The Region as a Mode of Statecraft

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Fig. 1. Norris Dam and Powerhouse as seen from the western overlook.
Photo by Avigail Sachs.

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Visitors to Norris Dam in East Tennessee are often surprised to find themselves in a scenic landscape, invited to admire the infrastructure, and hike and fish on the shores of the reservoir.[1] In the twentieth century, visitors were also welcome in the powerhouse, where they could marvel at the production of electricity and experience a sense of the technological sublime (**fig. 1**).[2] The entire landscape, both technical and scenic, was designed and constructed by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), a federal agency established in May, 1933. Unique among New Deal agencies,

In the 1930s, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) justified its mission by reference to two regions: the Tennessee Valley, described through maps and diagrams, highlighted the agency's

the TVA was authorized to engage in resource conservation and regional planning within a specific geographic territory rather than across the nation. Overriding the authority of seven states, the federal government demarcated the topographic watershed of the Tennessee River as a new legal unit: a *region*. As a planning entity, the TVA engaged in governmentality – it shaped policies and programs, which directly impacted the lives of Valley residents.[3] The demarcation of a geographic region elevated the TVA to the unprecedented position of a *meta-state,* casting its work as a form of statecraft.[4] Cognizant of its unprecedented role, the TVA expended significant energy to persuade the public that it warranted these unusual powers. The scenic tour at Norris Dam, which transforms a technical infrastructure into a public amenity, was part of this project of "persuasion."[5] The newly-demarcated region played a central role in the TVA's persuasive rhetoric; a map at the western overlook at Norris Dam depicts the extent of the Tennessee Valley. The map's caption encapsulates the TVA's statecraft: "Built for the People of the United States" (**fig. 2**).

Fig. 2. TVA map of the Tennessee Valley at Norris Dam in Tennessee.
Photo by Avigail Sachs.

engineering credentials; Appalachia, recognized through cultural symbolism, provided the TVA with a mythical history. The TVA's strategic conflation of the two regions became a crucial mode of statecraft, highlighting how regions are both geographical and cultural, modern and historical, and most importantly, replicable.

PROJECT

The Region: Architectural Histories of a Naturalized Concept

Fig. 3. The 18th-century gristmill in Norris Dam State Park.
Photo by Avigail Sachs.

One mile downstream, the visitor experience changes dramatically. Norris Dam State Park, also part of the TVA scenic landscape, includes a gristmill built by white settlers in the late eighteenth century. The TVA relocated the gristmill from its original location (now submerged by the Norris Reservoir) and staged it as an outdoor museum to perpetuate "the natural conditions of the upper Tennessee Valley during pioneer days" (**fig. 3**).[6] The gristmill, like the map at the overlook, is part of the TVA's persuasive rhetoric. It suggests, as TVA officials often did, that Norris Dam was a new form of pioneering, yet another chapter in the transformation of "the continent's natural resources into marketable wealth," known as both "progress" and Manifest Destiny.[7] This allusion to nationalistic progress provided the TVA bureaucracy with both a history and a purpose, but it complicated the narrative focusing on the "region" and the "people of the United States." In the 1930s, visitors would have associated the gristmill with the environment of Appalachia, a territory that overlaps with the Tennessee Valley, but stretches beyond the topographical watershed. Appalachia did not have clear geographical boundaries, but was defined instead by the material culture of the "Southern Highlanders" – poor, white, Protestant farmers living in the Appalachian mountain range.[8] By the early twentieth century, missionaries, authors, and journalists often referred to these people as "contemporary ancestors" and to Appalachia as a "lost frontier."[9] Adding Appalachia to the TVA narrative thus blurred the geographical identification of its region while also narrowing the "People of the United States" to a specific subset of the population.

The TVA did not reconcile the epistemological and geographical discrepancies between the Tennessee Valley

and Appalachia; it used both interchangeably to define the region under its care. The first, which the TVA identified through maps and diagrams, stood for technology, expertise and central administration. The second, symbolized with material culture, for faith, culture, and historic continuity. This was a powerful conflation, which contributed to the TVA's political and social success. Specifically, it supported what TVA Director David E. Lilienthal described as "grass-roots democracy."[10] Lilienthal argued that although the TVA relied on expert knowledge, its administrative power was legally and morally limited. Comparing the TVA to authoritarian regimes, he emphasized the sovereignty of "the people" of the Tennessee Valley who, he argued, retained the freedom to direct and profit from the resources the TVA conserved and developed.[11] The Tennessee Valley, however, was home to a sizable Black minority living under Jim Crow segregation. The TVA did not challenge this condition – it hired African Americans, but only for the lowest paying jobs and it practiced segregation in the housing it provided for workers.[12] The conflation of the Tennessee Valley and Appalachia, however, "whitewashed" grass-roots democracy, making it more acceptable to the white majority. It was in this social and political condition that the idea of a region was used as a mode of statecraft. The TVA's conflation of the Tennessee Valley and Appalachia thus demonstrates the multiple lenses– topographical, administrative, cultural–through which scholars can examine the term "region" and that any interpretation is subject to specific, social and political conditions.

The Tennessee Valley

Histories of the United States in the nineteenth century commonly focus on individual land ownership and financial autonomy as forms of freedom.[13] In this telling, the continent's natural resources were divinely ordained for the Anglo-Saxon race (white Protestants), who could be trusted to use them industriously and work towards overall social and economic progress.[14] This vision, often referred to as Manifest Destiny, was supported by policy. The United States Constitution outlined a process through which territories – areas opened to white settlement – could become states in the Union, a process vested in white bodies.[15] When the density of settler population in a territory reached a set threshold, white inhabitants were permitted to petition the federal government for admission to the Union. The actions of white settlers thus defined the borders of new states, even

if they followed topographical features such as rivers and mountain ridges. Following admission, the "people" of each state were free to develop their own constitution, including laws regulating land and resource management. The United States thus developed as a loose federation of independent states. The authority of the federal government was limited to overseeing international and interstate affairs and to the management of "public" land–areas seized from Indigenous People but not (yet) opened to white settlement.

In the 1860s, the secession of the Southern states and the Civil War triggered fundamental questions about the future of the Union and the wisdom of laissez-faire policies, opening the door to alternative approaches to statecraft. Advocates of political and social reform, collectively known as progressives, argued that the system that allowed the "people" to make public decisions was uniquely prone to abuse; politicians agitated for their local constituents instead of seeking the greater good, curtailing the freedom of individual citizens in the process.[16] Centralized and efficient administration of public land, on the other hand, would conserve resources and expand social and economic opportunities for white citizens. Experts, they asserted further, could administer and numerically measure efficiency by applying scientific knowledge through the techniques of modern management. Progressives also assumed that these experts, as employees of the central government, would be objective, politically neutral, and strive consistently towards the overall good. The idea of centralized efficiency shaped a wide range of policies, from the systemization of time zones to the reorganization of the postal service. William J. Novak describes these changes as a "New Democracy" and argues that they amounted to a "new regime of American governance—a modern democratic state."[17]

In 1890, the United States Census Bureau recorded the "closing" of the frontier. White settlement had reached the threshold for statehood across the continent, though it would be several decades before the last states were admitted to the Union. The new balance between territories and settlers, together with the arid conditions across much of the American West, intensified the investment in resource conservation, including flood prevention, forestry and soil conservation. This process culminated in the early twentieth century, when President Theodore Roosevelt Jr. spearheaded a national conservation movement and agitated for federal control over all United States waterways.[18] The Federal Water Act of June, 1920 authorized the federal government to regulate the improvement of navigation

together with the development of hydropower, even if these projects required keeping land in the public realm rather than opening it to settlement. This legislation shifted the balance in American statecraft and gave Washington powers previously vested in the states of the Union.

The next chapter in resource conservation was written in a time of crisis. The Great Depression was more than an economic calamity; it severely undermined the basis of American identity and called into question long-held beliefs about the benefits of land ownership and financial autonomy.[19] In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office, having promised to use the power of the federal government to ease the impacts of the Great Depression. In his first one hundred days in office, he directed a spurt of legislation known as the New Deal.[20] Many of these policies were improvised and experimental, but together, they expanded federal power dramatically.[21] Demarcating a watershed as a legal unit, for example, extended the logic of efficiency to territorial organization. The TVA Act, which tied territory and administration together created a novel entity that functioned both within and outside the existing political system of federation and states. We call this entity a *meta-state*.

The Tennessee Valley was an ideal case study for ground-breaking legislation. Detailed studies of rain patterns showed that efforts to control floods and improve navigation had the potential to maximize the production of electric power, providing a "scientific" basis for centralized and efficient administration.[22] In 1928, the Army Corp of Engineers prepared a plan for a system of multipurpose dams along the Tennessee River and its tributaries as part of a comprehensive proposal for all rivers within American jurisdiction.[23] The TVA designed and constructed this system, beginning at Norris Dam, and the agency still maintains it nearly a century later. Proponents of the TVA also flagged poor soil conditions in the Tennessee Valley. They argued that outdated farming practices on steep hillsides exacerbated natural erosion, but that most local farmers did not have the knowledge, or the fertilizers, needed to change their methods. The TVA worked with university extension services to develop a program that made both of these resources available to individual farmers who were willing to manage their land as "demonstration farms." [24] These farms were the basis for Lilienthal's argument that the TVA was engaged in "grass-roots democracy."[25] These and numerous other projects transformed environmental

conditions in the Tennessee Valley and embedded the new statecraft in the everyday life of the residents of the region.[26]

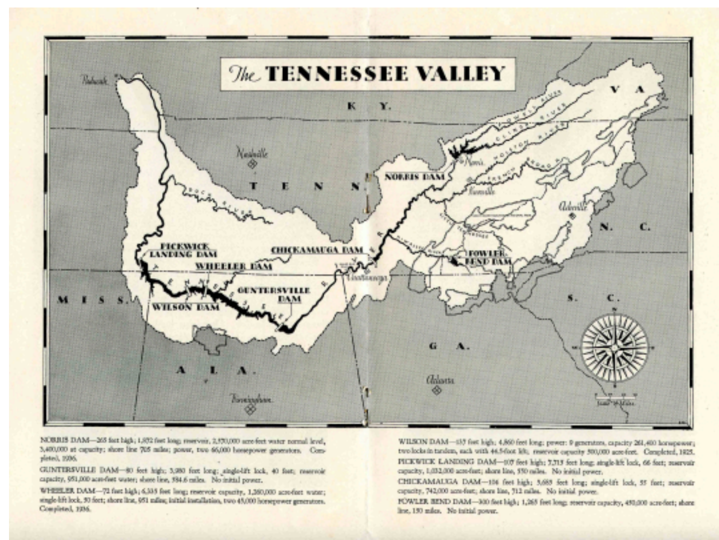


Fig. 4. TVA map of the Tennessee Valley, 1936. A similar map covered an entire wall in the Norris Dam Powerhouse visitor center.
The Development of the Tennessee Valley, (Washington, DC: Tennessee Valley Authority, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1936).

In the 1930s, few Americans had a clear conception of the Tennessee Valley and even residents experienced it as "a series of disparate and far-flung places," rather than a coherent whole.[27] The United States Geological Survey had not surveyed the Valley, so it did not appear in maps. The TVA employed geographers to record the topography, geology, and forest cover in the watershed and made this knowledge widely available.[28] It also produced stylized maps, or diagrams, for public persuasion. One such map was part of a mural in the entrance to the Norris Powerhouse, where docents greeted visitors before they proceeded to the turbine hall.[29] The mural no longer exists, but a similar map was included in a 1936 booklet titled *The Development of the Tennessee Valley*.[30] This map only shows the Tennessee River and its tributaries, including the emerging system of dams, while topographical features, including the Appalachian Mountains, are missing.[31] The legal boundary of the TVA region is clearly demarcated as a white figure against a grey background (**fig. 4**).[32] In the background, the boundaries of the seven states are faint and their names abbreviated, foregrounding the TVA as an unprecedented *meta-state*.

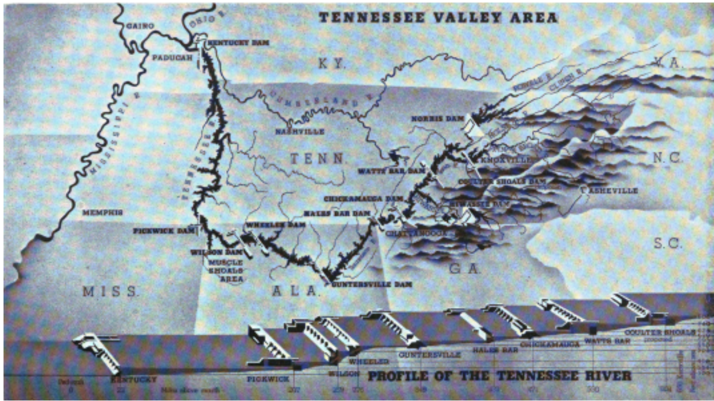


Fig. 5. TVA map of the Tennessee Valley, 1940.
TVA, Its Work and Accomplishments (Washington, DC: Tennessee Valley Authority, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1940).

The 1936 map made a political argument; one selected for a 1940 publication, *TVA, Its Work and Accomplishments*, highlights economic advantages (**fig. 5**).[33] Here, the Tennessee River is drawn as an integral part of the national network of inland waterways, a position it assumed only after the system of dams was mostly complete. The boundary of the watershed, on the other hand, is missing; its identity as a region had already been established. Instead, the map highlights the overlap between the Tennessee Valley and the mountains of Appalachia, rendered pictorially rather than cartographically. Below the main map, a section diagram shows the stepping of the reservoirs emerging behind the dams, highlighting the project's engineering goals: flood prevention, navigation, and the production of electricity. The representation of a chain of dams working together to modify the river–and by extension, the Valley–helps distill the complex reality of the TVA project into a stable, rational image grounded in technology. As James C. Scott points out, such representations were more than just maps, they were the basis of statecraft; combined with the legal and bureaucratic power of the TVA, they enabled "the reality they depicted to be remade."[34]

TVA architects and landscape architects contributed to the agency's rhetorical efforts. At Norris Dam, chief architect Roland A. Wank designed the dam as a modernist statement.[35] Wank, who had trained in Europe, argued that the public may not be able to understand the technical intricacies of flood protection or power production, but could appreciate the TVA's mission through the language of iconic architecture.[36] During a decade when modernist architecture was mostly unknown to the American public, choosing this style was a dramatic assertion about the new environmental reality unfolding in the Tennessee Valley and the TVA's

reliance on modern cartography, rational planning and expert knowledge. The design of the landscape surrounding the dam further highlighted the promise of TVA's program. It was reconstructed as a pastoral landscape not unlike Fredrick Law Olmsted's scheme for Central Park in New York City.[37] This allusion is most apparent on the eastern side of the dam where landscaping transformed the river bank into a glade with a gentle grassy slope populated with picnic tables (**fig. 1**).[38] As Jane Wolff points out, the message conveyed by this overall design was "so internally consistent and so convincing that its rhetoric was barely questioned."[39] Indeed, TVA designers used Norris Dam as a model for the design of all the subsequent dams and their immediate surroundings.[40]

Appalachia

In 1893, three years after the United States Census Bureau recorded the closing of the historic frontier, Fredrick Jackson Turner reaffirmed the role of white settlers in creating American democracy.[41] Ignoring the federal policies that made the frontier possible, as well as the administrative changes enacted after the Civil War, Turner argued that American nationalism was successful because "pioneers" drew on their individual resourcefulness to overcome the "wilderness."[42] In so doing, Turner explained, they combined the social norms they brought with them with the entrepreneurial approach stimulated by life on the frontier, creating a new, forward-looking, civilization. This selective history created a two-part myth. On the one hand, it affirmed the superiority of one racial and religious group and positioned them as an "imagined community" for the entire nation.[43] At the same time, it held a promise that recreating the environment of the frontier through resource conservation would allow Americans to develop an entrepreneurial approach to life, perpetuate the American spirit and support the continued development of American "civilization." In offering a selective history, it also promised a golden future.

The myth of the frontier became widely popular. It spoke particularly to white northerners disturbed by the migration of Blacks from the South and the influx of Catholics and Jews from southern and eastern Europe. These newcomers settled primarily in Northern cities and worked for wages in the burgeoning factories. Many progressive projects were intended to teach these immigrants about the "American" way of life and the importance of individual

entrepreneurship, rather than fundamentally change the social and economic realities of their lives.[44] The myth of the frontier also helped northerners come to terms with the aftermath of Reconstruction. In the twelve years following the Civil War, progressives made some effort to ensure the civil and voting rights of new Black citizens, but their impact was limited. White supremacy soon reestablished itself politically through Jim Crow segregation and voter suppression, and the Southern states rejoined the Union with these policies in place.[45] The myth of the frontier allowed reformers to explain this development as an environmental failure rather than an abdication of political responsibility. [46]

What might a frontier environment look like? The historic frontier was as diverse as the continent through which it ran, but in the late nineteenth century, progressives needed an environment that could be comprehended and represented–a model region. They found it in the southern portion of the Appalachian Mountains. This area had been colonized by Europeans after the Revolutionary War, but the steep terrain limited agricultural production, and many settlers bypassed it on their way further west.[47] In 1784, colonists in the Watauga River Valley, a tributary of the Tennessee, declared a state named Franklin, but were rejected by congress because their numbers did not meet the federal threshold.[48] Even after Kentucky and Tennessee were organized twelve years later, the federal government largely left Appalachian settlers to fend for themselves. Meanwhile, the Cherokee and other Indigenous People inhabiting the mountains strenuously resisted the incursion of the colonists until the Indian Removal Act of 1830, when over 60,000 persons were forcibly expelled and relocated to land west of the Mississippi River in the “Trail of Tears.”[49] The federal government maintained a territorial interest in the mountains, but it was slow to invest in infrastructure in and to the mountains, even as such projects were developed further west. The white population in the mountains thus preserved the frontier mentality and the suspicion of central authority, which had characterized early settlement, long after it had dissipated elsewhere.[50]

In the late nineteenth century, Protestant Home Missions began working in Appalachia, attracted by its remote geography, but even more by the perception that it was a homogenous area populated primarily by people of Scotch-Irish descent, whom they described as Anglo-Saxon. The missionaries’ goal was to bring northern denominations (i.e., Presbyterian, Congregationalist and Episcopalian) to this Southern territory. [51] They justified their work by

incorporating Appalachia into the myth of the frontier. The region was, they argued, an "arrested" frontier and its inhabitants had the potential for progress; with the proper guidance, they would advance and join the rest of "America," reaffirming Manifest Destiny.[52] This narrative was popularized in national newspapers and magazines. Appalachia was even more fully identified as a discrete region in 1893, when William Goodell Frost, President of Berea College in Berea, Kentucky, coined the phrase "Appalachian America."[53] Frost argued that the territory had remained isolated and protected for a divine purpose–to avoid undesirable foreign immigrants, by which he meant Catholics and Jews (Frost viewed other religions, not races, as the main threat to the Appalachian American spirit). As James C. Klotter explains, these myths allowed Americans, especially white reformers, to distinguish between the "Black South" and "White Appalachia" and to champion reform in the mountains while accepting Jim Crow segregation across the South.[54]

The public fascination with Appalachia persisted into the twentieth century, but changed in tone. Rather than assign the "mountain folk" a divine role, northern reformers in the early twentieth century began to examine the culture "on its own terms," supported by empirical, or at least observed, evidence.[55] These studies further bolstered the idea that Appalachia was indeed a distinct region, which could be studied and quantified. John C. Campbell, who worked for the Russell Sage Foundation between 1908-1919 and served as the secretary of the organization's Southern Highland Division, was the best known of these researchers. Campbell echoed Turner when he wrote of "The Southern Highlander and his Homeland" in 1921:

> Heredity and environment have conspired to make him an extreme individualist. In his veins there still runs strong the blood of those indomitable forebears who dared to leave the limitations of the known and fare forth into the unknown spaces of a free land. Year by year they lived the solitary life of the pioneer, pushing on to south and west along the extreme border of the frontier; and generation by generation, facing alone the dangers and the hardships of the wilderness, they learned the ways of freedom.[56]

Appalachian America was thus a ready-made myth for the TVA, whose directors wasted no time in appropriating it in official rhetoric. Suggesting that Appalachia–and not the

Tennessee Valley–was the basis for its regional efforts also implied that the beneficiaries of its enormous public investment were not immigrants, Blacks, or even former slave-owners, but a worthy white population that would join and uplift American society. This narrative cast large scale resource conservation and regional planning as inherent components of the longer trajectory of Manifest Destiny.

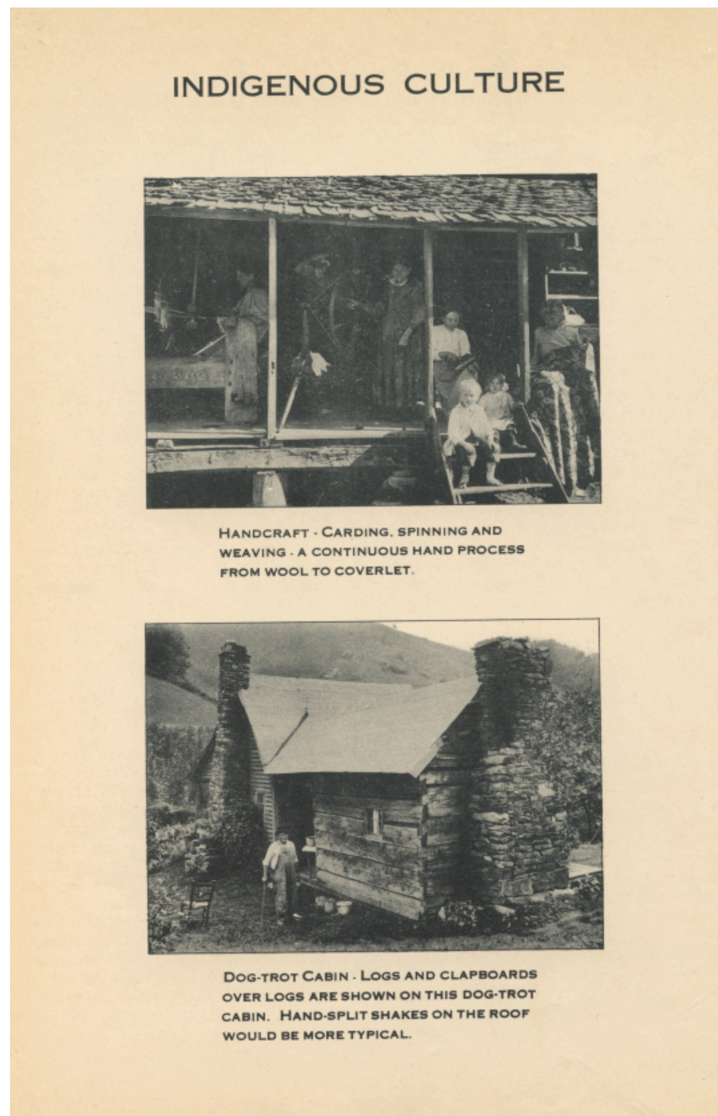


Fig. 6. TVA documentation of "Indigenous Culture" in Appalachia.
Fig. 6. Department of Regional Planning Studies, *Recreational Development of the Southern Highlands Region, a Study of the Use and Control of Scenic and Recreational Resources* (Knoxville: Tennessee Valley Authority, 1938).

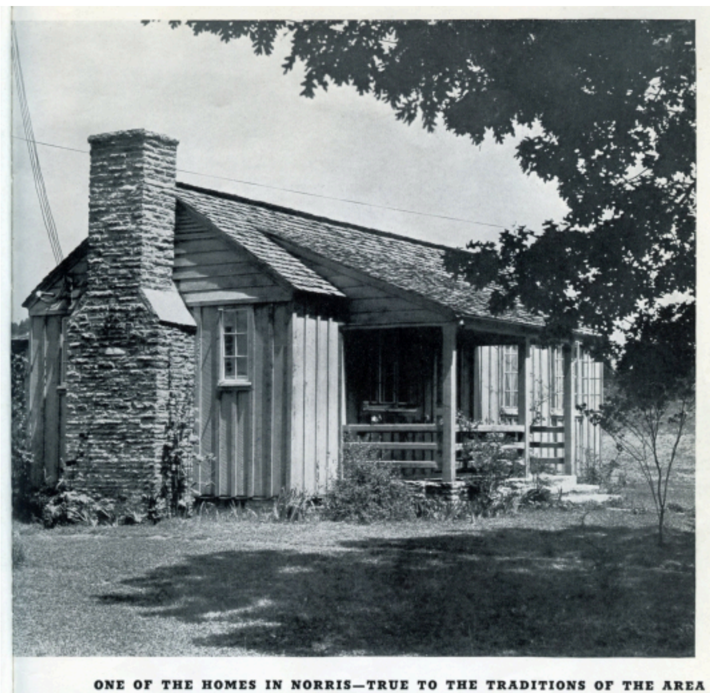
Campbell's report provided Appalachia with a visual identity. It was illustrated with images of everyday structures in the mountains such as cabins, churches, barns, and mills that were roughly constructed in local wood and stone. Their features were consistent enough to reinforce the identification of Appalachia as a distinct region. The TVA

contributed to this narrative as well. In 1938, the TVA Housing & Land Planning Division prepared a survey titled *Recreational Development of the Southern Highlands Region*.[57] The survey acknowledges the removal of Indigenous People from the mountains, but still identifies the built environment of the "mountain folk" as "Indigenous Culture" (**fig. 6**). A subsequent report is even more explicit: "isolation resulted in the preservation of an indigenous craft culture, with its own language, music, arts, and distinctive architecture."[58] The TVA used the material culture as a symbol of the myth of the frontier, including the gristmill in Norris Dam State Park. The mill was built by James Rice and his sons in 1798 when they first arrived in Tennessee from North Carolina. It was managed by the family for over one hundred years and provided the small community of Lost Creek with mechanical power for grinding corn and wheat. Its removal to the park, however, redirected its purpose. In the new location the gristmill, like the maps of the watershed, is emblematic – an image representative of an idea rather than a specific place, one that could be freely adjusted and replicated to suit the TVA's narrative. Just as the region could be manifested and manipulated in maps, cultural artifacts such as the mill could be relocated and re-staged as part of the TVA "persuasion."[59]

Fig. 7. A tourist cabin in the Norris Dam Park, 1936.
Division of Information, *Norris Dam* (Knoxville: Tennessee Valley Authority, 1936).

Appalachian symbolism found its way into the design of new structures as well. Even as Wank proposed that the design of Norris Dam would be a triumph of modern rationality, others on his team introduced "indigenous" features into modern buildings in its vicinity. In Norris Dam State Park, TVA architects designed a lodge, a picnic shelter, a stable, and tourist cabins, all intended to look as if they were made

by the residents of Appalachia. This is especially obvious in the cabins, which offer visitors a taste of "rustic" mountain living (**fig. 7**). In addition, the trails leading from the cabins into the forest follow the paths used by the Longmire family, who owned the land until it was purchased by the TVA for the construction of the dam.[60] The TVA also embedded Appalachian symbolism in the exteriors of the houses in the town of Norris, Tennessee, which was built to house TVA employees during the construction of the dam (displaced Valley residents such as the Longmire family had to find their own housing.) This symbolism is especially striking since Norris was planned as a model garden city and the houses were as technologically modern as the dam itself, constructed of innovative materials and finished with electric wiring and modern appliances.[61] The application of "Appalachia" to the products of rational reform reaffirmed the TVA narrative of regional continuity between past, present, and future.



ONE OF THE HOMES IN NORRIS—TRUE TO THE TRADITIONS OF THE AREA

Fig. 8. A house in Norris, Tennessee, 1936.
Division of Information, *Norris Dam* (Knoxville: Tennessee Valley Authority, 1936).

Conclusion

In the 1930s, progressives identified both the Tennessee Valley and Appalachia as regions; the first with topographic accuracy and the second with cultural symbolism. Resource conservationists preferred the watershed because it could be clearly delineated, mapped, and engineered. Appalachia

appealed to social reformers who saw it as a physical representation of a myth about the past–and future–of American society. The TVA, which combined resource conservation and social reform, drew on both regions to convey its mission and justify its goals. Ultimately, however, by conflating the two regions, the TVA created a novel amalgamation, which operated as a mode of statecraft. In this amalgamation, the region was both geographical and cultural, modern and historical, but most importantly, mutable and replicable. The term "region" denoted an entity that was both universal and specific and could be efficiently and effectively applied anywhere in the world. The TVA encapsulated this idea in yet another map. In this iteration, which was included in the 1941 annual report to Congress, a distorted perspectival view of the watershed and its system of dams replaces the partial geographical accuracy of the previous maps (**fig. 9**). The diagram represents the river gesturally, while emphasizing the dams with specific architectural details as elements of an interconnected, regional geography. Gone is the watershed boundary; the region is now a fully managed, unified system of flood control, power production, and modern farming. Lilienthal used this diagram in his bestselling polemic *TVA: Democracy on the March*, first published in 1944.[62] It was then repeatedly reprinted in promotional material as the TVA became an international model for regional development after World War II.[63]

Fig. 9. TVA map of the Tennessee Valley, 1941.
Tennessee Valley Authority, *Annual Report of the Tennessee Valley Authority for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1941*.

The TVA continued to invest in the territory within its scope. In the 1950s, the agency hired Knoxville, Knoxville modernist artist Robert Birdwell to replace the mural at the entrance to the Norris Dam powerhouse. His mural combines a diagrammatic map with symbolic images (**fig. 10**). The boundary of the watershed is drawn, but only faintly, recalling the TVA's early cartographic representations of the Valley while allowing the region to bleed outside of its specific geographic container. Depictions of the Valley's everyday life reinforce the TVA's statecraft. These vignettes, like the landscape at Norris Dam, blur the boundary between land and infrastructure. Each vignette presents a different prong of the TVA project: well-managed forests, industrial production, navigation along the river, plentiful fishing and recreation on the reservoirs, and electricity flowing to the farms. In each case, we see individuals in everyday attire–valley folk as much as mountain folk–meeting with TVA experts in casual, yet professional, attire. They are, the images suggest,

collaborating as equals, following the promise of grassroots democracy. In his composition, Birdwell masterfully triangulates between the region as an administrative unit, TVA expertise, and individual freedom to work the land and benefit from it. This depiction of TVA statecraft would have been impossible without the concept of region connecting these disparate ideas.

Fig. 10. A 1950s mural by Robert Birdwell (restored) at the Norris Dam Powerhouse visitor center.
Photo by Avigail Sachs.

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