The Cross-Florida Barge Canal

Long before the Sunshine state became associated with oranges, retirement, and Disney World, Floridians dreamed of building a canal across the peninsula to connect the Atlantic Ocean with the Gulf of Mexico. On a cold winter morning in 1964, President Lyndon Johnson commenced the building of the Cross Florida Barge Canal. The nearly 200 mile long, 30 foot deep canal would dwarf the Panama and Suez Canals. The canal would begin in Jacksonville and travel down the St. Johns River through Palatka, follow the path of the Ocklawaha River to Silver Springs, and then cutting west below Ocala until it entered the Gulf of Mexico near Yankeetown. The project was estimated to cost upwards of $300 million to build but would have provided a critical link between Mississippi River commerce and the east coast.

Yet, only seven years after its authorization, President Nixon announced that he was stopping all work on the canal to prevent further environmental damage to the Ocklawaha River. Less that one third built, the canal remains the largest public works project in American history to be halted in the midst of construction. With Nixon’s announcement and a similar decision by a federal district judge, it appeared the issue had been resolved but canal supporters delayed final de-authORIZATION of the project until 1990.

Many major political figures played a role in the development and eventual demise of the Florida Barge Canal. Florida governors from the 1960s to Charlie Crist have all been involved in this issue. The most important individual in the history of the Barge Canal is Marjorie Harris Carr, the Gainesville organizer of Florida Defenders of the Environment (FDE), who never held a political position in her life. Carr, a trained field biologist, used her position as a faculty spouse at the University of Florida to mobilize the FDE to stop the canal and stop the environmental destruction of the Ocklawaha River. Her unique combination of scientific expertise and organizational savvy made FDE the deciding factor in the decision to halt the construction of the Cross Florida Barge Canal. Florida Defenders of the Environment’s seminal 1970 environmental impact statement provided much of the rationale for both Nixon and the courts to halt construction. Perhaps more importantly, it also provided a template for the calculations of environmental damage into the costs of future large scale government public works projects.
With the canal’s demise, the issue shifted to what should be done with the remnants of canal construction, particularly the Kirkpatrick Dam and the Rodman Reservoir created behind it. Though the environmental preservation group, Florida Defenders of the Environment, has pushed for the dam’s removal to allow the river to flow freely and the reservoir to be drained, it still remains a working structure and is a source of continuing political dispute.

The story of the Cross Florida Barge Canal is a compelling tale of citizen advocacy; illustrating how a small group of environmental activists managed to stop a major government public works program in the middle of construction. This case study begins where that story ends. Disputes over what to do with the remnants of the canal (particularly the dam and reservoir) are tense and ongoing. On one end of the debate are environmental groups such as the Florida Defenders of the Environment (the group responsible for stopping the canal) and the Putnam County Environmental Council and on the other are sportsman and concerned residents organized into groups like Save Rodman Reservoir. Now it is your turn to decide what should happen to the Kirkpatrick Dam and Rodman Reservoir.