

By Fred Maxwell

BEFORE the white man came into this vicinity the entire area was under the control of a large swarthy Indian chief by the name of Tushkaloosa. This name, when anglicized or translated, means Black Warrior.

It is not strange therefore that the beautiful river that flows by the fair city of Tuscaloosa was officially called the Black Warrior.

In the northwest part of the state the Sipsy river and Little Warrior join to form the Mulberry which then joins with the Locust to form the headwaters of the Black Warrior River.

The Black Warrior flows in a southerly direction by Tuscaloosa, Eutaw and Greensboro, flowing into the Tombigbee River at Demopolis, then into the Alabama River at Calvert, into the Mobile River, Mobile Bay and the Gulf of Mexico.

Originally the river was affected by the tides as far as Jackson and was navigable to Millwood (Greensboro) for from 10 to 12 months a year and to Tuscaloosa about 9 to 11 months a year with a 2 to 4 foot minimum depth, sufficient for steam paddle wheel boats. The headwater of navigation was at Tuscaloosa due to the shoals—Squaw Shoals, where the river bottom rose over 30 feet within two miles, thereby causing rapids.

The government Engineers installed locks and Dams No. 1-9 (circa 1895) below Tuscaloosa and this gave a 7 foot river channel the year round to Tuscaloosa, still the headwater of navigation of the river. The 7 feet channel permitted the use of underwater propellers on riverboats.

Locks 10, 11 and 12 (called by

Tuscaloosans 1-2-3) overcame Squaw Shoals and opened the river to "Tidewater" located just below the future Lock 13.

This opened the Tuscaloosa coal field to the Gulf. The first barge of coal (mined at Tidewater) that passed through Lock 10 was christened with a bottle of champagne at a public ceremony by Jennie Cochrane Maxwell on Jan. 19, 1896.

By 1905 Lock 13 was completed and this opened up access to several new coal mines and tipples in the area. Locks 14, 15, 16 and 17 followed in order and were completed in 1910-15. This gave Birminghamport (35 miles from Birmingham) a 9 foot channel the year round to the Gulf.

Then followed an era of modernization on the river system to speed up traffic and to facilitate lockage. One lock with 45 foot lift could replace three of 15 foot lift.

Roughly, the following improvements were accomplished:

In 1961 the Jackson lock replaced Locks 1, 2, 3.

In 1855 the Demopolis lock replaced Locks 4, 5, 6, 7.

In 1957 the Eutaw lock replaced 8 and 9.

In 1940 the Oliver lock replaced 10, 11 and 12.

In 1966 the Holt lock replaced 13, 14, 15 and 16.

In 1971 Lock 17 is being modernized.

There are now six locks and dams in place of 17.

The Warrior-Tombigbee waterway is a navigation channel 9 feet deep and where practical, 200 feet wide, from Mobile to points on three headwater streams of the Black Warrior River a few miles above Birmingham, a total distance of 462 miles.

The scenic beauty of the river above the Holt Lock and Dam is said to rival or equal the Palisades on the Hudson River.

I Remember Old Tuscaloosa

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