

4. NORTH ALABAMA and the TENNESSEE VALLEY AUTHORITY

The economic crash in late 1929 rang in the decade-long Great Depression, which affected even the most affluent of citizens. African Americans living in the rural South, depending on the age-old occupation of farming and already having the disadvantage of segregation, discrimination, and Jim Crow, laws were arguably some of the worst off. The Tennessee Valley was considerably more economically bleak than most places in the country even before the depression. Farmland along the Tennessee River was undesirable due to the constant, unpredictable, and inevitable flooding and soil erosion. Most of the land in the valley had been intensively cultivated with nutrient-robbing crops like cotton and corn, and fallow winter fields were being washed away by the floodwaters. The average family made less than \$650 per year on their crops and supplemental income, a portion of the population's households subsisted on as little as \$100 annually. By the early 20th century, what topsoil was present was severely lacking in nutrients, and crops were under-producing affecting livelihoods and family health. In addition, about a third of those living in the valley were plagued by malaria. The birth rate in the valley was about 30% higher than the national average, meanwhile, literacy levels were well below average. Only 3% of farms had any electricity and the majority of the work force consisted of unskilled labor.

In 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president of the United States and within his famous "First 100 Days" put into motion many of the New Deal programs. At least two bills proposing something along the lines of

the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) were previously vetoed by former presidents in the early 20th century. However, the depression helped to change the public's attitude toward socialist programs and FDR had taken a special interest in the valley and visited the Shoals as President-elect. On May 18, 1933, President Roosevelt signed the Tennessee Valley Authority Act which was intended "for the especial purpose of bringing about in said Tennessee drainage basin and adjoining territory... the maximum amount of flood control; the maximum development... for navigation purposes; the maximum generation of electric power consistent with flood control and navigation; the proper use of marginal lands; the proper method of reforestation... and the economic and social well-being of the people living in said river basin; and to provide for the national defense." The TVA became a federally owned corporation controlling the Tennessee River and its watershed in most of the state of Tennessee and parts of Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky, Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia.

The sixth largest river in the country, the Tennessee River was known for its disruptive flooding. One particularly troublesome portion of the river is the Shoals in North Alabama, which made transport further up the river all but impossible. The federal government had had their eye on the Shoals long before the TVA was established. Wilson Dam began construction in 1918, intended to power the nitrate plants in Sheffield. But the dam was not completed until 1924, well after the war concluded. While the dam helped some of the navigability of the river, it was not producing its full potential of electric power.

Nearby and powered by Wilson Dam is U.S. Nitrate Plant No. 2. The nitrate plants of the Shoals were originally constructed for a dual purpose in war

(Below) The Tennessee Valley Authority Used Poster, Flyers, Billboards, and Other Propaganda to Promote Their Participation in the War Effort, 1942; Records of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), Record Group 142; National Archives and Records Administration – Atlanta, Identifier No. 7130538

