

A Brief History of the Saluda-Reedy Watershed



The Saluda and Reedy Rivers have sustained humans for more than twelve thousand years. However, since the arrival of the first Europeans in the upper Piedmont of South Carolina around 1770, the relationship between the rivers and the residents of the watershed has become more dynamic than during the Native American era. Over the last two hundred and thirty years, the Saluda and Reedy Rivers provided the power to drive economic growth and physical development of the watershed. They have provided water to drink, the most elemental of human needs. They have carried away solid wastes, liquid wastes, human wastes, and chemical and industrial wastes. And they have sustained the spiritual and recreational needs of watershed inhabitants, serving as fountains of wellness, beauty, and repose.

The Reedy and Saluda's most celebrated role in history has been as the workhorses of the Upstate economy in general, and of Greenville's economy in particular. Channeled or impounded by dams on the rivers, water provided energy to grind corn or wheat, weave cloth, and, starting in the 1890s, to generate electricity. By the early twentieth century, a strong entrepreneurial spirit and evolving technology joined with the hydrology and topography of the watershed to make Greenville the "Textile Capital of the World."



As part of this process of development, hydroelectric plants on the rivers were built to serve the industrial needs of cotton mills. These plants later illuminated the cities, towns, and finally the farms of the region, as well. In 1940, the growing electrical demands of people and industry in the Upstate spurred a massive hydroelectric project on the Saluda River known as the Buzzards' Roost dam. This project impounded the lower portions of both the Saluda and the Reedy Rivers to create Lake Greenwood, the first and only large-scale reservoir in the watershed, which supplies water to the Greenwood region to this day.

The Saluda – and particularly the Reedy – have long served as sewers for the people in the watershed, as well, draining away the wastes of civilization. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the factories powered by the falling water of the Saluda and Reedy Rivers dumped untreated industrial effluent back into

them. Starting in the 1870s, industrialization also fueled dramatic growth of the watershed's population, and especially the population of the city of Greenville. Population growth and physical development multiplied sources of pollution up and down the banks of both rivers. In the 1890s, Greenville built a city sewer system; however, for its first three decades it had no treatment facilities, and instead underground pipes carried untreated human and industrial wastes into Reedy. By the 1930s, Greenville had added waste treatment facilities, but any improvement in the Reedy's water quality was more than offset by the construction of two dyeing and bleaching factories in the preceding decades which together dumped more than three million gallons of toxic effluent daily into the Reedy.

Ironically, during the period when industry and sewage were defiling the downstream reaches of the region's rivers – thus reducing their utility for downstream users – the city of Greenville looked to the headwaters of the Saluda for sources of clean drinking water. The city built a reservoir at Paris Mountain in the 1880s, at Table Rock on the South Saluda River in the 1920s, and on the North Saluda River in the 1950s. The water piped from these reservoirs to the residents of the city was, according to a 1962 newspaper article, the

"purest in the world and found in more abundance here than any place in the United States [and] has long been counted Greenville's greatest asset and stimulant to growth. Billions of gallons of water from the sparkling creeks of the Blue Ridge have cooled the throats of burgeoning industry and commerce in Greenville and given life to the looms of the world's textile center."

The Greenville Water System was touted as an investment in the economic future of the city and became, for business and political leaders alike, a point of great pride. Unfortunately, the same concern for purity did not extend to what was sent downstream to users not fortunate enough to enjoy access to protected headwaters reservoirs.

Since the 1960s, the Saluda and Reedy have faced new threats to their health, but have also benefited from a new spirit of concern across the community. Untreated industrial effluent and sewage have been eliminated by large-scale economic changes and clean water regulations, such as the Clean Water Act of 1972. In spite of such measures to address point-source pollutants, water quality and aquatic health of the Saluda and Reedy basins remain compromised by the legacy of industrial and municipal contaminants that still reside in the sediments and floodplains of the rivers. In addition, non-point source pollution – sediment, nutrients and waste carried by storm water – is now the chief threat to these rivers. Non-point source pollution primarily results from poor land-use practices and unplanned growth, and has the potential to undo all the gains in water quality achieved in the last thirty years. It will take a concerted effort by community leaders across the Upstate to effectively address the threats of non-point source pollution fed by rapid development through our watershed.

This project was sponsored by the Saluda-Reedy Watershed Consortium and has involved technical work by Furman University. Watershed Insights Report No. 5, authorized for release by SRWC on 16 October 2005. Key Contact: Dr. Steve O'Neill, steve.o'neill@furman.edu. The SRWC is a broad-based group of universities, public agencies, private consultants, and non-profit organizations focused on assuring "Clean, Healthy and Abundant Water for a Sustainable Economy and Environment Throughout the Saluda-Reedy Watershed". For more info, visit www.saludareedy.org.