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**“The True Regulative Force”:
Race, Class, Hydroelectricity, and Regulation in Progressive-Era Georgia**

Against the backdrop of the United States’ involvement in the Great War, Murphy Candler, Chairman of the Railroad Commission of Georgia (RCG), insisted in April 1918 that the Atlanta-based Georgia Railway and Power Company must receive immediate approval for proposed rate increases and for plans to expand its hydroelectric power program. According to Candler, urgent authorization was required as Georgia Railway and Power had become the “trustee of the great industrial resources” of the state. Because both drought and coal scarcity had endangered electrical supplies crucial to wartime industrial production, the RCG chair continued, Georgia Railway and Power must also become the steward of the state’s natural resources and the primary agent for rapidly converting Georgia’s rivers into much-needed fuel for the generation of electricity. On the strength of this plea, the commission quickly agreed to the power company’s requests in order to assure immediate production needs and the future growth of the state and region. In the decade following the RCG’s hearty endorsement of the utility’s petition, Georgia Railway and Power harnessed the Tallulah and Tugaloo Rivers with a series of five reservoirs and dams and, based on the energy that river system provided, seized monopoly control over three-fourths of Georgia’s electrical market.

Regulation proved critical to the materiality of electricity. State regulatory bodies, which began to oversee the electric power industry in the early twentieth century, not only established utilities as monopolies in certain operating territories and perfunctorily approved petitions for rate increases. They enabled power companies to intensify their conquest of waterscapes and to dramatically increase their service areas by essentially making electric utilities proxies of state power. As “public service companies” with guarantees of state backing, regulated electric utilities attracted low-interest capital investments that permitted the construction of increasing numbers of facilities to expropriate the natural resources required for cheap energy production.

Historians have devoted a great deal of attention to American hydroelectric development and have invoked the onset of electric utility regulation as an important element in the course of electrification. Yet, with a few exceptions, they have failed to rigorously explore the motivations and actions behind the creation of the laws and commissions that supervised the activities of power companies. This paper will consider the development of the governmental mechanisms through which energy corporations in Georgia were empowered to yoke the state's rivers for the generation of electric power. The process through which the Railroad Commission of Georgia gained authority over electric utilities in the so-called "Empire State of the South" in part hewed to and drew from national trends, but ultimately took a peculiarly southern path. The regulation of electric utilities in Georgia emerged following a heated moment of inextricably intertwined race and class tensions. Yet it did not result primarily from the actions of opportunistic politicians, the heroics of progressive crusaders, or the demands of irate activists. It sprang from the boardrooms of utilities largely as a way to quell interlocked race and class conflicts and to establish the private realm—secured, ironically, by state action—as the most credible force for ensuring the region's prosperity through the provision of cheap energy.