



June 2019

Volume 13/No. 2

# The Vintage Rabun Quarterly

## TALLULAH FALLS RAILROAD: THE HISTORY AND THE LEGACY



The Tallulah Falls Railroad reached the town of Tallulah Falls in 1882, making the town an easy tourist destination for those enjoying the "Grand Canyon of the East" and the "Niagara Falls of the South." Photo: circa 1910

One of the most important occurrences in Rabun County history that shaped what we are today was the coming of the railroad. At the turn of the twentieth century, Rabun County remained largely isolated. This would

change with the extension of the Tallulah Falls Railroad. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the railroad literally opened this remote mountain area to the outside world. The line from Cornelia to Tallulah Falls was completed in 1882, and the fif-

teen miles to Clayton was completed in June 1904, more than twenty years later. By 1905, it was at the North Carolina line, and finally reached Franklin in June 1907 for a total distance of 58 miles. As early as 1903, one prophetic writer noted that the railroad would provide "...a practically new country which is rich in every resource, and the opportunities offered home seekers...are numberless and without parallel."

The real reason for building the Tallulah Falls Railroad was not to accommodate the masses of tourists heading for Tallulah Falls. It was originally planned as a

feeder line to the Blue Ridge Railroad, which was to be a major east-west route that would pass through Rabun County connecting Charleston, South Carolina and Cincinnati, Ohio. At least two other lines were to connect with the Blue Ridge

in Rabun Gap. Economic hard times caused by the Civil War stopped work on the Blue Ridge Railroad, and it was never begun again, despite several schemes to do so. The Northeastern Railroad built a track from Cornelia, reaching Tallulah Falls in 1882 as

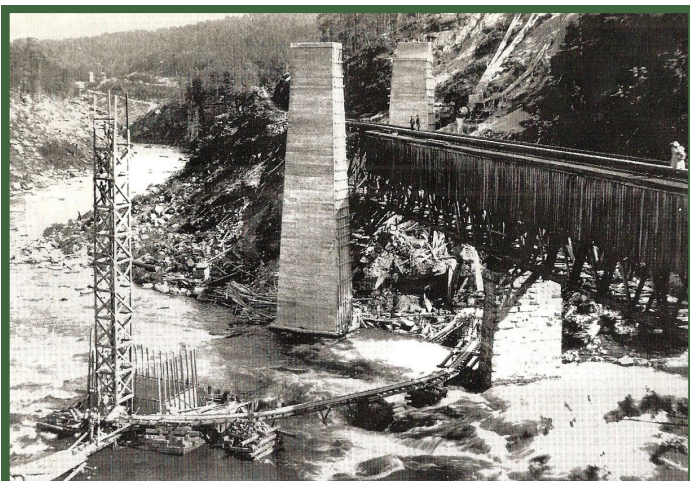


There were excursion trains which Atlantans would board on the Southern Railroad to Cornelia; they would then take the Tallulah Falls Railroad for an outing in the mountains. This is an excursion to Tiger in 1904.

the Richmond and Danville System, with intentions to continue the line to Knoxville, Tennessee. By 1886 another line was completed between Atlanta and Knoxville, making the line to Tallulah Falls useless as an east-west route.

After the railroad reached Franklin, North Carolina, they were then acquired by the Southern Railway Company with plans to connect to the Western North Carolina Railroad. These plans, like so many others, never materialized; the Tallulah Falls Railroad remained a "short line" with no connections to the major freight routes that may have kept it solvent.

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



The only non-wooden trestle on the Tallulah Falls Railroad was of steel and concrete crossing the lake at Tallulah Falls. When the Tallulah Falls dam was constructed in 1913, the rail line had to be rerouted. This photo shows the old wooden bridge and the concrete piers for the new steel bridge under construction. The relocated rail bed was nearly fifty feet higher than the original line to accommodate the level of the lake. The stone footings can still be seen in the lakebed when Tallulah Lake is drained.

The railroad opened this rugged region to many more tourists, as the line made access to the area both easy and cheap. In the early 1900s, the weekend rate from Atlanta to Tallulah Falls was \$3.35 for a round trip ticket. All of those tourists needed lodging, meals and entertainment. Entrepreneurs responded by opening hotels and boarding houses. By 1927, Clayton alone boasted at least twenty-three such establishments. Today, we can trace the origin of local hospitality and recreational businesses back to this first influx of tourists.

The arrival of the railroad also provided a more efficient means of getting mail into the county. This in turn facilitated the beginning of rural mail delivery in 1909. Families now had regular access to national and international news.

The railroad brought jobs not only for those who worked on the train or in the depots, but also for those who cut and hewed crossties, which needed regular replacement. Fifty cents was paid for each crosstie cut and hewn from oak trees. Putting down crossties paid \$15 a week for ten hours a day, six days a week.

A substantial portion of the freight carried was timber. With the railroad completed, major logging companies moved into the area and set up logging camps. Hundreds of logging and sawmill jobs were created directly as a result of the coming of the rail system. Their narrow gauge railway hauled timber to sawmills that sprang up, with the finished telephone poles, cross-ties, lumber, and telegraph poles hauled out of Rabun County by the Tallulah Falls Railroad.

Despite the economic benefits, the large scale logging took a heavy toll on the environment. The cut-and-leave practices of early timber companies had left a forest that was considered of little value. The United States Forest Service purchased 31,000 acres in four North Georgia counties for seven dollars per acre. The natural beauty of the area is now protected by the Forest Service, which took what was essentially a disaster area and turned it into Georgia's largest tourism asset.

Georgia Power built five rail spur lines from the Tallulah Falls Railroad and purchased several small locomotives to reach sites where dams and hydro plants were built on the Tallulah River from 1911 to 1925. Bringing in supplies without the train would have been nearly impossible.

In spite of some good years and some good customers, the railroad never made enough money to be profitable. In 1923, the Tallulah Falls Railroad went into



The railroad was extended to Clayton in June of 1904, causing an instant boom in tourism. Main Street was soon lined with hotels and boarding houses. This is a photo of passengers waiting at the second Clayton Depot opened in 1913.

bankruptcy where it remained for the rest of its existence, never making a profit in any year from 1924 to 1961. In the end, it helped create its own demise by bringing in the supplies and equipment to build Highway 441. Trucks and automobiles rendered the railroad unnecessary. Passenger service was discontinued in May, 1946 and mail service in the mid-1950s. On March 25, 1961, the Tallulah Falls Railroad made its final run.



The York House in Rabun Gap, which opened in 1896, had its own siding where the train stopped to load and unload passengers. Photo: circa 1910



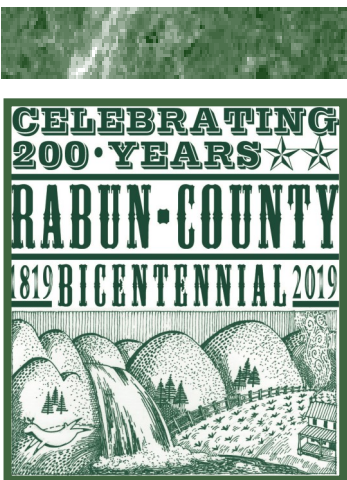
The depot at Lakemont, where many Lake Rabun residents arrived and departed was across the road from Alley's Store, Lakemont's social hub and post office.

The coming of the railroad opened an isolated and difficult-to-reach location and brought the beginnings of an extremely important tourism industry. The train also brought the logging industry that eventually led to a protected national forest, and it brought a utility company which built dams and beautiful reservoirs. These seemingly unconnected events have worked to produce the unique environment we enjoy today. Tourism, logging, and dam building changed almost everything, and all were made possible by the railroad.



Wrecks contributed to the financial worries of the Tallulah Falls Railroad. On August 23, 1920, the train derailed just north of Wiley carrying 85 girls returning from summer camp. (top photo) No children were injured, but the engineer was killed and the fireman severely burned. In 1927, the Hazel Creek trestle in Habersham collapsed; two were killed and 114 injured. (bottom photo)

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There were 42 trestles on the 58 mile line of the Tallulah Falls Railroad. They ranged from 8 to 83 feet high. The longest was 939 feet, and the shortest was 25 feet. The tallest trestle was the three-decker at Wiley pictured here in 1941.