The Battle For Falls Lake

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Raleigh, North Carolina
Dedicated to the people
who lost land for the creation of Falls Lake
Acknowledgements

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On a cool October evening in 2001, my husband and I drove to Blue Jay Point, a park located in a seemingly remote part of Wake County, which is in reality, a stone's throw from the bustle of Raleigh, North Carolina, the capital city. The park rests on a peninsula that juts into Falls Lake and is flanked by Upper and Lower Barton Creek. Blue Jay Point is part of an extensive network of recreational facilities constructed on leased land owned by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (or Corps) that is managed and operated by various state and local agencies. This particular hidden treasure operates under the auspices of Wake County Parks, Recreation and Open Space. The park’s mission is to engender sensitivity toward the environment and foster stewardship of the land. The staff accomplishes this with programs, exhibits and workshops for all ages, many of which take place in the Blue Jay Center for Environmental Education, a contemporary structure which blends seamlessly into the landscape. The forested park itself offers an impressive playground, picnicking areas, hiking trails and plenty of open play space.

We were meeting our daughter's fifth grade class taught by Phyllis Parker, for a campfire, with s’mores and ghost stories. The class was on a two
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day field trip and staying in the rustic, yet fully equipped lodge which sits on the backside of the property. The rough-hewn building plays host to groups throughout the community. Before lunch, the students had dissected owl pellets containing the remains of an unlucky mouse and then observed snakes up close. This didn’t faze them in the least. They are used to reptiles, with names like Sally and Oliver, which populate Ms. Parker’s classroom at Durant Road Elementary School. Students vie for the opportunity to feed the snakes their monthly “mousicles”\(^1\) and lessons stop so everyone can watch as they shed their skin. After dinner, prepared by hardy parent volunteers (many of whom were relegated to the lower bunk), the evening would end around the campfire.

To reach Blue Jay Point, we traveled north on S.R. 1005 Six Forks Road,\(^2\) so named for the confluence of a couple of well-traveled county roads\(^3\) which together form six legs, or forks, at a point (once known as Tipper’s Crossroads) south of the Bayleaf community.\(^4\) We were well inside the Falls Lake watershed, a swath of land that drains into the lake, which is also Raleigh’s drinking water reservoir. This watershed is protected with zoning regulations to restrict commercial and residential development. The intent is to limit the amount of surface pollutants making their way into the lake and potentially compromising water quality. To stay on Six Forks Road, we turned left just before Bayleaf Baptist Church. The original Six Forks Road asphalt continuing north toward N.C. 98 now terminates in the lake at the Yorkshire Center, a three story barn like building with a tin roof, housing N.C. State Parks administrative offices. The building, which once was painted red, was originally

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\(^1\) Yes, a whole frozen alive mouse. You hold it by the tail until the snake shows interest and latches on. Then you carefully wash your hands.

\(^2\) The “S.R.” stands for secondary road, not state road as is commonly misunderstood. Each state maintained road has an associated number used by the N.C. Department of Transportation for identification purposes.

\(^3\) Strickland Road, Baileywick Road and Leadmine Road have been rerouted, so it’s difficult to see how they intersected to form “six forks.”

\(^4\) Lally p.304, Murray p.104, 664. The Tippers owned land in the area starting in 1790. Six Forks Baptist Church, built in 1893, is all that remains of the original Six Forks Community.
owned by James Keith. At one time it was a popular restaurant named the Yorkshire House. The name is derived from the Yorkshire variety of hog which made frequent appearances on the buffet line. But this new ribbon of road we are on provides the only way for travelers heading north on Six Forks Road to gain access to N.C. 98, an east-west connector between Wake Forest and Durham.

After crossing the lake, we turned right on S.R. 1847 Pleasant Union Church Road and drove a few hundred yards to the entrance of Blue Jay Point County Park. This road, which bisects the park, also terminates in the lake but at one time took a hairpin turn to cross Lower Barton Creek, where it hugged the north shore, and then made an abrupt turn to meet up with S.R. 2003 Six Forks Road. Because the park closes at dark, and the entrance gate was closed preventing us from driving any farther, we parked our car, leaving a sign on the windshield explaining why we were there, so the resident park ranger wouldn’t mistake us for trespassers. We decided to hike to the campsite one-quarter of a mile inside the gate. I didn’t know this at the time, but the park staff requires that all after hours visitors be met at the gate (with a key) so they can drive to, rather than hike to, the lodge.

The sanctuary of our car soon disappeared from my backward glances and I realized we were utterly alone, enveloped by the dark, save for the moonlight and occasional mercury vapor lamp with its orange glow and incessant buzz. Though I could not see them, I knew we were surrounded by woodland creatures glad the daytime visitors had gone so they could reclaim the place for themselves. The call of a newly awakened barn owl cut through the

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5 The rutted remains of Pleasant Union Church Road are quite visible and you can get to them from the Falls Lake Trail near the Yorkshire Center. The portion of this serpentine road that intersects S.R. 2003 Six Forks Road is now called Mizelle Lane. For help in exploring the area, get a good recreation and fishing map of Falls Lake, such as the one produced by Atlantic Mapping, Inc. available at book shops and bait and tackle stores.

6 It’s easy to get lost in the woods especially at night and hard for rescue personnel to locate you which is why parks are closed at dark. Guided night hikes are offered on occasion.
night. The sounds of swirling leaves and acorns pelting the ground were magnified by the absence of the normal daytime din. I felt eclipsed by the expanding forest and quite fearful of what I imagined to be lurking at the edge of the forest. Quickening the pace, I distracted myself with thoughts of the mundane. As if sensing my uneasiness, a deer standing under the hardwood canopy “blew” at us. It took a moment for my addled brain to comprehend what was happening. Clearly, he didn’t want us around, so I complied by walking even faster, unsure whether he might try some other means to get us out of his way.

As the lodge’s warm lights came into view, my composure returned. Apparently we were the last to arrive and had to inch our way alone (again) to the campfire down a meandering walkway in low light. It was worth the trouble. A magnificent blaze had engulfed the fire pit and was only kept in check by a circle of field stones. The shooting embers and heady scent of burning timber drew me closer but the heat forced me to keep my distance. Finally, the students assembled themselves on log benches and the adults got busy passing out straightened coat hangers with the usual admonishment not to poke anyone in the eye. Parents and children alike impaled marshmallows, burned them in the flames and sandwich them between layers of Hershey chocolate bars and graham crackers to create the cloying treat called s’mores (as in “I want some more”). Against our better judgment, a number of us succumbed, and developed the engorged tick sensation which results from eating too many sweets. Bloated and nauseated, we were ready to settle in for the ghost story.

A dad with great stage presence stood up and walked toward the edge of the woods for dramatic effect. We turned toward him and drew in a little closer for safety’s sake. There wasn’t much light as all that was left of the fire were a few chunks of scorched wood and a pile of glowing embers. A jack-o-

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7 A highly technical term used to describe a deer rapidly exhaling almost like a horse’s whinny. It is a defensive maneuver.
lantern with a malevolent grin (surely just one of his props) rested on a nearby rock and with its mocking leer seemed to say, get out if you still can. I glanced nervously at my watch and wondered how these young impressionable students would sleep tonight following what was sure to be a horrific tale. He continued.

“This is the story of the Revolutionary War Battle of Falls Lake. In the fall of 1775, as George Washington was busy crossing the Delaware…”

I blinked and for a moment the idea of a Revolutionary War skirmish at Falls Lake seemed plausible. After all, the pristine surroundings, natural beauty, and absence of obvious construction scars all lent credibility to the notion that Falls Lake had been around for hundreds of years. Of course I knew better. This man-made lake is Raleigh’s primary source of drinking water and a draw for visitors throughout the state seeking respite from the chaos of modern life. It is only 25 years old. Still I wondered how many present actually knew the true history of Falls lake. For the most part, these students have grown up, drinking water from the lake and know little of its previous existence.

This is the real story of the battle for Falls Lake. It is a tale of political haranguing, pitting newly elected Senator Jesse Helms — with his conservative values and belief in small government — against North Carolina’s other senator, the wildly popular and perhaps more pragmatic, Sam Ervin of Watergate fame. It is also the tale of changing attitudes toward the environment and the rise of a movement that would lead to the founding of the Environmental Protection Agency and new legislation aimed at protecting our natural resources. And finally, it is the story of personal loss experienced by those whose communities were in the way of progress and are now left, in both the figurative and literal sense, at the bottom of the lake. My hope is that you will visit Falls Lake often to appreciate its beauty and acknowledge their sacrifice.
The Revolutionary War Battle of Falls Lake
(author’s version, with apologies to Washington Irving and historians everywhere)

In the fall of 1775, as George Washington was busy crossing the Delaware, Falls militiamen on horseback prepared for battle with a regiment of British red coats who had managed to navigate the Cutty Sark up the Neuse River from New Bern, an English outpost. The Falls blacksmith was too busy welding rivets back on to the Falls of Neuse Bridge which had recently collapsed, due to excessive traffic from Wakefield, to complete the prototype for a new sword commissioned by tavern owner and captain of the Falls Lake Brigade, Charles Sims. The U. S. Army Corps of Engineers couldn’t help with repairs as they were busy building bridges for the Battle of Bunker Hill. Instead, Sims and his men had to rely on muskets and gun powder produced in an Eno Indian shelter at Zeagle’s rock and stockpiled in a hidden cave behind Fonville’s Bait and Tackle. Cornwallis’ men, disembarking at the canoe launch, withdrew gleaming cutlasses from their scabbards and marched single file into battle at the top of Possum Track Road by Mack McReath’s house. The valiant Falls Lake soldiers were no match for the smartly outfitted Brits and heads began to roll.

If you travel the forgotten roads of Falls Lake near midnight at the end of October and you hear approaching hoof beats, turn around and retreat. Otherwise, you may find yourself face to face with one of Sim’s men, who in the swiftness of their demise, don’t realize they are dead. They are searching for their heads so they can continue in battle. They won’t rest until their work is complete.
Chapter One
The River

Gary Watkins has lived on Possum Track Road for too many years to recall. He still refers to the area flooded to create Falls Lake, spitting distance from his house, as “the river.” He is not alone. Most of the remaining residents of the tiny Falls community think the same way. Never mind that Falls Lake, created by impounding the Neuse River at the Falls community about ten miles north of Raleigh with an earthen dam, has been in existence for twenty five years. The Falls community bore the brunt of the upheaval caused by the construction of the lake.¹ Many of the residents of Possum Track Road who had heard talk of a lake since 1930, have long since relocated or passed away. It is true some of them chose to stay nearby and maintain close ties to the community that had developed over the years. But still, one-quarter mile of

¹ Though residents of the Falls community suffered, as well as many other area landowners, for a truly startling account of communities decimated by construction of a water supply, look at the Quabbin Reservoir in Massachusetts. It was constructed in the early 1900s to provide water for Boston which was 100 miles away. Four substantial valley communities were destroyed in the process. The remnants of these communities, now underwater, have been documented on film by researchers and search and rescue diving teams.
Possum Track Road is now “under water” and another portion of it “runs under the dam.” And even though the Neuse River channel isn’t visible except in Durham County near Interstate 85 during times of extreme drought, for Watkins and the others, this area will always be known as “the river.”

Watkins is a tall man with a lanky frame and a broad grin. His southern drawl and deliberate, smooth speech make me wonder if he wasn’t a salesman at one time or another. He lives alone, recently widowed, in the house built by Young’s Construction Company in a trade made for land he owned on Red Fox Run in the 1960s. Watkins and his wife Olivia raised their family in this house situated next door to the house where he grew up. Olivia developed a cough, but apparently neither one of them was aware of the seriousness of her condition. Gary carried her to the doctor’s office one day, where unbelievably, she died. He drove back home, this time carrying only her purse, to a now empty house. She is buried in the Falls Community Cemetery next to the plot where Gary will one day rest. He has retired from fulltime work for sometime now, but seems always to have a project in the works. As he tells me, there’s nothing worth watching on television, so he goes to bed when the sun goes down and wakes up when it pierces the drawn shades. He appears content to putter around and play with his grandchildren who are frequent visitors.

Gary and I are neighbors. On this cloudless, Carolina blue winter morning, he agrees to go for a walk with my husband and me to survey the once vibrant area. We meet at his house and head toward the abandoned road, past the one-story clapboard siding house, where he was raised, with its massive oak tree out front which provided natural air conditioning. His dogs have long since grown tired of our slow pace and have raced on ahead, eager to sniff out some critter and possibly run it up a tree. You can see the asphalt that was Possum Track Road if you venture past the large yellow diamond shaped sign which reads “Road Ends 500 Feet.” Farther along there is a candy striped barrier in front of a huge dirt pile to stop the inattentive driver from barreling into a ditch.
A car speeds past Gary’s house as if Possum Track Road should provide a quick route to Wake Forest, which it did before the lake was built.

Figure 1 Della Watkins, the possum tracking dog, circa 1950. (photo courtesy of Gary Watkins)

“More people come down this road lost, than used to when the road went through,” he says.

The car does an about-face on the gravel of Red Fox Run and heads back to find a different route.

Few county roads were paved in the 1960s when Possum Track was in its prime and ran west from Falls of Neuse Road to Six Forks Road. To build the dam, the portion of Possum Track Road from Falls of Neuse Road to Watkins’s house, about one-half mile, was decommissioned. The asphalt remains on dry land are now blanketed in pine straw. The road, which curves to the left, intermittently reveals vestiges of a double yellow line with its reflective properties still intact. You can scrape away the underlying moss and dirt to ferret out the surface, but soon the road vanishes. Scrub pines from the succession forest minimize the appearance of construction scars and fill in the narrowing road bed. The outline remains but little else. The once private land

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2 Lally, p.66. After WWII, county roads slowly began to receive an asphalt or macadam surface, and Possum Track Road was one of the few in the area to be paved. Many well-traveled roads such as Brassfield Road and Raven Ridge Road were dirt well into the 1970s.

3 Downey
on either side of the road supported timber harvesting. This was considered its “best use” by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers real estate appraisers prior to its acquisition for the lake. A well-worn foot path left of the road’s center is still actively used by hunters, hikers and woodland creatures looking for a quick route to the water. To the left, foundation walls of an outbuilding, glass jars, rusted tin cans, wooden fencing with barbed wire, cement rubble, the frame of a bicycle and a child’s red toy fire engine are all that remain of a homestead that once occupied the site. The house was moved to Six Forks Road near Lower Barton Creek to make room for the lake. These remnants are slowly being reclaimed by the forest and soon will fade from the consciousness of all but the most discerning viewer. In fact, from where we are standing, it’s difficult to reconcile photos depicting the bustle of an active homestead with the stillness of an unspoiled forest. Watkins struggles a bit to locate the road bed. Back on the path, we hike 100 yards or so and stop. He points at different areas of the woods and begins to rattle off the names of long-gone residents.

“Barham, Leonard, Jenks, Lowery, Davis. They were good hard working folk. Many of them worked in the cotton mill at the Falls.”

He is referring to Erwin Mills. It sat on the north shore of the Neuse River a few hundred yards from the dam’s spillway on Falls of Neuse Road. Erwin Mills was the last textile operation in a long line of many to operate on the site before it shut down its looms in 1959. The mill’s beautiful granite buildings and their contents succumbed to decades of misuse, but were eventually revived and renovated becoming condominiums in 1984. Watkins did not work for the company that produced cotton sheets and bedding. He held down various jobs, including one in a local manufacturing plant amidst highly toxic chemicals, in conditions that probably wouldn’t meet OSHA standards today. Despite this experience, he is amazingly sprite and in seemingly good health. It’s hard to keep up with him.
We walk about 200 yards more, pushing through dense briars and bramble to reach the point where Possum Track Road would have meandered past the Barham property but now “slides” into Falls Lake. I look across the water and try to trace the path of the road as it would re-emerge on the other side. Even with maps and detailed photos, I can only guess. Before the lake was built, Watkins could walk less than a mile from this point to the Falls Community Cemetery where his parents are buried. I look left across the lake and can see the backside of the cemetery which is adjacent to the spillway. To get there now would require a five-mile trip, as no road crosses the lake at this point.

His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Fred Watkins, like most of the Falls residents, centered their lives around family and community. People stayed close to their roots, perhaps taking on the same work as their parents. For many, the Falls was the only place they would ever live. Life had fewer options then but, maybe also less stress.

Figure 2 Mr. and Mrs. Fred Watkins standing on Falls of Neuse Bridge, circa 1940. (photo courtesy of Gary Watkins)

Our hike could go no further. I would have to walk the rest of the way down Possum Track Road deeper into the Falls community in my mind and through the stories of those who had first-hand knowledge.