

# HISTORY OF FRENCH BROAD RIVER

[Listen to Wilma Dykeman read the chapter, "Who killed the French Broad?" from her book "The French Broad."](#)

[Listen to RiverLink Executive Director Karen Cragolin \(1986 – 2016\) interviewed on WCQS](#)

## FRENCH BROAD RIVER DEFINES THE REGION

The Cherokee called the river "Long Man," and its many tributaries the "Chattering Children." "Tahkeyostee," or "Where They Race," was how the Native Americans described the French Broad's fast moving rapids. The earliest settlers called it the French Broad because it was the broad river in the French territory. Today it is known simply as the French Broad River. The story of the French Broad River is the story of the American river in microcosm, full of paradise and paradox.

For the early travelers seeking to scale and settle the area the river's low, flat lands provided the easiest access through the beautiful but steep Blue Ridge and Smoky Mountains. Settlers came seeking new lands and new opportunities in the beautiful wilderness now known as Western North Carolina. The mountains were majestic and the rivers were clean. Life for the first settlers was dangerous and difficult, but the beauty of the land and the river made them want to stay. Before long they were growing their crops, building their houses and starting their businesses along the banks of the French Broad. The French Broad River was the preferred transportation option for the turkey, hog and other herders from Kentucky and Tennessee seeking to sell or ship their goods to the lucrative ports in South Carolina. The Buncombe Turnpike along the French Broad provided the access to these markets that the herders needed. As a result of the heavy traffic a series of Inns developed along the French Broad to house the traveling herdsmen. It wasn't long before farmers in the area started growing and selling crops to feed the hungry travelers and their livestock.

When the railroad arrived in Asheville in 1880 the small settlement quickly became a city. The railroad brought people like George Vanderbilt and others who came to admire the healthful air and the bounty of the mountainous setting. George Vanderbilt was one of many who visited Asheville and decided to stay. These "newcomers" indelibly changed the face and direction of the city. They brought new ideas and money. "Newcomers" continue to arrive in Asheville and their influence has been profound. A significant percentage of the local and regional economy today is based on the young, energetic retirees who have migrated to WNC.

In 1905, the Asheville Electric Company created a small diversion off of the French Broad, erected a carousel, a boat house and an outdoor movie screen that could only be viewed from a boat in the river. Like most facilities at that time Riverside Park was segregated. But for the residents of Montford, Asheville's historic neighborhood, and the merchants of downtown Asheville, there were trolley cars that carried families and lovers to the area's premier recreation spot on the banks of the French Broad River — Riverside Park. Many of today's visions of what the river should be are based on the memory of how integral to the life of the community the old Riverside Park was. A fire in 1915 destroyed much of it... The great flood of July 16th, 1916 wiped out what remained of the park. Riverside Park was never rebuilt.

The flood of 1916 had grave consequences for life in urban Asheville. Before the flood many people lived on or near the river, next to large cotton mills and tanneries. After the flood, the factories stayed but the residents moved. The 1920's and 1930's were the heyday for factories along the river providing much needed jobs for the people of the region. Ice houses, distilleries, coal and grain storage facilities complimented the thriving trade in cotton and hide tanning which flourished along the urban riverfront.

The railroad continued to play an important role in moving goods and people to and from Asheville and the region. Asheville had gained a national reputation as a health spa, particularly for patients seeking treatment for tuberculosis. Today the Asheville Chapter of the Railway Historic Society sponsors steam engine excursions twice a year along the French Broad River gorge. Through an agreement with the Norfolk Southern Railways the local chapter has brought home steam engine #722 as a permanent static display. It's been rescued. Steam engine #722 was Asheville's premier cargo engine from the 20's through the late 40's. A feasibility study is currently being conducted to determine if AMTRAK service should be restored to Asheville.

Also during the 1920's Asheville witnessed a land boom. Properties were changing hands so often that the registrar of deeds moved his office outside, in front of the courthouse, to better record the land transactions. After the boom came the bust, followed by the great depression that swept across the United States. Many of Asheville's decisions today are based on the memory of the boom and bust that occurred in the late 1920's. Asheville proudly paid off all its indebtedness from the bankruptcy in the late 1970's, but the memory of the terrible depression still haunts and clouds policy decisions today.

During the great depression Asheville began a long term policy of "deferred maintenance." Sewer and water lines, sidewalks and streets, the infrastructure of the city was ignored for over fifty years. Today's residents are paying the price of the "deferred maintenance" policies adopted in the 20's and 30's. Sewer and water prices have increased dramatically and will continue to rise as the city begins to retrofit the system. The Swannanoa river valley became so bad that the state of North Carolina intervened in the late 1980's and imposed a moratorium on any new construction.

In 1950 a young woman named Wilma Dykeman published a book entitled The French Broad. Today she regales audiences with tales of her difficulty getting the book published. Publishers looked at the title and assumed that a titillating tale awaited them regarding a foreign woman. Even more difficult were her efforts to include a chapter in the book about pollution. The river had endured decades of misuse with no state, local or federal regulations to protect it. To interest her publishers, and to provide a sense of anticipation, she entitled her chapter on pollution "Who Killed the French Broad." In spite of her publisher's reservations, she convinced them that pollution of the river was a story in need of telling. Once the book was published "Who Killed the French Broad" became the most talked about chapter, and attracted the most national media attention.

During the 1970's the federal government passed its first comprehensive legislation enacting standards to ensure clean water and clean air. Also during the 1970's the Tennessee Valley Authority looked at the French Broad and determined they could control flooding and create hydro-electric power if they dammed the river. Almost over night a group of citizens banded together from all across WNC. They called themselves the Upper French Broad River Defense League, and began a legal battle to keep the French Broad free flowing. They won. Today the French Broad is a free flowing river without dams, subject to periodic flooding.

Having lost the battle to dam the French Broad, TVA hoped to redeem itself by appropriating funds through the local Council of Governments, Land-of-Sky Regional Council, to create a series of river access parks along the 117 miles of the French Broad River. Once the river access parks were established, Land-of-Sky (LOS) wanted to keep local attention focused on the French Broad River. To accomplish this LOS helped create The French Broad River Foundation, (FBRF). The mission of the FBRF was to create more river access points for recreation while keeping the public thinking about clean water. The FBRF became a non-profit organization championing the French Broad throughout its 117 mile watershed. Jean Webb, an Asheville native and long time citizen activist, became the FBRF's first chairperson. She was a natural choice since she had been the central figure in Asheville's attempts to spruce-up the city for the bicentennial celebration. As the director of Quality Forward, which led the bicentennial effort, Jean understood the importance of clean streets, recycling, and clean water.

Citizen involvement with the river's water quality and debris intensified in the 1980's with the establishment of river clean-up efforts sponsored by Quality Forward, the FBRF and other citizen led groups. Years of neglect coupled with no long term planning had turned the banks of the French Broad River into auto graveyards and landfills. The views of the river from any of the many bridges passing over it were anything but attractive.

Discarded tires, abandoned automobiles and bone distillation plants lined the banks of the urban riverfront. The thriving factories of the 20's and 30's had closed leaving large mostly abandoned industrial buildings all along Asheville's urban river corridor

During the era of urban renewal, Asheville, like many cities, built public housing projects. Asheville's' public housing projects were placed out of sight and out of mind — along the French Broad River.

New roads were built between the river and the downtown further isolating the river and making access nearly impossible. The French Broad River in Asheville became a no man's land dividing the city. West Asheville residents considered themselves isolated. They were on the wrong side of the river, the working class side.

Simultaneous with these events, policy makers had determined that the only reliable source for drinking water was the French Broad River. LOS and other government agencies aided by the TVA began a series of management studies and evaluations to tap the French Broad as the primary drinking water source for Buncombe County. If the region were to grow it needed an abundant source of water, and the French Broad River was the only option. One local politician, having visited other cities, recognized the potential for developing the French Broad as a recreational and tourist destination and began talking about its development. Funds for studies were appropriated through LOS and TVA to begin to look at ways of developing the river. Nothing concrete happened, but the public dialogue about the river and its uses continued.

Finally, the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce hired a consultant to determine how to keep people in the area "one more day." Asheville's premier tourist destination, the Biltmore Estate, attracts 750,000 visitors a year, pumping millions of dollars into the economy. It seemed logical that if another tourist destination spot were developed along the riverfront, which runs right through the city, the tourists would multiply and extend their visit. The consultants recommended that the French Broad be developed as the best way to keep the tourists "one more day."

Also during the 1980's the city of Asheville began a long term public participation process called "Alternatives for Asheville." During this process a number of public hearings were held all across the city in community centers and at city hall. The citizens were asked what they wanted their city to look like in the year 2010. Without exception every meeting resulted in citizen voices clamoring for the revitalization of the French Broad as a mixed-use area with greenways, walking and biking paths and a reduction in the amount of dirty polluting industries along the river's edge.

The city adopted the "Alternatives for Asheville" recommendations and incorporated them into the award winning City of Asheville 2010 Plan.

In April 1989, RiverLink, then known as the French Broad Riverfront Planning Committee, a loosely knit unincorporated group of volunteers, came together under the auspices of the Asheville Chamber of Commerce and the FBRF to develop a plan for the Asheville Riverfront. The Chamber was primarily interested in the economic development opportunities that the river offered. The French Broad River Foundation's primary concern was better river access and improved water quality. One thing was clear to both organizations — a marriage had to occur. Neither the environmental nor the economic development desires of either organization would come to fruition without the participation and input of both groups.

The Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation and a NC civil planning grant helped fund the Asheville Riverfront charette in April, 1989. Because Asheville's riverfront presented many complex problems involving both the natural and the built environment, a joint AIA/ASLA charette team was formed. Prior to the actual charette numerous contests for boy scouts and girls scouts were sponsored in an effort to gain input into what the children wanted along the river. The kids responded in great numbers with posters and dioramas depicting a user friendly river peopled with bikers, runners, restaurants, and canoeist. A second contest focused on gaining input from the region's burgeoning retirement community. The adults were concerned with good lighting, security, residential opportunities and stable asphalt surfaces that would allow them to walk leisurely along the river's edge, to enjoy a meal or buy a specialty item at a riverfront boutique.

During this time Asheville's downtown had been undergoing a tremendously successful revitalization effort. Initially downtown enthusiasts expressed concern that focusing on the riverfront would detract funds and attention from the downtown revitalization effort. That fear has been allayed. Asheville

is emerging as the regional hub for WNC. The concept of "what is downtown," has recently been expanded to include west Asheville, Biltmore Village, Montford and the French Broad River. Several of the river's industrialists feared that a revitalized riverfront would put them out of business. Clearly Asheville's riverfront charette had many obstacles to overcome.

RiverLink contracted with Peter Batchelor, Chairman of the NC AIA, Urban Design Assistant Team, to chair the joint AIA/ASLA charette. Peter had gained a national reputation as an urban designer and charette team leader. Peter divided the charette teams into three groups. One team would focus on reestablishing the linkages between the downtown and the river. The second team would focus on the river within the city limits of Asheville. And, the third team would focus on the river as the region's most salient characteristic.

Since all of the charette team members were out of towners, each team member was assigned a local assistant from the same discipline. Consequently local architects were paired with visiting architects and local landscape architects paired with visiting landscape architects. There was also a healthy mix of sociologists, economists, and historians to augment the team's efforts.

Resource teams of experts were assembled from UNCA and Warren Wilson College. City and county employees were recruited along with representatives from state, local and federal regulatory agencies. Input into the charette would include experts ranging from the Army Corps of Engineers to zoologists. The resource team members agreed to be available twenty-four hours a day for the four day charette. RiverLink didn't want anybody guessing what the correct answers might be to questions that might arise during the charette.

A valuable resource and planning tool for the charette was prepared by the Preservation Society of Asheville and Buncombe County in the form of an inventory of historically significant structures along the Asheville riverfront. The building inventory provided many insights into the number of historic buildings available for adaptive reuse and their surprisingly good condition. Many of Asheville's industrial buildings had ceased operation in the 1950's, but the sheer volume of industrial buildings and their size would present opportunities for future development and provide historic tax credits for their rehabilitation.

An Advisory Committee had been established comprised of the area's most influential agencies, corporations and leaders. If the French Broad River was to be revitalized, the cooperation and input of the entire community had to be incorporated into the final plan.

RiverLink sponsored a series of public input sessions during the charette, and the public response was overwhelming. All of the public hearings were aired live over the area's public radio station, WCQS. All day and all night citizens approached the microphones to express their ideas, their hopes and their fears. The real challenge lay ahead however; how to incorporate and balance the needs and desires of the entire community to revitalize the French Broad?

Typical of most charettes the heavy brainstorming occurred in the wee hours of the morning and more than one resource team member was called at 3 AM to discuss the issue at hand. The walls of the temporary headquarters for the charette team were covered with maps and diagrams. Reams of paper littered the floor and the coffee pot perked all night and all day keeping the charette team members alert. Local restaurants and garden clubs donated food and a constant stream of interested citizens participated in the on-going discussions.

On the morning of the fourth day a tired but exhilarated charette team emerged with a plan. As the TV cameras and radio microphones reported the results of the charette team's findings, a new era and image began to emerge for Asheville's ailing riverfront. National Geographic magazine had dispatched a photographer to cover the entire proceeding for inclusion in the June, 1990, issue on Greenways Across America. The Asheville Riverfront Plan, complete with maps, diagrams and text, laid out a mixed use plan for the revitalization of the French Broad's urban corridor that satisfied the needs of the business, environmental and recreation community.

One month later, in May, 1989, a public referendum was held to provide the funds necessary to build a water treatment plant on the French Broad River. The referendum was soundly defeated. The citizens were not willing to drink the water of the French Broad. Nor did they believe it could be

treated to provide a safe drinking water source. One thing was clear, despite the defeat of the bond referendum; the citizens viewed the river as a mixed-use opportunity and were willing to help restore it. But they did not want to drink it.

The Riverfront Plan was presented to elected officials in the city and the county. The plan was immediately accepted as the “official” vision for the rehabilitation of the French Broad River. The city adopted the plan as an addendum to its award winning 2010 long range comprehensive plan. The Riverfront Plan was awarded the North Carolina American Planning Association award for “Large Community Outstanding Planning” in 1990. It also was awarded the 1989 PICA, printers award for the most beautifully designed not hard bound book.

It was now time for The French Broad Riverfront Planning Committee to incorporate in order to carry the plan forward. It was also time to develop a funding plan to underwrite the day to day operation of the organization. The French Broad Riverfront Planning Committee wasn’t just planning anymore — it was doing. RiverLink would carry the plan forward and the name helped identify the mission – relinking the river back to the community.

RiverLink became a contract agency with both the city and the county. Every six months written reports were presented to local government officials detailing the riverfront revitalization effort.

In order to get people on the river, or rather to show them how to get to the river, RiverLink began leading monthly bus tours. At least once a month over the last three years a mixture of community leaders, elected officials, retirees, garden clubs and interested citizens board a bus in front of city hall and begin the Asheville riverfront tour. Native and newcomer alike are treated to roads, neighborhoods and historical facts that had long been forgotten as they traveled the length of the French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers throughout the city limits of Asheville. The tours have been RiverLink’s most successful marketing tool.

People knew that you could get to the river from the downtown. They just forgot how. RiverLink called this pivotal connection the Patton Avenue spine, a direct link from the downtown to the river tracing the old trolley car route that carried people to Riverside Park. During the two hour bus ride, people ate their lunch and visited Asheville’s oldest neighborhoods, the site of Asheville’s first airport, the old Riverside Park location, dried up lake beds, Biltmore, The Richmond Hill Inn and began to envision linkages to the North Carolina Arboretum and the Blue Ridge Parkway Headquarters Building that is yet to be built.

When RiverLink presented The Riverfront Plan to the Asheville Tree & Greenway commission for approval, they were instructed to take the plan to the next level. In 1925, the city had hired Dr. John Nolan, an architect from Boston to design a city of the future. Dr. Nolan envisioned a series of greenspaces that would link the area’s mountain tops and river valleys. The national economic depression precluded the possibility of the plan being enacted. But Nolan’s concept will still sound. RiverLink and the Tree and Greenway Commission began to reinterpret the Nolan plan of the 20’s into a greenway master plan for the entire county. The same opportunities didn’t exist because of the intervening years of development and road construction — but the mountains and rivers were still there. Once the plan was conceptualized the Buncombe County planning staff computer mapped the greenway master plan. Public hearings on the plan have been held in every county community center. Mostly the crowds have been small but receptive. The idea of using the natural topography of the area as a greenway corridor, and tying into the Mountain to the Sea Trail that criss-crosses Buncombe County has mass appeal. Exactly how to do that is still an unanswered question. However, RiverLink will sponsor a National Greenway conference in September 1995. The conference theme is, “the economic development impacts of greenway development.”

A giant breakthrough occurred in early 1991 when Carolina Power and Light Company agreed to donate to RiverLink a 1.9 mile section of riverfront property on the west bank of the river for use as the first link in the urban riverfront greenway. The property had been purchased by CP&L as a utility right of way. For years the property had been used as an “unofficial” land fill. Construction companies and concrete manufacturer’s had for generations emptied and cleaned their trucks along the banks of the French Broad River. Kudzu and poison ivy choked the trees and obliterated the view of the river.

RiverLink successfully petitioned the city to accept the donation of land from CP&L and entered into a public-private partnership to develop it.

RiverLink also created the concept of "The Mayor's Greenway Award" to encourage citizens and corporations to donate land for public access along identified greenway routes. The first "Mayor's Greenway Award" was presented to CP&L during a ceremony at city hall with many handshakes and much goodwill.

Interest in the riverfront was growing. Many of the property owners along the river were anxious to participate in the revitalization effort. Several of the larger properties along the river had been in the same family hands for two or three generations. Thus their basis in the property was zero for tax purposes. This presented an interesting dilemma. If they sold the property they would cash out of the revitalization effort and pay most of the money to the Internal Revenue Service. Most have opted not to do that. A few property owners interpreted the renewed interest in the urban river corridor as a serious threat to their continued existence.

RiverLink was very interested in creating a design framework for the entire revitalization effort. A design blueprint was needed to move forward for both new construction and the anticipated adaptive reuse projects of the future. In September 1991, RiverLink sponsored its second charette to develop The Asheville Riverfront Open Space Design Guidelines. This charette was funded through the NC Arts Council, under a regrant provision of the National Endowment for the Arts design initiative program. Once again a charette team of professionals was assembled. This time the team was comprised of architects, planners, landscape architects, sculptors, studio artists, printmakers, public art advocates and art educators. The charette chairman, Luther Smith, ASLA, APA, and RiverLink board member, divided the teams into three groups. Group one focused on access and landscape issues. Group two focused on structures and facilities, while the third group focused on graphics.

The overwhelming message from the design charette was to keep the project focused on what is essentially Asheville. Indigenous materials, native plants, and historical context should be used as the guiding principals for developing Asheville's river corridor. It was clear that neither the public nor the professionals wanted a riverfront that looked or felt like Baltimore or Boston. The development of Asheville's riverfront should be a celebration of Asheville's history. Future development should reflect the best of the area's history in the context of modern needs. Architecturally structures should reflect the feeling of old Riverside Park, with steep roof lines and graceful details. Landscape materials should showcase the wondrous botanical diversity of western North Carolina — no Japanese gardens along the banks of the French Broad. Public art was discussed in detail. The charette team members agreed that Asheville's riverfront should be viewed as a canvas. Every item, no matter how mundane, whether a picnic table or trash receptacle, should be chosen to further the theme of celebrating Asheville.