

Sunken Plantations

THE SANTEE COOPER PROJECT

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*This book is dedicated to the ladies of the Pinopolis Book Club,
established in 1935, in admiration for their contributions to the Lowcountry
and their efforts to keep telling the stories of our history. Only if the day
arrives, when one generation fails to pass off great stories to the next,
will the spirit of our forebears die.*

THE OLD SANTEE CANAL

As early as 1770, a committee of the Commons House of Assembly discussed the need to connect the Santee and Cooper Rivers. Such a project would, for the first time, allow products and raw goods from the midstate to efficiently reach the port of Charleston. Likewise, foodstuffs and finished goods could easily ship from Charleston to these newer settlements.

The assembly hired an engineer, Henry Mouzon, to survey the possible routes for such a connection. By 1775, Mouzon reported on five routes to connect the rivers. Unfortunately, the advent of the Revolutionary War diverted everyone's attention from the project.

In January 1782, with the British still occupying Charleston, the South Carolina General Assembly met in Jacksonborough on the Edisto River. The assembly approved a commission to "cause the land between the Santee and Cooper Rivers, to be surveyed and examined and to fix on the most convenient place for cutting a canal so as to open a navigation route from one to the other of these rivers." The assembly was pleased with this first bold step, but lacked the necessary funds to follow through.

In November 1785, a group of Charleston citizens petitioned the state assembly for a charter to pursue the canal plan. In early 1786, the South Carolina General Assembly chartered a "company for the inland navigation between the Santee and Cooper Rivers." General William Moultrie was appointed president; John Rutledge, former governor and president of the Republic of South Carolina, was vice-president; and Generals Francis Marion and Thomas Sumter were selected as directors.

Moultrie wrote to George Washington seeking advice as to the selection of an engineer for this venture. Washington responded that he thought the most talented engineers were French. Despite the advice, the commission hired a Swedish engineer, Colonel John Christian Senf, who had served with Sumter in the war.

Senf insisted on finding his own route to build the canal rather than selecting one of the options identified by Mouzon. Senf's choice of route ignored the natural water routes through the region, an important problem with his plan.

Work did not begin until 1793, due to a critical labor shortage. Planters were busy shifting their crops from indigo to cotton and were not anxious to make their slaves available for the

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project. White laborers shied away from volunteering to work in the swamps in the summer due to the heat and the danger of fevers.

Eventually, the project hired as many as one thousand laborers to build the canal using picks, shovels and wheelbarrows. Finally, the Santee Canal was complete in 1800 at a cost of \$750,000. The canal was thirty-five feet wide at the surface, twenty feet wide at the bottom and five and a half feet deep. Workers also constructed a ten-foot-wide towpath to allow draft animals to pull boats.

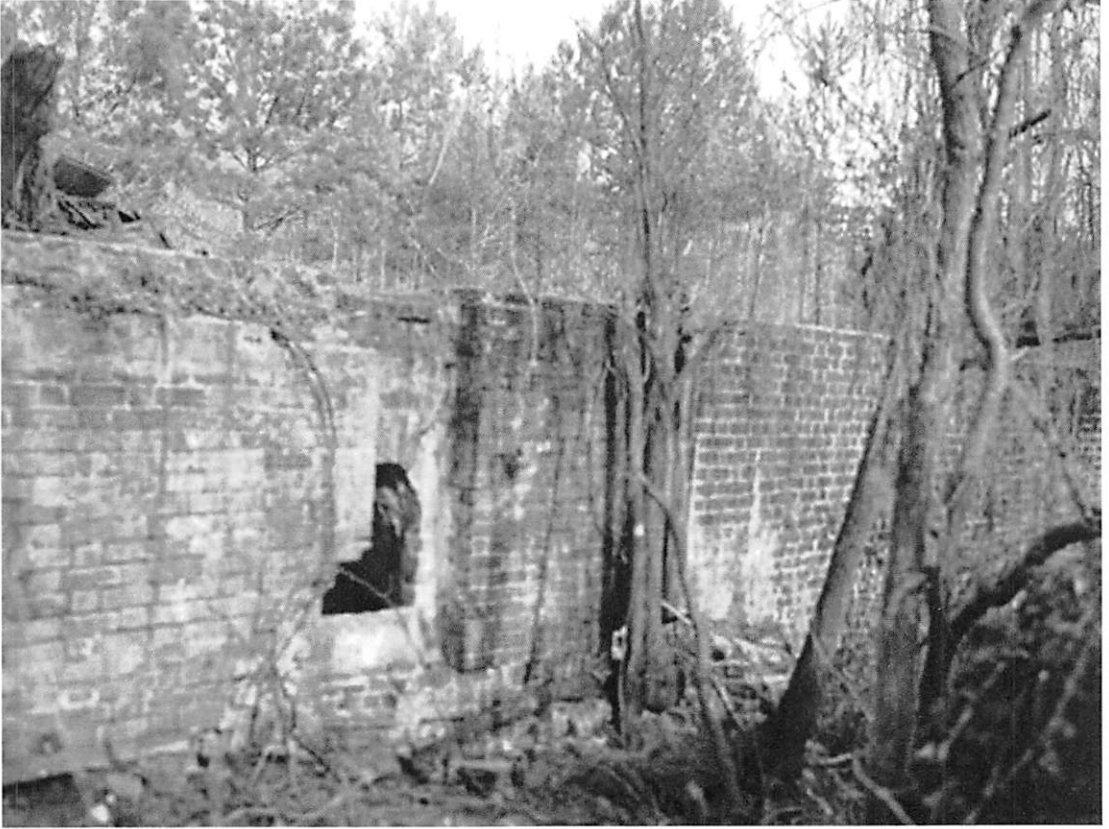
In May 1801, William Buford traveled the ninety-mile trip above Columbia on the Broad River to arrive in Charleston using the new Santee Canal. Everyone asserted this canal would create great wealth for the state. Unfortunately, Senf's choice of routes had a fatal flaw and seasonal droughts would sometimes dry up sections of the canal. The canal also began to compete with the railway, which was now extending to the mid- and upstate.

The canal company charged every boat a flat fee, regardless of whether was empty or loaded. The freight companies creatively responded by building boats that could be stacked on the return trips. This loss of fees deeply affected the canal company.

Eventually, the railway, both faster and more dependable, out competed the Santee Canal. By the 1840s, the canal was slipping into disuse. In 1850, the General Assembly revoked the charter for the canal company.



This photograph shows some of the remnants of the Old Santee Canal, which stretched from White Oak Landing on the Santee River to Biggin Creek on the Cooper River.



The canal had three sections: the first ascended thirty-four feet in two and a half miles; the second was level for five miles; and the third descended sixty-nine feet in fourteen and a half miles to the Cooper River.

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In 1913, the Columbia Railway and Navigation Company was running steamship service from Columbia to Georgetown. They filed a request to amend its charter to construct a more suitable navigation route between the Santee and Cooper Rivers. Though approved, the company lacked funding to immediately pursue the plan.

By 1917, the Charleston Chamber of Commerce was clamoring for a canal, both for navigation and electricity generation. In 1923, Charleston Mayor John Grace wrote Colleton County State Senator J.P. Padgett of his desire for a hydroelectric project using the Santee and Cooper Rivers. Grace asserted that the project would “transform Charleston,” providing a much-needed boost to an economically depressed region.

Gabriel A. Guignard and T.C. Williams, Columbia businessmen and partners in the Columbia Railway and Navigation Company, seized on the opportunity and new-found interest. They selected one of the original routes mapped by Mouzon, from Ferguson on the Santee to Moncks Corner on the Cooper. They applied for approval with the Federal Power Commission for both the canal and a power-generating plant at Moncks Corner. In 1926, they were granted a fifty-year license for the project.

South Carolina was already in the midst of an economic depression. The rice industry had given way to stronger competition in Texas and Louisiana. Boll weevils devastated cotton and the market further collapsed after World War I. The stock market crash of 1929 simply added to the trouble of a state already good at being poor. One South Carolina newspaper reported, “In almost every form of human progress, South Carolina has sunk about as far as a state can sink.” In 1930, South Carolina had the highest illiteracy rate in the nation, malaria was still a raging problem and the state was unable to pay its bills, instead using “state scrip” to pay state employees.

At the 1932 Democratic Party Convention, Franklin D. Roosevelt, a candidate for the nomination of president, was speaking of the advantages of federal programs for public works. Convention delegates South Carolina Governor Ibra Blackwood and Charleston Mayor Burnet Maybank attended these meetings and proposed that the federal government take over the Santee Cooper Project.

In 1933, State Senator Richard Jefferies sponsored a bill, with twenty-five of the forty-six senators cosponsoring, to create a public corporation. The bill passed the Senate but was

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defeated in the House. The bill opposition was generated by three groups of detractors. Some felt that power production was not the purview of the state and should be left to private enterprise. Others felt strongly that South Carolina could not afford to fund such an ambitious project. Finally, influential St. John's Parish residents and wealthy Northern industrialists, wanting to protect their hunting preserves, lobbied against the bill.

Harry Ashmore, a Greenville journalist, wrote, "South Carolina is seeking to rehabilitate that region [St. John's] to bring wealth not to a few as in other days, but prosperity to many. A vision of an industrial empire in a virgin land has taken hold of this state... There is a dream of repopulating a vast area."

A new committee was formed, including a young legislator from Edgefield, J. Strom Thurmond. New legislation was proposed citing four goals for the project: "1) To provide affordable electric power for South Carolina; 2) To develop the Santee, Cooper and Congaree rivers for navigation; 3) To reclaim and drain swamp lands; and 4) To reforest the watersheds of the state's rivers." In February a committee of sixty-four South Carolina officials and citizens traveled to Washington to meet with the Public Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration.

On April 7, 1934, Governor Blackwood signed the bill to create the South Carolina Public Service Authority, popularly known as Santee Cooper. Blackwood appointed Burnet Maybank as the first chairman. President Roosevelt wrote in July 1935, "From my study of the Santee Cooper project, I am convinced that its construction, which can be speedily put underway, will not only serve to overcome the distress caused by unemployment in that section, but will also permanently contribute to the economic development of the southeast."

Not to be deterred, opponents filed a lawsuit to block the act. On September 10, 1935, the South Carolina Supreme Court ruled that the Santee Cooper act was constitutional. Still determined to forestall the project, Carolina Power & Light Company, South Carolina Power Company and Broad River Power Company filed a federal lawsuit. They argued that the project cost would far exceed the estimates, that the lakes were geologically unsuitable and that the project would "do an irreparable injury to the majority of the people of SC."

In 1937, Federal Judge J. Lyles Glenn ruled in favor of the Santee Cooper Project. The decision was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which upheld the decision on May 3, 1938. Initially a \$14 million federal grant was awarded and additional loan guarantees totaled \$17 million, a total figure that was two and a half times the size of the entire 1939 South Carolina state budget.

The United States Department of the Interior sent a consultant, Thomas T. Waterman, to assess the value of the historic homes that were threatened by the project. Considering all the plantation homes, he recommended that only Hanover and the Rocks were worthy of preservation, a view that would be disputed today, given the large number of historic homes lost to the project.

The project took two years, six months and twenty-six days from the first clearing to the flooding of the lakes. The navigation lock at the Pinopolis Dam was the highest single-lift lock in the world, lifting boats seventy-five feet from the Tailrace Canal to Lake Moultrie.

The project created two lakes: Lake Moultrie, near Pinopolis, and Lake Marion, within the bluffs of the Santee River marshes, north of Eutaw Springs. Lake Marion is the larger of the two, but it is not completely cleared of thousands of stumps, dead tree trunks and live cypress

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trees. Lake Moultrie is smaller but more open, measuring fourteen miles at the widest point. The project did open 86,000 acres to duck and goose hunting and 160,000 acres to fishing.

Today, Santee Cooper provides power to 1.7 million South Carolinians and to thirty-two large industries, municipal utilities in Bamberg and Georgetown and to the Charleston Air Base.

Game hunting was always both a sport and a necessity for food gathering in St. John's Parish. The plantation properties were teeming with wild turkeys, quail and deer.



There were thousands of African Americans, mostly descendants of plantation slaves, living in the Santee Cooper basin. Poverty was rampant through the region. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*



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Many African American families were still living in old plantation slave cabins, structures that were well over one hundred years old. *Courtesy of Mrs. Roulan Deveaux.*



When asked about the Santee Cooper Project's offer to buy her property and move the family, one elderly black woman indicated her excitement saying, "Great Gawd, den I'd hab coffee an' macaroni pie t'ree time a day." *Courtesy of Mrs. Helen Schiller.*

Right: These poor families held tightly to their few treasures, like a piece of furniture or a lace cloth. In this photograph, the family has insulated their cabin with newspaper in an attempt to trap any heat possible. By spring, this would strip away to escape the coming heat of Lowcountry summers. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*



Below: In the project, the Santee Cooper Resettlement Division relocated 901 families, most all black. Like the large plantation homes, most of these old cabins were destroyed. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*



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Left: There were few jobs available to the black families in St. John's by the early twentieth century. Most workers either farmed or timbered trees for turpentine. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

Below: On the small African American farms in St. John's, everyone pitched in and worked. Charleston photographer George W. Johnson captured this photograph of children milling rice on the Cooper River. *Courtesy of Mrs. Roulain Deveaux.*



Numerous churches, black and white, were destroyed by the Cooper Santee Project. Black Oak Church, pictured here, was first established in 1808. The church was dismantled in 1941 and its graves were moved to St. Stephen's Episcopal Church and Pooshee Plantation.



Black Oak Church was home to the Cain, DuBose, Jervey, Lucas, Porcher and Ravenel families, among others. Here the families gather for a covered dish lunch at the Black Oak grounds. *Courtesy of Mrs. Sarah Spruill.*



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The Santee Cooper Project relocated ninety-three cemeteries throughout St. John's Parish, a massive project in itself. One resident offered that the upcoming flooding for the lakes "menaced the homes of the living and the graves of the dead."



The graves of General Francis Marion and his family at Belle Isle Plantation, home of his brother Gabriel, survived the flood. Several Porcher grave markers were moved from Black Oak to join them.

More than six thousand graves were relocated in the resettlement effort. Without ground-penetrating radar, which was not yet available, the relocation crews had to rely solely on markers of any type to locate the graves. Many colonial-era graves, whose cypress tomb boards had long since disappeared, would never be discovered.



The skeletal remains were removed and placed in new caskets for re-interment. In many cases where tangible remains were no longer available, the grave markers were moved and concrete slabs were poured over the original gravesite. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

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At the height of construction, more than 12,500 people were employed by the Santee Cooper project. Twenty-two work camps were constructed. Eleven of these were permanent and eleven camps moved as the work progressed. The men were housed in barracks and fed in large mess halls.



Separate barracks and mess halls were established for white and black workers. Some barracks were built for fewer men and more comfort. The quarters pictured here was for engineers and was much smaller and more comfortable than the large barracks built for laborers.

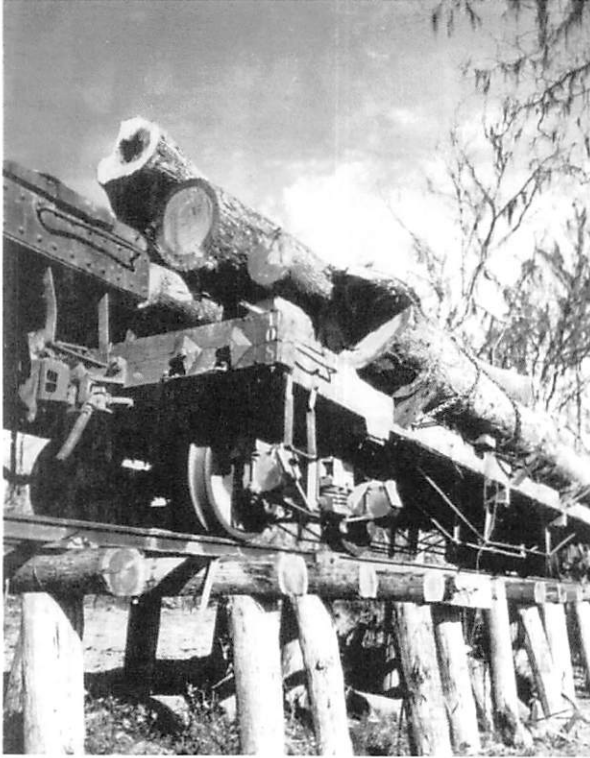


Right: The land was first cleared of trees using axes and crosscut saws, no small task for the thick virgin woodlands present in much of St. John's Parish.

Below: A total of 104 million feet of virgin hardwood were harvested in the Santee River basin. A total of 200 million feet of timber were cut and sold during the project.



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Temporary elevated rail lines had to be constructed to move the harvested timber out of the swamps and river basin. As with the barracks for the laborers, these tracks were moved and reassembled to the locations needed.



Nine thousand of the men in the workforce were assigned to logging, milling and clearing. Particularly given the era in which this was done, the Santee Cooper Project was a model of ingenuity and efficiency.

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The project required obtaining title to 1,326 tracts of land. By April 1939, land clearing crews were hard at work. By June of that year, Santee Cooper had acquired 1,100 of the needed properties totaling more than 177,000 acres. An average of \$12.19 per acre was paid for farmland.



Once the trees were removed and shipped out for sale, many areas still had to be excavated. Though steam shovels were used, the progress was slow.

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Above: Once completed, the Santee Cooper Project was one of the largest land-clearing projects in the history of the United States.

Left: During excavation, many archaeological sites were uncovered, including unknown burial sites and many Native American sites. This photograph was taken at one site where a set of whalebones was uncovered.

The Santee Cooper Project

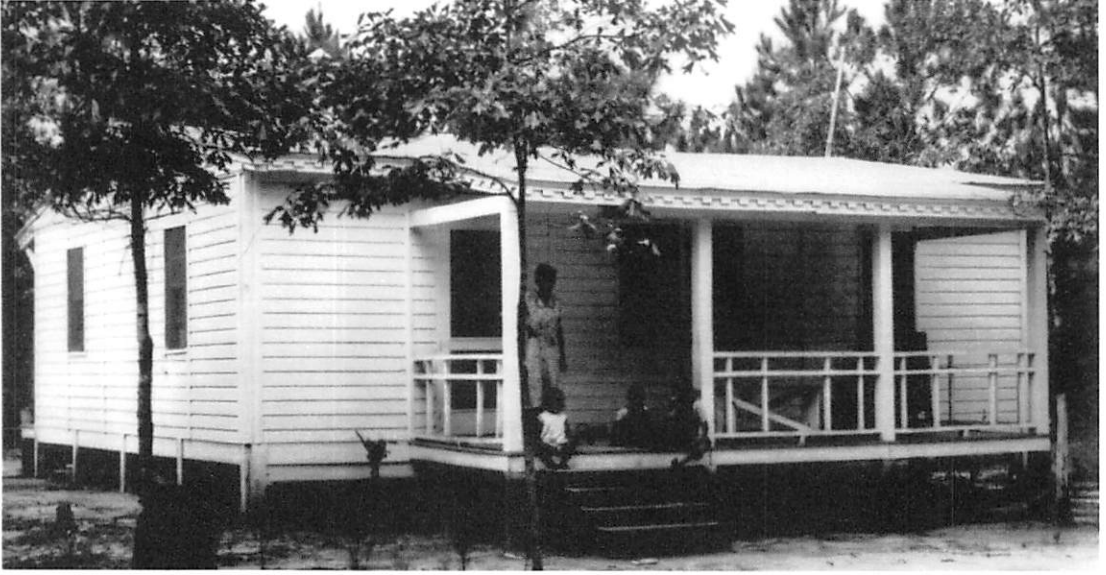


In December 1941, the *Charleston News and Courier* published a special "Power and Defense" issue featuring best wishes to Santee Cooper from some of the popular comic strip characters.



The Santee Cooper Project was not without its detractors. While the land purchase and clearing project were fully supported by the state and, if needed, the courts through eminent domain, the Board of Directors was committed to winning in the court of public opinion as well.

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When families had to be relocated, their houses were moved if possible. Many of the African American cabins and shacks were not worth saving. In that case, a new home was built for the family.



Santee Cooper moved families and neighbors to new sites together to maintain these important rural relationships. One hundred chickens were also provided for every family that had to be relocated. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

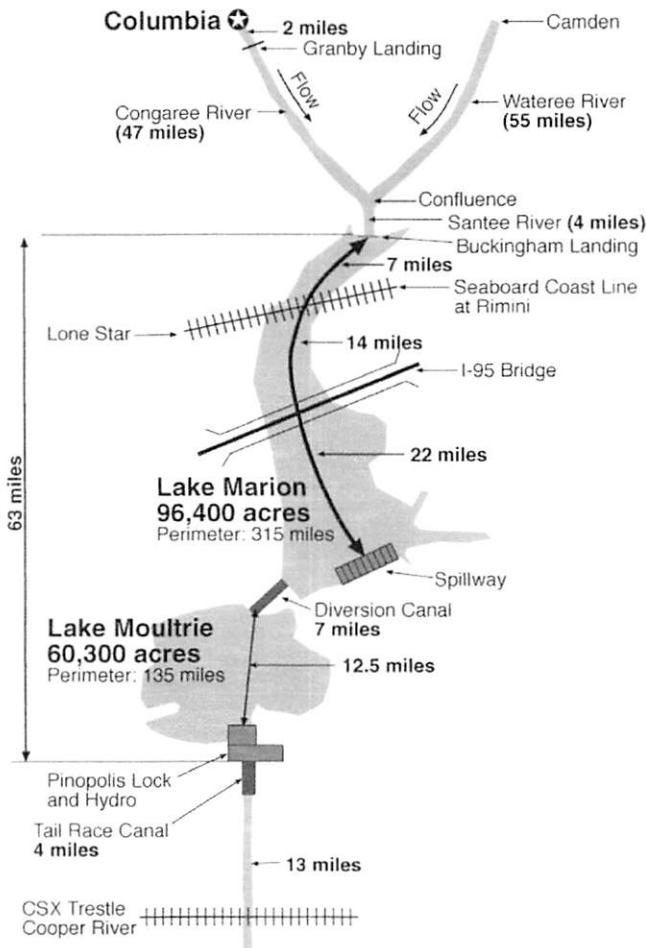


When new communities were created, schoolhouses were also constructed to provide for the families. Most of the African American families that were relocated viewed the benefits provided as a windfall.



On November 12, 1941, the reservoir began to fill. By February 17, 1942, the Pinopolis Hydroelectric Plant produced its first electricity.

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Left: The Santee Cooper Project created Lake Marion (110,600 acres) and Lake Moultrie (60,400 acres), joined by a 7-mile diversion canal. The lakes vary in depth from shallow swamps to 30 feet.

Below: The two lakes offer world-class freshwater fishing. They hold the world record for channel catfish, fifty-eight pounds. They did hold the world record for striped bass, fifty-five pounds, through 1977. The lakes also hold state records for largemouth bass, black crappie, chain (Jack) and Arkansas blue catfish.

