportunities looked in rural Mississippi counties, some of the ones located Western Alabama—which were supposed to benefit the most economically from the waterway—actually fell further behind the rest of their state since construction on the project began.

¹⁴⁷ Elizabeth Rooks, “Tenn-Tom Today,” *The Aberdeen Examiner* (Aberdeen, MS) January 23, 1986; “Waterway boaters are responsible for wakes,” *The Itawamba County Times* (Fulton, MS) April 12, 1989; Kristie Alley, “Waterway safety problems discussed,” *The Daily Journal* (Tupelo, MS) [u.d. probably early 1990s] article located in Tenn-Tom Scrapbook 1985-1997, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Headquarters, Plymouth Bluff, Columbus, MS

The gap between their employment rates and the statewide figure widened significantly since the 1970s. Leon Styes a small business owner in Epes, Alabama stated, “It hasn’t done nothing for us in this little town. I’m pretty bitter. We need some money here—everybody’s on food stamps.” Gene Sullivan, an economist with the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta explained, “You’re not likely to see companies want to move large numbers of workers where they have questions about the schools and the library.”¹⁴⁸

Also in 1989, an Aliceville, AL, newspaper wrote, “It’s hard to find any jobs in the self-proclaimed ‘Hot Spot of the Tenn-Tom.’ The average jobless rate in 1986 was 10.2 percent at a time when Alabama averaged 7.2 percent unemployment. But even these figures understate the problems in Aliceville, since most of the city’s young people leave the area to find work.” The loss of future generations to out migration and the death of rural communities remained a concern of local people. Eclave Hodges, the high school guidance councilor remarked, “The job opportunities are very, very bleak. Most of our students, especially the productive ones, leave the county. Quite a few of the others go on welfare.” In 1989, Hodges claimed that one fifth of the previous year’s senior class enlisted in military service, as a way out of their economic plight of the region. In Western Alabama, estimates predicted that 86% of all youths leave the counties of their birth.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Mike Dorning, “Tenn-Tom’s flow far short of predictions,” *The Anniston Star* (Anniston, AL) July 9, 1989.

¹⁴⁹ Mike Dorning, “No illusions in Aliceville over waterway’s benefits,” *The Anniston Star* (Anniston, AL) July 9, 1989.

That same year, Jan Sawyer, a lock operator, stated, “It just hasn’t been the overnight success that a lot of people thought it would be. I really think we’re getting there. It’s just taken a lot longer than a lot of people thought it would.” Tim Parker, president of Parker Towing Company in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, said, “The ports, the docks, the rail spurs, those three things are still being added. Each time you add those facilities, they make the Tenn-Tom much more competitive. It (gives) shippers and receivers...options they haven’t had before.”¹⁵⁰

The same debate swirled around the recreational aspects of the Tenn-Tom as well. Commenting on the estimated six million recreational visitors attracted to the Tenn-Tom during 1989, Don Waldon stated, “What makes that really phenomenal is we haven’t finished building our recreational facilities.” Beenie Brown a grocery store owner said, “There’s no limit to what you’ll spend when you’re going fishing. You might budget, but there’s no limit to what you’ll spend.” As for other benefits, such as to the youth of the region, Louise Monahean stated, “Amory didn’t have much for young people to do before—just a theatre and a roller rink. They really enjoy the fishing and boating.” In addition to enjoying the waterway’s recreational activities, local communities incorporated the waterway into the customs of the region. The most important of these was Christmas on the Tenn-Tom. Residents and visitors created an annual flotilla, complete with decorations and lights to celebrate the holiday season. In 1989, the future of the waterway was still in question, but as one local paper editorialized: “It may not be

¹⁵⁰ Mike Dorning, “Tenn-Tom’s flow far short of predictions,” *The Anniston Star* (Anniston, AL) July 9, 1989; and Tom Gordon, “Tenn-Tom gradually proving its worth,” *The Birmingham News* (Birmingham, AL) May 4, 1989.

what they were promised, but the residents along the shores, used to receiving little, will take what they can get.” While it would be easy to place local populations as victims of this story—suffering from the same economic stagnation of previous generations—the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway should not be the villain of the narrative. Suffering from a promise too hefty for TTWDA and local business leaders to uphold, the waterway’s history is one of hardships, shortcomings, and promise. One project no matter how large cannot salvage the economic future of a region, suffering from the same historical inadequacies of its past—poor education, inadequate transportation infrastructures, and myriad social and racial issues, but it can help the process of change.¹⁵¹

In 2000, the TTWDA produced a booklet claiming “the construction of the waterway has created upwards of 50,000 new jobs, transforming this formerly impoverished region into one that is anticipating continued progress and prosperity in coming years. Companies including Boeing, Weyerhaeuser, Kerr McGee, Kimberly Clarke, and Corus Steel have all located facilities in the corridor—thanks to the advantages offered by the Tenn-Tom.” The maturation of the waterway seemed to be aiding the fulfillment of its promise. In 2006, a booklet produce by the South Atlantic Division of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers stated, “Lakeside recreation though it may

¹⁵¹ Chris Wilson, “Local Singer to have own show,” *The Amory Adviser* (Amory, MS) [nd. 1986] Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Headquarters, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Plymouth Bluff, Mississippi; “Celebrate Christmas...,” [unknown publication and date, likely 1986], clipping located in Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Scrapbook 1986-1992, Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Headquarters, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Plymouth Bluff, Mississippi; “Christmas parade set on Tenn-Tom,” *Aberdeen Examiner* (Aberdeen, MS) November 22, 1984; George Hazard, “Christmas Lights Twinkle On Tenn-Tom,” *The Commercial Dispatch* (Columbus, MS) December 2, 1984.

be considered a luxury by some, is also a major economic force in the region.” It seemed industrial and recreational growth was still coming to the Tenn-Tom region.¹⁵²

Together, the intertwining of the economics and the environment of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway offered a new interpretation and fulfillment of its promise. They formed a complimentary path for the future of the region. At the same time it gave a gentle reminder or perhaps a warning against building expectations too high and the limitations of people and progress. Perhaps, it also shows an example how modern water navigational systems should be built, operated, and maintained in the new environmentally conscious age. Stretching beyond its limited scope of jobs or its questionable economic aspects are its created landscapes. By touching peoples lives on a personal level, one in which people can return to land taken from them during construction, , albeit for different reasons, the Tenn-Tom began appealing to a broader base of people and actually sparked local interests, a type of grassroots recreational movement. By enjoying the waterway through various leisure activities, local people shed their image as victims to a failed promise and found benefits where they could. Recreation began to make subtle, but significant changes on the region’s culture. While there is no real villain in this story, not the Tenn-Tom nor the regional development groups. Not even the boosters or politicians who built the promise too high. There is one place blame can be laid. That is at the feet of progress, or at least the ideals fostered by it. All the individuals contributing to the waterway’s construction and development and

¹⁵² Rob Holland, “Southeastern Drought Tests Water Managers,” *Spectrum* (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, South: Atlantic Division 2006), vol. 3. no. 1, p. 19.

the building of its promise did what they had to do to uphold the region's march toward industrial advancement.

There in lies the fundamental problem of the project. Critics looked only at gains in industry as a means of judging the waterway's success. They failed to recognize the other gains that the Tenn-Tom brought to people's lives. Water, recreational activities, and opportunities that they did not have before, all offer counter claims to the idea of region's failure to advance. Whether the waterway should have been built is no longer the question. What remains is how it developed? The one legacy of the Tenn-Tom that perhaps, matters the most is its unique combination of economics and environment. The waterway has proven that man and nature can work hand in hand to the benefit of both. In the process of one benefiting the other, both galvanized into a new promise, where the environment (through recreation) and economics (by industrialization) offer the region a new future. In the end, time will hold the final verdict on the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, but it reminds us, that for progress, there is always a price we all must pay.

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APPENDIX A

MAP OF THE TENNESSEE-TOMBIGBEE WATERWAY.



APPENDIX B

SECTIONAL MAP OF THE TENNESSEE-TOMBIGBEE WATERWAY

