

# Preserving Rail Options in Southside VA

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Sometimes a fast start makes for a slow later-life! Mecklenburg County, Virginia, on the VA-NC boarder, was on an important Native American travel and trading route that attracted 18<sup>th</sup> century English and Scottish traders to the site of today's Clarksville, on the Roanoke River. The place became an important tobacco market and trading center early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, continuing well into the 20<sup>th</sup>. In 1840, the County already had a population of 20,774 residents (about 33,000 today), many of them slaves whose sweat and toil helped produce, at that time, more than four million pounds of tobacco annually. Such was the commercial attraction of Clarksville, and Mecklenburg, that in the early 1850's a railroad, the *Roanoke Valley* ("RV"), was constructed from Manson, N.C., on the Raleigh & Gaston, northward to Clarksville. This effectively connected Clarksville to Raleigh, and in a roundabout way, to Hampton Roads via Weldon. Plans were to continue the RV line northward to Keysville, VA, but the Civil War intervened. Later, part of the RV and other connecting rail lines came to represent one of the shortest rail routes linking Richmond and Durham. The RV was incorporated into the Southern Railway System toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today these line segments are owned by N.S.

Fast forward to today. Clarksville continues to celebrate its history. Tobacco is but a shadow of its old self. Manufacturing has also taken its lumps. Buggs Island Lake and its recreational amenities are the area's main attraction. The railroad, described in the paragraph above, barely exists, some of it dormant. The only reason for its continued tenuous operation between Clarksville and Keysville is the 138-Megawatt coal-fired electric power-production unit of Dominion Power. That plant at Clarksville occasionally receives shipments of coal. It is feared that the Clarksville plant -- less than 3% of Dominion's Virginia-West VA coal-fired generating capacity -- could go at any time due to cyclical slack demand for power or, more likely, it could be converted to natural gas or biomass fuels. What then happens to the one-customer railroad?

A positive note regarding this railroad is that Norfolk Southern still owns it. The entire route linking Richmond and Durham, could, *with tons of money*, be put back in service, but does anybody care? Does Mecklenburg care? Does Clarksville care? Is rail even relevant in general freight transportation today? Mecklenburg and its northern neighbor, Lunenburg County, are among the least populated, and least prosperous in Southside Virginia. However, they lie right smack in the dark zone (look at a NASA night photo from space) between two rapidly growing "*Megapolitan*" regions, the 11+ million population Baltimore-DC-Richmond-Petersburg-Hampton Roads "*Chesapeake*", and the 8+ million "*Carolina Piedmont*", which includes Raleigh-Durham.

Who is to say that in another forty years -- certainly in another fifty years -- Mecklenburg might not light up on those satellite photos? VA railroads have been

around since 1830, and they are again being recognized as an important transportation asset. Let's find a way to preserve Clarksville's railroad, and everything north and south of town. Our great-grandchildren may even Tweet "*Thanks*"! # # # #