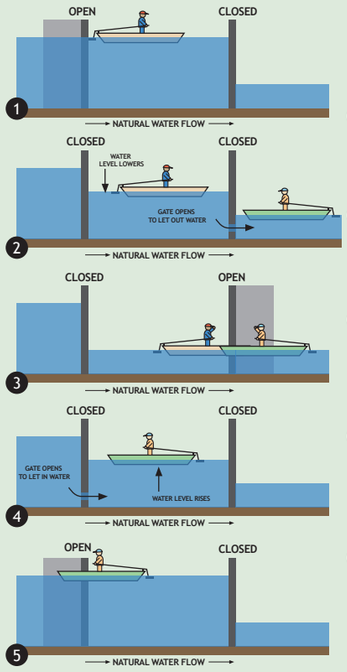
The Roanoke Canal Trail

The Roanoke Canal Trail and its contributing resources tell the history of transportation on the Roanoke River from the early 1800s to today. Segments of the canal that remain intact today include portions of the 39 foot wide channel, its 10 foot wide tow path, the original aqueduct and one of the stone culverts. In 1976, the canal, the tow path, and the canal structures were added to the National Register of Historic Places. The towpath and bottom of the canal provide pedestrian access between the communities of Roanoke Rapids and Weldon, North Carolina. Visitors using the Canal Trail can experience engineering feats and explore life along the Roanoke Valley as it was in the early 1800s. The canal and the supporting structures are a living legacy to the early years of transportation, the engineering profession, and a developing way of life along the Roanoke River.



How the Locks Worked

1. With the upper lock open and the lower closed, the boat enters the lock with the water level high.
2. The lower gate is opened to allow the water level in the lock to lower to the level of the down stream portion.
3. Once the levels have equalized, the gate opens to allow the tan boat out. The green boat, heading upstream, enters the lock.
4. Once inside the lock, the upper gate is opened to allow water to enter the lock from upstream. The water level in the lock rises.
5. When the water levels equalize again, the upper gate opens to allow the green boat to continue on upstream.

History of the Canal

The Roanoke Canal contains some of the most impressive and best preserved early nineteenth century canal construction in the nation. Begun before 1819 and completed in 1823, the Roanoke Canal was built as the North Carolina segment of the ambitious Roanoke Navigation System. It was designed to connect the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia and Norfolk over a distance of 400 miles.

Hamilton Fulton, an English engineer, was hired to supervise the construction of the canal around Great Falls. The present Roanoke Canal Trail is part of this Great Falls area which presented the biggest obstacle to the builders.

The initial plans for the canal show how ambitious the project was, particularly before modern machinery. The navigation system was composed of three parts; the lower (tidewater) Roanoke was over 100 miles long, and was to be cleared for large craft such as steamboats and barges from Norfolk; the Great Falls above Weldon, a major obstacle where the river dropped 100 feet in a few miles, which was to be overcome by a nine-mile bateaux canal with locks; and the upper Roanoke, Dan and Staunton, over 300 miles long, which were to be made navigable for bateaux by clearing and sluicing the river bed.

When completed, the canal provided an economic boost for the area and the farmers of the interior. Goods and produce were carried on the canal. A large profit was never realized for the company due to the major repairs needed especially after frequent flooding. A new transportation development - the railroad - signaled the beginning of the end for the canal. Trade continued into the 1850s. In 1885 the canal was purchased by the Roanoke Navigation and Water Power Company. This company deepened and widened the canal for use as a source of water power. In the early 1900s a brick generator house was built on the upper locks to produce the area's first electricity. This National Register of Historic Places building is currently being developed into the Roanoke Canal Museum.

Now maintained by the nonprofit Roanoke Canal Commission, Inc., the approximately 8 mile trail along the old Canal has been preserved for the enjoyment of the public.

The Roanoke Canal Commission

The Roanoke Canal Commission, Inc., chaired by Charles "Poochie" Fitts was chartered in 1984 to "promote, develop and maintain the natural beauty and historic area that is part of the old Roanoke Navigation Canal in Halifax County, North Carolina." The Commission has remained intact over the years and oversees the management of the Canal Trail and development of the Roanoke Canal Museum.

The Roanoke Canal Commission, Inc.
c/o Roanoke Rapids Parks and Recreation Department
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Roanoke Rapids, NC 27870
252-533-2847

Plan Your Visit

For details on accommodations and dining near the trail or for assistance planning your trip, visit **www.visithalifax.com** or call **1-800-522-4282**. Please visit the Halifax County Visitors Center at 1640 Julian Allsbrook Highway (HWY 158), 1/4 mile west of I-95.

Special Thanks to Our Partners:

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The Roanoke Canal Trail

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