Flat-bottom keelboats are again floating the historic Augusta Canal where once the power of falling water was the industrial might of the South. Today the boats have electric motors, but the eight-mile cut through Georgia’s second city still serves its original purpose. Canal-fed turbines still drive spindles and looms that make cloth from plantation cotton. Visionaries and financiers still look to its falling waters to inspire the revitalization of an urban manufacturing center.

Older than the Confederacy, the canal idea caught fire in 1840s as the City of Augusta competed with Charleston and neighboring ports for control of the cotton trade. Engineer Henry Cummings, formerly a lawyer, founded a semi-public canal company with Georgia railroad money and a $100,000 municipal bond.

Construction began in April 1845. Modeled after the Middlesex Canal of Massachusetts, where hydropower had made the City of Lowell a thriving textile center, the Augusta Canal tapped the Savannah River at rapids above the city. A U-shaped ditch—five feet deep and forty-five feet wide at the water’s surface—dropped 26 feet through a gauntlet of wheels and turbines. By 1846 the canal was producing 380 horsepower from a discharge of 257 cu ft/sec—enough power to drive 10,000 spindles for cotton mills. In five years the city’s population doubled to 13,000. In Cummings’ words, Augusta had become “the Lowell of the South.”

The canal with its rail connections made Augusta the logical site for the great Confederate States Powder Works factory. Built between 1861 and 1863, the 28-building-gunpowder complex dominated two-miles of Augusta’s canal front. The Civil War-era canal also lured shoe factories, a pistol armory, and the Confederacy’s most advanced locomotive machine shop. Brick apartments along the canal housed hundreds of textile works. Girardy’s Ice Factory produced a ton of ice each day.

Continued on next page...
Inexplicably, the Union Army bypassed Augusta after Sherman razed Atlanta. In May 1865, however, the Savannah River broke levees, flooded the factory district, and forced the army to higher ground. Augusta, even so, remained a bright spot in the ruin of postwar Georgia. Rebounding strongly in 1875, the city raised almost $1 million for canal improvements from the sale of municipal bonds. Falling power rates attracted the enormously successful Enterprise Manufacturing Company and the sprawling Sibley Manufacturing Company—two of the largest mills in the South. In 1896, the city added a canal-fed power station. Four years later Augusta became the first southern city with an electric trolley line.

The 20th century ended the canal's most prosperous era and began its downward slide. Serious flooding in 1908, 1929, and 1936 damaged spillways and headgates. Guard walls collapsed. Gates rusted. Factories relocated. Hydro dams upriver brought a more reliable source of power. Not until the 1980s did public support for a waterfront park revive interest in the old canal. In 1989 the new state-sponsored Augusta Canal Authority spearheaded the restoration. In 1996, with support from the National Park Service, Congress created the Augusta Canal National Heritage Area. In 2003 the heritage park opened a $3 million interpretive center in the restored spooling building of the old Enterprise Mill.

“Augusta has returned time and again to its waters,” Mayor Bob Young proclaimed in his speech at the dedication of the interpretive center. More than a history lesson, the canal, said Young, would again inspire the city that reinvented the industrial South.

Mystery under Selma

The engineering firm TRC, Inc. has recently investigated brick-lined tunnels under downtown Selma, Alabama. Historians have long speculated on the origins of the mysterious tunnels.

Investigators now believe the tunnels once drained artesian wells into the Alabama River. The tunnels average about 3 feet wide by 4.5 feet high with vaulted ceilings and brick-lined floors. Concrete or corrugated pipes to prevent collapse have replaced all but one of the outlets into the river. The city constructed at least five artesian wells in the city streets in the 1850s. A source in 1878 stated that the “immense streams of water flowing from [the wells] make their way to the river through brick culverts, constructed for that purpose by the city.”

Although many believe that the tunnels had been used for smuggling slaves or transporting wounded soldiers during the Civil War, these stories could not be confirmed. No artifacts were recovered from the tunnels. Although the tunnels predate the Civil War, investigators could not precisely determine construction dates. TRC hopes future investigations will reveal construction methods by locating the builders’ tunnel excavation trench.

For more information, contact Jeff Holland or Lynn Pietak at (770) 270-1192, or email to jholland@trcsolutions.com.

Hey Ralphie boy!

The International Committee for the History of Technology (ICOHTEC) will host its 31st international symposium in Bochum, Germany, from August 17th to 21st, 2004. One session will consider how roads, canals, and other public works have changed romantic notions of the countryside. A related session will examine how technological development has been reflected in fine art and other media. Visit the conference web site at http://www.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/technikhist/icohtec2004.htm.


The Smithsonian’s Lemelson Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation and the MIT Press have established an interdisciplinary book series on topics in the history of invention and innovation. Books in the Lemelson Center Series on Invention will explore the work of inventors and the technologies they create in order to advance scholarship in history, engineering, science, and related fields. For further information, contact Joyce Bedi (bedij@nmah.si.edu), Sara Meirowitz (saram@mit.edu), or Arthur Molella (molellaa@nmah.si.edu).

On May 1927, barely a week after Charles Lindbergh landed in Paris, the City of Oakland rushed to complete a runway long enough to launch the first California-to-Hawaii flight. Crews labored around the clock for 23 days to complete the 7,020-foot strip that was then the world’s longest runway. Oakland’s determination capped a boom era described in Professor Janet Bednarek’s illustrated history of municipal airports, forthcoming this spring in Essays in Public Works History.

Have you made a tax-deductible contribution to the PWHS Endowment Fund?

The Fund was established for the sole purpose of funding selected PWHS award programs, publishing projects and special events as they relate to the historical preservation of the public works environment and the PWHS Strategic Plan. Details and a donation form can be found at http://www.apwa.net/About/SIG/PWHS/socact.asp#endowment.
ABOUT THE SOCIETY

PWHS Award Nominations

Since an independent committee, composed of Public Works Historical Society members, reviews PWHS award nominations submitted, APWA has extended the deadline for submission to March 15, 2003, for PWHS awards only.

Abel Wolman - recognizes the single best new book published in the field of public works history (copyright 2003)

Michael Robinson - recognizes the single best article published in the field of public works history (copyright 2003)

Please review the complete awards criteria listed on the APWA web site (http://www.apwa.net/About/Awards/2004Awards/).

If you have questions, feel free to contact Teresa Hon (thon@apwa.net, 816-872-3615) or Rhonda Wilhite (rwhilhite@apwa.net, 816-872-3612).

PWHS Board of Trustees and Nominating Committee are soliciting recommendations for open positions on the PWHS Board of Trustees. You are encouraged to submit names for nomination by March 10, 2004. Following the deadline, the PWHS Nominating Committee will review the suggestions and put forward a slate of nominees for the 2004 ballot.

The Bylaws of the Public Works Historical Society call for a system of rotation between members from the academic community and practitioners. Listed below are the open positions, as well as requirements for each particular office.

- **President-elect**
  (PWHS member who is a practitioner)
- **Trustee**
  (PWHS member from the academic community) - term to expire 2007
- **Trustee**
  (PWHS practitioner member) - term to expire 2007

Current members are:
Jerry Fay, President
Howard Rosen, President-Elect
Jeffrey Stine, Past-President
Jameson W. Doig, Trustee (term expires 2006)
Glenn A. Compton, Trustee (2006)
Todd Shallat, Trustee (2005)
Richard Cunningham, Trustee (2005)
Sarah Elkind, Trustee (2004)
Kenneth Eyre, Trustee (2004)
Martin J. Manning, P.E., Board Liaison

Suggestions should be sent to pwhs@apwa.net.

If you’ll be attending Congress, be certain to include the PWHS Chapter Historians Meeting and PWHS Luncheon on your personal itinerary. Both are scheduled for Monday, September 13. Details will be available in the APWA Congress preview and on the PWHS infoNOW Community.