History

The Urban Appropriation of the Rural South:
The West Point Dam and the Politics of Outdoor Recreation

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Introduction

On November 25, 1958, local government officials and businessmen held a meeting at the General Tyler Hotel in West Point, Ga., to form the Middle Chattahoochee River Development Association. The main topic of discussion was the proposed multi-purpose dam on the Chattahoochee River above the town of West Point to be constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. West Point Mayor Tom Morgan presided over the meeting and called on various guests to speak about the potential benefits of the dam. Among the gathering were R. Shaefer Heard of the Alabama State Senate, A.T. Hanson of the West Point Manufacturing Company, Carl Griffin of the Alabama Industrial Board, and Paul Miller of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. These men elaborated on the economic benefits such as hydroelectric power generation, navigation, recreation, and flood control. They presented a unified message: the dam would offer the benefit of urban development along the stretch of the Chattahoochee River that flowed through the local region.

As the meeting was culminating at a high point with everyone in favor of the project, Mayor Morgan was reminded of one last speaker who had yet to voice his opinion. Joe Young, a local landowner, walked to the front of the room and after a brief pause declared his opposition. Government officials, civic leaders, and experts in river development fell quiet. Young told the stunned audience:

The dam you stand behind would put my land underwater. I am one man, a little man. I want to ask: what rights do we little landowners have? You and the government have the right to condemn my land, tell me how much you’ll pay me for it and then cover it up with water. Who speaks for the little man?

Gentlemen, I realize the benefits, which may come from the

construction of a dam, but when you back up the water over my

property, you’ve taken away the only life I know—my land.²

The underlying sentiments of the West Point, Ga., meeting in November 1958 reflected the emerging urban agenda of government and business officials. In the decades following World War II, a transformation occurred through the U.S. as the majority of Americans took up residence within urban areas. With this shift in population, the federal government became more focused on urban growth and the improvement of metropolitan areas. One particular focus of the federal government became outdoor recreation and its growing demand from urban populations who had more leisure time to spare, but limited spaces to enjoy it in. As a result, for the first time in U.S. history, public officials began to prioritize the rural land surrounding cities as an outdoor recreation resource for urban populations, rather than only as land that met the needs of rural residents.

**Literature Review**

The urban transformation of the U.S. is widely viewed by the public as a progressive movement that allowed the country to attain the status of a world economic superpower. Sociologists have noted such social improvements as higher education, mobility, and the extension of leisure time. These combined to create new needs for an urban class that had rapidly become the majority population of the country. With that in mind, the federal government began planning for the future needs of the growing urban culture.

Outdoor recreation was one particular focus of the federal government, and as many historians and sociologists maintain, it became a need-based priority for urban populations because of their growing leisure time and desire to enjoy outdoor activities and even connect with nature. Much has been written about the urbanization of America in the post-war period as well as the social and environmental impact of outdoor recreation. These forces provide the context to understand urban growth in the American South, specifically in connection with proposals for the dam project in West Point, Ga. in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The December 1960 journal article, Nature and Directions of Suburbanization In The South by T. Stanton Dietrich, is a presumptive look at the changes already occurring in the southern region of the United States as well as the future implications for the coming decade.³ The article analyzed the out-migration of rural farmers to urban areas due to the advancement and

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mechanization of southern agriculture, improvements in transportation, and mass production techniques utilized in industry. Dietrich observed that because of these general improvements in the South, major population redistribution was occurring and people were flocking to already established urban towns and cities in the region. Therefore, in the words of Dietrich, “the social and physical demarcations between rural and urban settlements have tended to become blurred and indistinct, if not entirely obliterated.”

The South and the New Frontier by Robert S. Chauvin takes a look at the southern region of the United States and its postwar years of economic prosperity. He argued that urbanization was taking hold in the South, and an educated class of Southerners was rising to take advantage of the abundant natural resources in the region. According the Chauvin, “the [South] has long served the country as a reservoir of brains and brawn...but out migration [has] drained mature people from the area.” From this he inferred that with time the South would continue to grow into a powerful agricultural and industrial society if it was grounded on science.

His 1964 article provides an initial perspective on the growing trend of urbanization in the South, the intentions of state and municipal governments, and the shift of focus away from rural areas. Chauvin alluded to this in the reapportionment of state legislatures in favor of the “urban proletariat” and the “city dweller” over the “old agrarian control.” This follows his research findings, which show a rise in income levels throughout the developed areas of the South.

He also addressed the role of the federal government in the new frontier as an encroaching entity made bearable by the funding of large infrastructure projects such as multi-purpose dams. He stressed that “as part of the new frontier, the federal government will play a larger role then ever in its relations with [states rights advocates], and no state can secede financially from the federal structure.” Thus Chauvin described a new frontier as it was being incorporated into American society, along with the acceptance of its morals and values. This places urbanization in a fundamental role in the advancement of the region and advocates the use of federal funds for the development of natural resources that would benefit the new urban population.

4 Ibid., p. 181.
6 Ibid., p. 139.
7 Ibid., p. 145.
8 Ibid., p. 146.
9 Ibid., p. 146.
In *The Changing South: National Incorporation of a Region*, John C. McKinney and Linda Brookover Bourque, portray the South as a “passive, backward, and often recalcitrant region of the country” that was finally emerging as a functioning cog in postwar America. Their 1971 article offers a reflection of the general perception of the South as a burgeoning economic zone that was catching up with the other regions of the United States through growing improvements in urbanization, industrialization, occupational redistribution, income and education. McKinney and Bourque based there findings on the idea that improvement of these five factors indicated societal progress in the South. This notion that urbanization benefits society came about as a product of the postwar boom in America and thus led to a shift of focus away from the rural areas of the country.

From *Conservation to Environment: Environmental Politics in the United States Since World War II*, by Samuel P. Hays, examines the roots of social change in the post-war American society through a look at environmental history. While this 1982 article primarily focuses on this broad topic, it includes a subjective look at two of the reasons for social change and their implications on the rapid urbanization of the country. As Hays states, “One is associated with the search for standards of living beyond necessities and conveniences to include amenities made possible by considerable increases in personal and social ‘real income.’” The other reason is the advancement of education among the general American population, which “generated values associated with personal creativity and self-development, involvement with natural environments, physical and mental fitness and wellness, and political autonomy and efficacy.”

These changes in the underlying mentality of the new urban class of the 1950s and 60s reflected a desire for a better “quality of life.” Hays goes on to say that the American people combined the value of natural environments with this desire for a better quality of life and viewed recreation as a part of the general rise


11 Ibid., p. 401.

12 Ibid., p. 402.


14 Ibid., p. 108.

15 Ibid., p. 108.
in the standard of living of this time period.\textsuperscript{16}

Interest in [the natural environment] was not a throwback to the primitive, but an integral part of the modern standard of living as people sought to add new ‘amenity’ and ‘aesthetic’ goals and desires to their earlier preoccupation with necessities and conveniences.\textsuperscript{17}

These ideas that Hays introduced to the ongoing discussion surrounding urbanization are important because they pinpoint the evolving values of the new urban class in the 1950s and ‘60s as leisure-oriented. By this time, most necessities and conveniences could be found in the suburban household. Therefore families had more time and dispensable income for vacations as well as the means to travel long distances in order to experience “natural environments both emotionally and intellectually...for direct personal experience in recreation.”\textsuperscript{18} This led to demands for more parks and other recreational sources such as lakes and wildlife preserves that made the natural environment accessible to the automobile owning public.

In 1958 Congress established the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission whose report acknowledged the growing interest and demand for recreation on state and federal public lands. As Hays notes, the report’s recommendations “heavily influenced” public policy during the Lyndon Johnson administration and led to the Land and Water Conservation Fund of 1964, which provided the revenue for the purchase of state and federal outdoor recreation lands.\textsuperscript{19} This involved altering the landscape in order to meet the needs of the urban vacationer and throughout the 1960s and 1970s publicly funded “rural development” projects were carried out through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.\textsuperscript{20}

Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States by Kenneth T. Jackson is a broad chronological examination of the history of urbanization in America.\textsuperscript{21} Published in 1985, it analyzed the movement of the American population from rural environments to cities as well as the shift to the surrounding fringes of major metropolitan areas. Focusing on the flight to suburbs, Jackson provided a sociological background to the 1950s and ‘60s in which “low inflation,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 109.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 109.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 110.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 115.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 124.
\end{itemize}
plentiful energy, federal subsidies, and expansive optimism [gave] Americans... the way to a more abundant and more perfect lifestyle.\textsuperscript{22} From Jackson's study on suburbanization, it can be seen that a fundamental moral shift took place in the living and housing conditions of middle and upper class Americans in the post World War II society. This post-war generation sought to find a harmonious balance between the urban city and the rural environment by creating the suburbs as means of escaping to the limitless expanse of the country while maintaining the security and upward mobility of the city.\textsuperscript{23}

From Crabgrass Frontier, one can understand recreation as a rising priority in the minds of 1960s suburban families. A widening division between work and leisure, expanded transportation and highway systems, and the movement away from inner cities allowed people to seek out recreation in places such as state parks that rarely if ever existed in urban areas. This refocus of values caused the local as well as federal government to shift its attention to the suburbs and as an extension the rural areas that could potentially benefit the suburban population.\textsuperscript{24}

The outdoor recreation movement that occurred in response to the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission report published in 1962 had a major impact on the urban development of the United States as the majority of Americans living in urban settings had more leisure time. Therefore, the outdoor recreation needs of the country’s urban population became a federal government issue because it related to the welfare of the people – and the well being of the American economy.

This paper will provide a unique perspective of the outdoor recreation movement by examining the impact of the ORRRC report on the authorization of the West Point, Ga. multi-purpose dam. By providing a detailed look at the report and how it related specifically to the project in West Point, a clearer picture of the intentions of federal, state, and local officials advocating the construction of the reservoir emerges which foregrounds the contestation of the urban appropriation of the rural.

The Federal, Local, and Landowner Views

The urbanization of the rural is a prevalent theme in American society during the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Following the shortages of World War II, the U.S. economy rapidly expanded and led to the subsequent growth of urban centers throughout the country. These major metropolitan areas retained a measure of influence given to highly populated cities in the past, but in the post-war period of the late 1950s

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 243.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 6.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 11.
and early 1960s, they became the centerpiece of a new federal government focus on the urbanization of the country. This entailed a shift in government priorities towards a policy that made access to outdoor recreation a legitimate function of the federal and state government. This, in turn, directly impacted the creation of a federal reservoir in West Point Ga., by the United States Army Corps of Engineers in the 1960s.

In the case of the West Point Dam, there are three perspectives on the question of urbanization and outdoor recreation. The involvement of the federal government and its designation of priorities in present and future matters was the first view. The second view was that of local government and the business and civic leaders of the region surrounding the proposed site of the West Point reservoir. The third view was from the perspective of the rural landowners who were negatively impacted by the West Point project.

**The Federal View**

The United States Congress created the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission (ORRRC) in 1958 to address the growing needs of an urban population. The congressional committee set out to study the growth in education, jobs, and leisure time and relate them to the need for more outdoor recreation opportunities. Through outdoor recreation, the state governments and federal government planned to foster the development of the major metropolitan areas throughout the country and the urban population; which now represented the majority of the country. Therefore the ORRRC's Study Report 21, which was delivered to President John F. Kennedy and the United States Congress in January 1962, was an outline of social reform within the country that specifically focused on the growing need for outdoor recreation among urban Americans.

The title of the ORRRC Study Report 21, *Future of Outdoor Recreation in Metropolitan Regions of the United States*, describes the purpose of the report, which was to brief the federal government on the country's current outdoor recreation resources and the demands likely to be placed on them over the next 40 years. The first part of the 246-page report focuses on the place of outdoor recreation in American life and the supply, demand, and economics of recreation presently and in the future. The second half of the report gives recommendations for programs and policies as well as defining the responsibilities of the federal government, state governments, local governments, and private business.

26 Ibid., p. i.
27 Ibid., p. i.
The overall message of the report was the growing need for recreation sources around the metropolitan areas of the country. As populations increased in metropolitan urban centers, the volume of outdoor recreation activities increased due to the rise in income, leisure and mobility correlated with urban and suburban populations.\textsuperscript{28} The report stated that in 1960, metropolitan populations generated 37 percent of the national recreational activity and that this proportion was on the rise.\textsuperscript{29} The report this concluded that the current state of outdoor recreational resources around cities was inadequate to meet the future needs of burgeoning metropolitan areas.

A shift in the state of Georgia from an agricultural-based economy to industry and the general movement of southern populations to cities was represented by the city of Atlanta in the ORRRC report.\textsuperscript{30} Because of this urban transformation, the federal government recognized the city as a growing “large-scale population center” that could benefit from more outdoor recreation resources. However, to justify access to the recreational resources needed for the future needs of Atlanta, the report introduced a fundamental ideology that represented the federal government emphasis on the urban over the rural classes of America:

As the Nation becomes more and more committed to the urban life, the old division between rural and urban, between country and city, and between city people and country folks tends to disappear. The city reaches out into the surrounding countryside and claims it as a service area. The national point of view becomes urban, and urban need commands national attention. The open countryside becomes an adjunct and an amenity of metropolitan life.\textsuperscript{31}

This illustrates the federal government’s view toward urban centers as the backbone of the country. As stated in the report, it is easier to make a living and provide for one’s needs in the city because of the mass-market economy that developed due to the conglomeration of urban populations.\textsuperscript{32} Therefore in the early 1960s, Atlanta, and every other major American city, was viewed as a growing metropolitan area that needed to use the recreational resources of the surrounding rural areas in order to secure the future growth and development of

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p. 6.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 7.
\textsuperscript{31} ORRRC Study Report 21, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. 7.
the city and its people.

The ORRRC report views recreation as a source of comfort for people because “much of the pleasure of outdoor recreation is related to feelings of freedom of movement in a spacious environment.” The report also defines the “open country” as the necessary environment for recreation and views it as an “essential corrective” to the confined space of the city. This idea is essential to the overall purpose of the report because it clearly illustrates why recreation is important for urban populations. As the report states:

There seems to be only one conclusion: that the people on whom the environment of the city with its close-packed living, its constant pressure of the concrete brick and asphalt environment, and its lack of pleasant surroundings which is most oppressive, have less than average access to the out of doors.

The welfare of the urban class was therefore at stake and, according to the federal government, recreation was a way to alleviate the pressures of the city. The authors of the report presented outdoor recreation as a temporary refuge rather than an alternate, to the urban environment. Thus the government prioritized the needs of the urban complex in a manner that placed the rural environment in a subservient position.

The authors of the ORRRC report also viewed outdoor recreation as a purveyor of “American outdoor heritage.” This nurtured the idea of a past American culture that was no longer experienced. Outdoor recreation was recommended as a positive benefit for the new generation of urban-class youths as well as a technique of acculturation for African-American populations in the American South. This last point highlights racial thinking in the ORRRC report, but it also reinforces the idea of outdoor recreation as an important tool for social transformation.

While the federal report targeted the urban class in general, the central audience for outdoor recreation was the suburban class of metropolitan areas because of their tendency towards higher income, education, occupation, and mobility. This highlights the urbanization of the American population towards

33 Ibid., p. 13.
34 Ibid., p. 7.
36 Ibid., p. 28.
37 Ibid., p. 11.
38 Ibid., p. 10.
39 Ibid., p. 13.
the urban fringe of the metropolitan areas. As the report observes, “people have found in suburban living a way to enjoy the best of two worlds; the greater economic opportunity of the large metropolis and the illusion, at least, of a spacious environment.” Therefore the outward residential movement towards the suburbs represented the social objective of the educated urban class; which was the combination of urban benefits and the rural environment. Outdoor recreation catered to the needs of this demographic because it provided the sought-after environment as well as proximity to the suburbs of the metropolitan area.

The ORRRC report concluded that recreation should be given national endorsement because, “if outdoor recreation has beneficial effects on those who participate in it; if it adds to the mental and physical well-being of a state’s citizens; then it is a legitimate function for government to undertake.” This conclusion had a lasting impact on the role of government in the development of recreation resources around the country in the 1960s. More specifically, it influenced the creation of a federal reservoir in West Point, Ga.

The 87th United States Congress authorized the construction of the West Point dam during its second session in October 1962. This decision came eight months after the ORRRC published its report on outdoor recreation. While the project was not specifically referred to in the report, which included a focus on Atlanta, there were indirect statements that suggested the need for more sources of outdoor recreation to the south of the Atlanta metropolitan area.

Frank K. Gibson, a professor of political science at the University of Georgia, was the author of the report on Atlanta. In his opinion the city had done little to plan out the recreation sources already established near the city, yet he considered them adequate for the present urban population of Atlanta. Gibson warned of future issues due to the lack of recreational planning, however, and urged the creation of use-oriented parks and reservoirs – recreational sources that are planned out in order to take advantage of maximum public-use rather than the natural beauty of the environment. In Gibson’s words, “The presence

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40 Ibid., p. 36.
41 Ibid., p. 36.
43 Senate Committee on The Secretary of the Army, *Chattahoochee River; West Point and Franklin, Georgia*, 87th Cong., 2d sess., 1962, S. Doc. 507, pg. 1.
45 ORRRC Study Report 21, p. 28.
of appropriate water bodies exerts almost as much influence as access in determining the adequacy of recreation resources of metropolitan residents.”

Thus Gibson advocated for the federal government to construct more recreational resources such as reservoirs that catered to the needs of the growing Atlanta urban population.

Overall the ORRRC report approached the future recreation needs of metropolitan areas as an issue of appropriate distribution and location. In the case of Atlanta, the authors noted that “Since the [Atlanta metropolitan area] will doubtless expand southward in the future, it is the recommendation of this report that at least two reservoirs be established [south of the city].”

Therefore the West Point Dam was authorized by Congress in part to address the recreational needs of Atlanta’s urban population that were addressed in the ORRRC’s report.

The actions taken by Congress following the ORRRC report demonstrated the influence the congressional publication had on local and federal policy during the early 1960s. However, it is equally important to note impact of President John Kennedy’s message to Congress on March 1, 1962, that focused on the conservation of the nation’s natural resources. It addressed the urbanization of the United States and the subsequent strain placed on natural resources by the rise in industrial output, rapid population growth of metropolitan areas and increased enjoyment of leisure time.

This message was influential in many ways as it introduced new concepts to the members of Congress, but most importantly, it reaffirmed the general conclusion of the ORRRC report. The timing of the message was equally important as it followed the publication of the ORRRC report by one month and predated the opening of the second session of the 87th United States Congress, which took place in the fall of 1962.

The presidential message stated the federal and state issues that confronted the present and future use of natural resources. It reinforced the general concept that the country’s population and economic output was rapidly expanding due to urbanization, but also stressed that the conservation of natural resources such as air, water, land, fuels, energy, soils, forests, and wildlife was crucial to the continuation of the country’s growth. As President Kennedy stated in the introduction, “the highest form of national thrift [is the] prevention of waste and despoilment while preserving, improving and renewing the quality and usefulness of all our resources.”

Following this statement was a list of national natural resource developments that had occurred between 1961 and 1962.

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46 Ibid., p. 29.
49 Ibid.
included the formation of 74 major water resources projects and the introduction of new urban growth and development regulations. In relation with the West Point project, one regulation allowed for the acquisition of land to construct federally financed reservoirs, which would “preserve the recreational potential of those areas.”

The message being sent by President Kennedy, therefore, was the need for quick and decisive action on the part of Federal and state agencies. He addressed outdoor recreation as a top priority in his message and specifically referenced the ORRRC report and the results of its studies. He went on to recommend the authorization of $500 million dollars over the course of eight years to begin the expansion of recreation resources throughout the nation. The impact of this recommendation essentially guaranteed the federal backing of future recreation projects and the subsequent funding needed to complete them. In this case, the influence of the U.S. President cannot be understated. Therefore, President Kennedy’s affirmation of the ORRRC report in his message to Congress influenced the authorization of the West Point Dam because of its potential for outdoor recreation.

The Local View

The federal government’s role in the creation of West Point Lake was substantial, but local government, private enterprises, and civic leaders had some influence over the project as well. Since the 1920s, local community and business leaders had advocated the construction of a dam above the town of West Point, Ga., for the purpose of flood control. This was due to infrastructural damage caused by the seasonal floods of the Chattahoochee River whose bank ran parallel to the town. No one including the federal government, however, was interested in building the requested single-purpose dam. Public officials waited until the late 1950s to reconsider the project. This was due to growing interest from Atlanta and the states of Georgia and Alabama in the modern development of the Chattahoochee River. With this new perspective, the purpose of the West Point project expanded five-fold to include hydroelectric power, fish and wildlife recreation, general recreation, and navigation in addition to flood control.

Through a multi-purpose dam and reservoir project, local interests began

50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
54 Senate Committee on The Secretary of the Army, Chattahoochee River, West Point and Franklin, Georgia, 87th Cong., 2d sess., 1962, S. Doc. 507, p. 1.
to envision various urban advantages that were previously unattainable. This included a new energy source - a draw for industry to the area - the economic benefit of recreation and potential cargo shipments along the river as well as the protection of downstream urban developments.\textsuperscript{55} Local government officials and business leaders surrounding the town of West Point embraced the support of regional interests - and the subsequent expansion of the project purposes - because of the prospective economic advancement of their region though the resources and planning of the federal government. Therefore local government and private enterprises originated the plans for a dam above the town of West Point, but the development and authorization of the project took place at the state and federal level.

The economic importance placed on the project is illustrated by a look at the local and regional sponsors of the multi-purpose dam at West Point. The Middle Chattahoochee River Development Authority was formed in November 1958 by a gathering of men representing cities and counties from Columbus to Atlanta who sought the construction of the dam primarily for flood control, hydroelectric power and to make the river navigable from the Gulf of Mexico to Atlanta.\textsuperscript{56} Notable speakers at the meeting included several mayors of local towns, county commissioners, the president of West Point Manufacturing Company, a representative of the Georgia Ports Authority, a member of the Alabama Industrial Board, and a representative of the mayor’s office of Atlanta.\textsuperscript{57}

Following this meeting, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers held a public hearing in December 1958 to determine the level of public support for the project. Proponents of the dam who gave testimony included representatives of the Atlanta Freight Bureau, Atlanta Water Works, Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, Georgia Power Company, Georgia Waterways Commission, and Fourth District Congressional Representative John J. Flynt who was responsible for the initial project survey grant from the Federal government.\textsuperscript{58} Colonel Robert W. Love of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers concluded the meeting by stating that the project survey would indicate to Congress whether the “monetary returns from the dam would make it a profitable enterprise.”\textsuperscript{59}

These meetings highlight the importance placed on economic benefits


\textsuperscript{56} Glenn Kennedy, “Heard, Crane Head Middle Chattahoochee Crusade,” \textit{LaGrange Daily News}, November 25, 1958.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
by local government and businesses. There was a broad endorsement of the project by various organizations that had wide-ranging intentions for the proposed multi-purpose dam. Recreation was not an initial focus of these local interests, but the acknowledgment of economic benefits as a foundation for the construction of the dam and reservoir opened the door for the influence of the ORRRC report and President Kennedy’s conservation message.

The United States Army Chief of Engineers issued the final report and authorization for the West Point project on August 31, 1962. In the opening statement, Lieutenant General W.K. Wilson Jr. acknowledged the five purposes of the West Point project and their economic benefits. However the final two paragraphs of his letter recognized the growing importance of outdoor recreation as confirmed by the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission Report 21 and a subsequent conservation message sent by President Kennedy to Congress. Wilson concluded by stating:

The Commission's investigation disclosed the pivotal role of water in outdoor recreational activity and stressed the need for public action to assure that adequate opportunities for water-based outdoor recreation are accessible to all Americans. In the case of West Point Reservoir, I believe this objective warrants an increase in the balanced basic recreational development to be undertaken by the Federal Government.\(^\text{60}\)

Therefore the message sent by the chief of engineers was that outdoor recreation was now a federal priority due to the ORRRC’s report and President Kennedy’s conservation message. The West Point project was to accommodate it as an integral part of the planning in order to serve the heavily populated metropolitan areas of Atlanta and Columbus, Ga., as well as adjacent regions of Alabama.\(^\text{61}\) Wilson ended his report by adding an additional measure of $1,800,000 to the project budget for the development of recreational land and facilities.\(^\text{62}\)

The West Point project was authorized under one basic premise: it was economically justified. The addition of recreation created further economic incentives for the local region as well as advancing the urban agenda of the federal government. The local government and business leaders accepted this added measure because of the potential benefits to their constituents as well as themselves. Waights G. Henry, then president of LaGrange College in nearby LaGrange, Ga., gave a speech in April 1966 on the potential benefits of the project.

\(^{60}\) Senate Committee on The Secretary of the Army, *Chattahoochee River; West Point and Franklin, Georgia*, 87th Cong., 2d sess., 1962, S. Doc. 507, p. 1.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., p. 2.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., p. 2.
He concluded by stating, “This river that gives life to a great metropolis to the north of us now gives promise to this area of two great states.”

The recreation addendum was viewed as a benefit because it would allow the non-metropolitan area of West Point and surrounding towns to profit from the recreational needs of the urban populations of Atlanta and Columbus. This view held by local politicians and business leaders was that the creation of the lake would urbanize the region by increasing industrial growth and the working-class population. Therefore, when recreation became an integral part of the West Point project, businessmen and local government officials welcomed it on the local level because of the economic benefits to the areas surrounding the lake rather than considering the social benefits for the urban population of metropolitan Atlanta.

**The Landowners’ View**

There existed a small group of individuals that had much at stake concerning the creation of the West Point Reservoir, but they had very little power or authority to decide the outcome. These people were the rural landowners whose property was to become inundated by the reservoir. To them, the construction of the multi-purpose dam and reservoir would dramatically change their lives by removing them from their land and heritage. In a letter to the editor of a local West Point newspaper, Mrs. W.J. Fletcher of the Piedmont Heights Community Club declared that, “We are, in its entirety, having to sacrifice our homes and farms for the recreation of the [West Point] dam.” This view delineated the frustration of landowners unable to keep their homes and land in the face of the federal government.

Joseph L. Young and Guy M. Word owned farmland within the proposed site and were the only two landowners to make their voices heard at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers public hearing in December 1958. They based their opposition on the lack of appropriate condemnation payments for their land, the burden on taxpayers who would ultimately pay for the project, the questionable need for recreation facilities, and the inadvisable capacity for more hydroelectric power in the face of new atomic energy sources. Of the 72 written statements received by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at the public hearing held in West Point,

64 Senate Committee on The Secretary of the Army, *Chattahoochee River, West Point and Franklin, Georgia*, 87th Cong., 2d sess., 1962, S. Doc. 507, p. 17.
65 W.J. Fletcher, letter to the editor, *Valley Times* (Lanett, Alabama), April 15, 1966.
66 Senate Committee on The Secretary of the Army, *Chattahoochee River, West Point and Franklin, Georgia*, 87th Cong., 2d sess., 1962, S. Doc. 507, p. 177.
Joseph Young and Guy Word were the only two representatives to express their opposition to the proposed project. This fact highlighted the overwhelming public support for the West Point dam prior to its authorization, but only so far as the government, business, and civic leaders who had the time and money to invest in its future benefits.

However, the underrepresented view of the rural landowner may have extended beyond the affected homeowners and farmers. Dr. Robert Copeland was a resident of the nearby city of LaGrange, Ga. during the 1960’s and in a recent interview he noted that the “excitement for the [coming of the] lake was palpable.” Dr. Copeland spoke further about the West Point Dam, however, and recognized that, “many political things take on a life of their own.” He and many other residents understood at the time that the project was controlled by outside entities fueled by a political momentum difficult to counter.

Dr. Copeland expressed his feelings at that time for the farmers by asking, “How do you justify taking someone’s property that has been in their family for generations?” This questioned the authorization of the project and the use of eminent domain by the federal government to reapportion private land for the use of the public. Therefore the landowner had some support among local residents, but the priorities of the United States federal government and the welfare of the country’s majority urban population took precedence over the rural farmer whose land happened to lie within the proposed site of a federal reservoir.

The logic of the urban appropriation of rural resources for recreational use in an attempt to maintain a much-revered connection with the outdoors in the face of growing American metropolitan areas was unassailable at the federal level in the postwar period. Both the president and the congress had identified the subordination of the rural to the urban as national policy goals and yet the purposes and benefits of this policy were subject to differing interpretations. As the narrative of the approval of the West Point dam shows, local political and commercial interests saw recreational development in terms of local opportunities with no interest in the national-scale implications. Those who lost the most, unsurprisingly, found little solace in the advance of national policy initiatives or the boosterism of the local business community. Their voices were lost in inundating enthusiasm for development for the benefit of distant urban classes and local elite interests.

67 Ibid., p. 175.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
Conclusion

The authorization of the West Point multi-purpose dam represented a fundamental shift in the post-war United States in which rural regions and communities came to serve as recreational resources for growing urban areas, in this case, metropolitan Atlanta. This concept of rural planning for an urban future signified the development of new federal policies and priorities tailored to the needs of the country’s growing urban population. President John Kennedy elaborated on this notion in his conservation message to the United States Congress by urging the use of water as a key resource for the future development of the country. Major General George Walker of the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers reinforced this idea by stating, “[The construction of a dam] is an important event to an area in any part of the country [because] you have a wealth of water which can be your greatest natural resource if made useable for man.”

The recognition of water-use and its relation to outdoor recreation came early in 1962 when the ORRRC report delineated the importance of water-related leisure activities to urban populations. This led to President Kennedy’s message on the wise use of water resources and subsequently the inclusion of recreation in the authorization of the West Point multi-purpose dam.

The urban appropriation of the rural in postwar America, however, was neither the sole concern of the federal government nor was it a process uncontested. While local governments and business groups were enthusiastic supporters of federal development of recreational resources, they did not understand these projects in terms of the mobilization of the rural resources for urban benefit. Instead they saw these projects as opportunities for local economic growth. Local landowners who stood to see their property inundated, conversely, encountered the power of eminent domain that rendered impossible effective opposition or negotiation to save relationships to the land created over generations. For these people, the greater public good, the greater urban good, translated into the death of family legacies and ways of being.

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71 Groundbreaking of West Point Dam, *Valley Times (Lanett, Alabama)*, April 18, 1966.
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