



This is the Rocky Mount Mills and the Tar River rapids.

Photo © Nancy Pierce

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Trail Updates

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ROCKY MOUNT

Growing up in 1950s Rocky Mount, a child's senses were filled with the sights and smells of cotton and tobacco production. But most thrilling were the sounds: the train whistles pulling into the Rocky Mount Station and the constant chug-chug of locomotives back and forth on a spur that served the town's industrial section.

Memories of that sound may have something to do with why Rocky Mount native Bob League became a transportation planner in his hometown. But it wasn't until he came across NCRT newsletters and read about North Carolina rail-trails such as the Dunn-Erwin, American Tobacco Trail and Skewarkee Rail-Trails that a light bulb went off in his head. That

old railroad spur, so active in his youth, could thrive again as a rail-trail!

The mile-long spur is abandoned and overgrown. Only a few ties and rails remain, and in spots the right-of-way has been built upon. The tobacco warehouses, textile mills, fertilizer plants, and lumber mills are mostly empty or underutilized. The faded company names speak to an interesting past: China American Tobacco, Burlington Industries, Royster Fertilizer, Southern Oil Mill. Like most North Carolina mill towns, Rocky Mount with 57,000 residents in Edgecombe and Nash Counties 50 miles east of Raleigh is re-inventing itself in a new economy.

There's already buzz in town about a rail-

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The rail spur in Rocky Mount passes close to many old industrial buildings such as Burlington Industries, at right. Visible at left is the Rocky Mount Farmers Market.

Photo © Nancy Pierce

Rocky Mount
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trail's potential to be part of a much larger project that could draw residents, tourists and business to Rocky Mount. At the center of this vision is the historic Rocky Mount Mills on the Tar River on the west edge of town. It's the second textile mill ever built in North Carolina (1818) and is on the National Historic Record. It ceased all operations in 1996.

In 2007, Raleigh-Durham's Capitol Broadcasting Company Real Estate Division purchased the empty mill buildings and surrounding 72 acres, including a few dozen intact mill houses. The Rocky Mount Mills overlooks an existing 3-mile Tar River Greenway, a gorgeous trail with boardwalks, rocky outcroppings, informal swimming holes and views of the rapids that powered the mill for nearly two hundred years.

Capital Broadcasting is known in the Triangle for developing Durham's American Tobacco Historic District, formerly the American Tobacco Company which in its heyday was the largest tobacco company in the world. This mixed-use project is a poster child for urban redevelopment, with office space, entrepreneur space, retail, restaurants, and entertainment and educational venues. The district also anchors North Carolina's longest rail-trail, the 22-mile American Tobacco Trail.

As Capital Broadcasting's Development Manager, Evan Covington Chavez's job is to find an action plan for the Rocky Mount property. She says: "The American Tobacco Campus reflects the character of Durham, and we're focused now on figuring out what Rocky Mount will support."

Bob League is convinced that whatever Capital Broadcasting decides, a rail-trail on the spur will encourage adaptive re-use of nearby buildings and invigorate this industrial section of Rocky Mount. The City is investigating the right-of-way and has requested NCDOT funds for a bike/ped trail along the corridor.

The rail-trail would connect the Rocky Mount Mills with the City's thriving Farmers Market and the Imperial Centre, Rocky Mount's creative soul. A National Historic Record site, the former tobacco warehouse and adjacent Braswell Memorial Library contain a theatre, children's museum, exhibit space, visual and performing arts classes, a science center, planetarium and event and exhibit venues. Just beyond is the restored Rocky Mount Depot, one of Amtrak's busiest stations in North Carolina, and historic downtown Rocky Mount.

"We'll probably have a few squabbles up and down the line regarding public use of the right of way," says Bob. "Rail-trail is a new concept to this area. But they'll come around.

It's a great opportunity for Rocky Mount!"

Evan Covington Chavez agrees. "We're seeing potential to draw tourism traffic off I-95, branding Rocky Mount as an interesting town on a beautiful river, with historic and artistic value. Retirees might be attracted there for its quiet friendliness, proximity to nature, hiking, paddling on the Tar River Paddle Trail and the Rocky Mount arts scene. Plus, it's just 45 minutes to Raleigh and a couple of hours to the coast."

Some of those tourists might wonder how a flatland town ended up with the name "Rocky Mount". There's a story there, and the person to tell it is John Mebane, a Rocky Mount financial consultant and sixth-generation descendent of the Rocky Mount Mills founder.

Speaking in the first person "we", John weaves family, mill and town history together. "We built the first dam in 1807 at the Tar River's natural rapids to power a grist and lumber mill," he said. "There were, and still are, large rock outcroppings there. A village grew up on that spot and became known as "Great Falls at Rocky Mound." The story goes that when the US Post Office established a stagecoach outpost there in 1816, a Washington bureaucrat carelessly labeled it "Rocky Mount", and the name stuck.

Rocky Mount Mills was built in 1818 to spin cotton from nearby farms, and eventually it made canvas for tents. The Wilmington and Weldon Railroad was completed in 1839 to move the cotton from Halifax and Edgecombe counties to the Wilmington port, passing just a mile east of the Rocky Mount Mills. "In the late 1880s," says John Mebane, "we built a mile-long spur to connect the mainline with the Rocky Mount Mills to haul coal for our new steam operated electric generators."



Rocky Mount transportation planner, Bob League is driving the effort to create a rail-trail on a mile-long spur from the Rocky Mount Mills on the Tar River toward downtown Rocky Mount.

Photo © Nancy Pierce

The canvas tent business was good, but it prompted Union soldiers to burn the mill, along with the Tar River trestle and the train depot, in order to stop tents and supplies going to Confederate soldiers. But the owner's big house survived and it still stands on a rise above the mill.

This story goes that the mill owner's wife didn't like living near the mill, so he moved the family to a country house, leaving the mill manager as live-in caretaker of the big house. A Connecticut Yankee, the manager persuaded the Union soldiers that they shouldn't burn a Yankee's possessions.

The mill, depot and trestle were rebuilt after the Civil War. Other industries followed, including in the 1890s Emerson Shops, a

large maintenance facility for the Atlantic Coastline Railroad. (The Wilmington & Weldon had merged into the Atlantic Coastline, then Seaboard Coast Line and now CSX.)

Imagine how that mile-long spur bustled with activity day and night, for a hundred years.

Now imagine the overgrown rail corridor once again bustling with activity: pedestrian and bicycles moving back and forth between new development, re-purposed historic buildings, downtown, the Farmers Market, the Tar River Trail, and who knows what else? It won't be a quick process, but no doubt it will be another great story in the history of Rocky Mount.

Executive Director's Message

Spring is always an exciting time for trail lovers. The woods come alive again with red buds and trout lilies. Solo winter hikes and runs are now shared

as more people venture out in the warmer weather. I hope that you are able to get out and enjoy all the special places that make North Carolina such a wonderful state. In this newsletter you'll learn about an exciting new project in Rocky Mount. We have high hopes that a rail-trail on this corridor will help breathe life back into this beautiful mill town. This issue also contains our 2013 honor roll of donors. Your support makes our work possible and we are so grateful.



Carrie Banks

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North Carolina Rail-Trails would not exist without you...our supporters. As a special way of saying thank you we are including your name in our yearly honor roll. Thank you so much for your gift.

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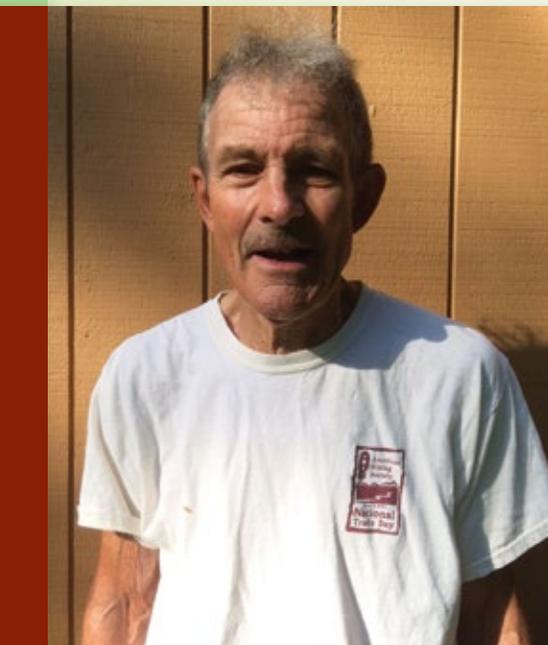
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CR TOWNSEND VOLUNTEER SPIKE

Long-time volunteer, Curt Devereux received the 2013 CR Townsend Volunteer Spike Award. Curt has volunteered as our webmaster for several years and is always keeping the homepage fresh with timely news items. This award is made possible by a generous donation from George Smart.



Photo © Joe Mickey

TRAIL UPDATES

E & A Rail-Trail (Surry County): Construction continues on this beautiful trail. The bridge is being placed over Elkin Creek and the Elkin Valley Trails Association hopes for a late spring ribbon cutting ceremony!

Dunn Erwin Rail-Trail (Harnett County): Using grant money secured by NCRT, the Town of Erwin is hard at work

building a new section of trail to connect the rail-trail to the Cape Fear River Trail. We hope that construction will be completed this summer.

American Tobacco Trail (Durham County): The long awaited bridge over I-40 is now open! The bridge opened on February 20th and is being heavily used. The trail is now contiguous for 22 miles in Durham Chatham and Wake Counties...a long awaited dream come true!