

BOARD OF PUBLIC WORKS

INTRODUCTION

BEGINNING with the colony at Jamestown, a steadily increasing proportion of Virginia's mercantile wealth was based upon trade with the frontier. While this traffic was small, rivers and trading paths were adequate, but soon after the Revolutionary War, when the settlement of trans-Alleghany America began in earnest, it became apparent that a comprehensive system of internal improvement was necessary. Private investment alone could not meet this challenge successfully, except on a local level and on a small scale. The costs of dredging rivers, digging canals, and building turnpikes over long distances were too much for local residents to face unaided. Only the government—either federal or state—had the capital to finance large-scale internal improvement companies. When the federal government refused to provide the funds, the states had to do so.

In Virginia the government program began on February 5, 1816, when the General Assembly passed an act to establish a "Fund for Internal Improvement." In the words of the preamble to the act, the fund was created for "the purpose of rendering navigable, and uniting by canals, the principal rivers, and of more intimately connecting, by public highways, the different parts of this Commonwealth."¹ The act further provided that, "for the purpose of preserving and improving this fund, and of disbursing such portions of it to be applied to any object of internal improvement", the Board of Public Works was to be established.²

The board was authorized to invest money from the fund in internal improvement companies, provided certain conditions were met: none of the state's money could be invested until three-fifths of the company's stock had been privately subscribed, one-fifth of which actually had to be paid for, or secured by bonds made payable to the board. The remaining two-fifths of the stock could then be purchased by the board. From 1816 until 1831 the Board of Public Works consisted of the governor as president and twelve directors: the treasurer and attorney general of Virginia, and ten private citizens chosen annually by the General Assembly. On April 2, 1831, the General Assembly passed an act to reorganize the board. The governor continued to act as president, but the number of directors was reduced to three: the lieutenant governor, the treasurer, and the second auditor. The board was reorganized twice more before mid-century. An act of March 5, 1833, removed the lieutenant governor from the board and added the auditor, and an act of February 28, 1846, added the register of the Land Office.

The composition of the board was changed completely by the Constitution of 1851. Instead of state governmental officials, private citizens made up the board. The state was divided into three districts, each of which elected one commissioner to serve for six years. The first board elected under this system met on July 4, 1853, and was composed of Archibald Graham, president; Thomas J. Boyd; and Edward J. Armstrong. Between 1853 and 1865 Alexander R. Holladay, Zedekiah Kidwell, Odin G. Clay, G. W. Murphy, and J. F. McIlhenny were also members of the board.

1. Acts of Assembly, 1815-1816 (Richmond, 1816), 35.

2. Ibid.

The end of the Civil War, when Governor Francis H. Pierpont and the "restored" government of Virginia assumed control, brought another change in the character of the board. On June 3, 1865, the new board met with the governor as president and the auditor and treasurer as directors. The board retained this organization until February 28, 1903, when it met for the last time. In accordance with the Constitution of 1902 the board was dissolved and replaced by the State Corporation Commission, which first convened on March 2, 1903.

Like many organizations the Board of Public Works was most powerful and effective during the early years of its existence and became less so with age. The antebellum period was one of great interest in canals and turnpikes, while railroads were gradually gaining acceptance. After the Civil War the board primarily was concerned with making tax assessments and regulating railroads; before that the board had been deeply involved in the financing and construction of a wide variety of internal improvements.

During the early years the principal engineer was the board's official agent in the field. The principal engineer was responsible for surveys and maps of the routes of improvements, as well as for managing his teams of assistant engineers and accounting for surveying expenses. He also bore the brunt of any criticism over his selection of routes. The board was fortunate that this position was filled by a series of talented men, the most illustrious of whom was Claudius Crozet.

The board's investments of money and talent had to be repaid by the companies by way of reports and accounts. Annual reports were required of each company in which the board had purchased stock, and company expenses chargeable to the board had to be accounted for strictly. The annual reports included a description of the progress of the work, as well as a statement of the company's financial condition. Lists of stockholders, certificates of the amount of money actually paid on private subscriptions, and accounts of expenditures were sent to the board regularly.

Besides its involvement with internal improvements, the board was responsible for several short-term projects of importance to the state. For example, by an act of the General Assembly passed on March 6, 1835, the board was authorized to appoint a person to make a geological survey of the state, and Professor William Barton Rogers of the University of Virginia faculty was chosen. During the Civil War the board was given the task of ensuring the production and distribution of salt. A state superintendent of the salt works was appointed by an act of March 30, 1863, and the Board of Public Works acted as a board of directors of the salt works for the remainder of the war.

Shortly before the Civil War the state began to divest itself of its stock in internal improvement companies. This process accelerated after the war. Turnpikes were abandoned or taken over by the counties through which they passed. Canals yielded to the railroads, which now ran from state to state, and were now controlled by ever more powerful and complex corporations. After the war the board took a passive rather than an active role, concerning itself primarily with tax assessments.

As evidence of the board's new role, the office of railroad commissioner was created on March 31, 1877, by an act of the General Assembly. The commissioner saw to it that the railroad companies did not violate their charters—a responsibility that the board would have assumed in earlier years. He also recommended changes in procedure to the companies and reported violations to the Board of Public Works for possible legal action. Railroad and other internal improvement companies made annual reports of their real and

personal property in Virginia to the auditor, who sent the reports to the board for the assessment of taxes.

Because of the increasing complexity of public and private business in the late nineteenth century and the press of other duties -upon the officers of the board, its membership was changed -once again. The state Constitution of 1902 created the State Corporation Commission, whose duty it was to regulate all corporations (including those concerned with transportation) that did business in Virginia. The constitution also provided that

upon the organization of the State Corporation Commission, the Board of Public Works and the office of Railroad Commissioner, shall cease to exist; and all books, papers and documents pertaining thereto, shall be transferred to, and become a part of the records of, the office of the State Corporation Commission.³

Since 1903 the State Corporation Commission has transferred several lots of the "books, papers and documents" of the Board of Public Works to the Archives Division of the Virginia State Library. In the 1920s and 1930s efforts were made to arrange the board's records, but the task was never completed, and no description of the records' original order was made. For the purposes of this inventory the arrangement imposed on the record group half a century ago was followed as long as it agreed with archival principles and facilitated easy access to researchers. This record group contains over eighty thousand items and over seven hundred volumes.

The inventory is divided into three parts, consisting of the administrative records of the board and of the railroad commissioner, the records of the internal improvement companies reporting to the board, and the field notes, maps, drawings, and plans pertaining to internal improvements. The entry for each series consists of the title of the series, the inclusive dates, and the approximate quantity of material. When necessary a brief statement describes the documents in the series.

The types of records available today are the result of the functions of the Board of Public Works, the railroad commissioner, and the various internal improvement companies. The records of the board itself concern its duties as a gatherer and dispenser of information relating to internal improvements, as well as its role as the administrator of the state's investment in the stock of the companies. The records thus created include minute books and journals of the proceedings and business of the board, as well as financial journals, ledgers, and account books. Letters and papers received by the board include those of the principal engineer and the special engineers, as well as general letters of inquiry and business correspondence.

Additional records were created by the extra duties assigned to the board by the General Assembly. Such duties included overseeing the geological survey of Virginia starting in 1835, issuing state internal improvement maps, supervising the production and distribution of salt during the Civil War, ensuring the free passage of fish up and down the navigable waters of Virginia in the late 1870s, and managing certain "waste and unappropriated lands" after the Civil War. Beginning in 1865 the records of the board include tax assessments for property owned by railroad and canal companies in the state.

3. Acts of Assembly, 1902-1904 (Richmond, 1902), 37.

The papers of the railroad commissioner are relatively few in number. Besides his incoming and outgoing correspondence the commissioner's records include the oaths of office taken by him and his clerks and deeds and contracts between railroad companies and suppliers of equipment.

The largest quantity and variety of records concern the many internal improvement companies that operated in the state: toll bridge, canal, and river navigation companies, as well as railroad, steamboat, telephone and telegraph, and turnpike companies. As before, the types of records found depend upon the activities of each company. For most companies, however, the emphasis is on records concerning financial matters or construction and maintenance.

Once a company had been incorporated by the General Assembly it opened its books for stock subscriptions, held a meeting of the stockholders, and elected officers. After the Board of Public Works purchased shares of its stock, the company was required to report to the board on how the money was spent. The records generated by these procedures include minutes of the meetings of stockholders and of company officers, lists of stockholders, certificates signed by the president and treasurer of the company attesting to the amount of money privately invested, and various financial statements.

The construction and maintenance of internal improvements created a wide range of records. Usually a state engineer surveyed the route of the improvement, recorded the survey in field-note books, drew up a map from his notes, and occasionally made plans and drawings of bridges, canal locks, toll houses, and the like. Specifications for construction work were published by the superintendent of the project, and bids were submitted to him by prospective contractors. Those selected signed contracts and security bonds for the faithful performance of their duties. The superintendent sent letters and reports to the board, as well as accounts of the construction expenses and supporting receipts or vouchers.

After the improvement was completed, toll stations were built and returns of the tolls collected were sent to the board. The construction supervisor was replaced by a superintendent who was responsible for repairs and for an accounting of maintenance expenses. Occasionally travelers disputed this official's abilities as a manager, and a lively series of complaints and rebuttals were sent to the board.

Associated with the company papers described above, but not physically located with them, are a large number of field notes, maps, plans, and drawings. The field notes that are filed separately from the company papers are those that do not pertain to particular companies, but instead concern projects of the board or proposed routes for improvements that never went beyond the planning stage. Most of the maps, plans, and drawings long have been separated from the company papers because of their size. Together, these records constitute an important pictorial and cartographic image of Virginia transportation during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The records of the Board of Public Works are a unique source of information for historians, whether their interest is in social history, economics, biography, commerce, engineering, or cartography. This inventory should help them in their research and present new opportunities for investigation.

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