4 THE UNDERWATER TOWN OF MONROE



Over the years numerous accounts have circulated about a town at the bottom of Smith Mountain Lake, near Vista Pointe. Numerous fishermen have supposedly claimed to have hooked weird things, like pieces of clothing and other articles that people might have left behind when their homes were covered by water.

There was even a rumor that someone had seen what appeared to be a church beneath the waters' surface. George Phillips, III, a scuba diver from Northern Virginia, saw some such postings on a website where scuba divers exchange information, and he became fascinated… "hooked", you might say!

"I would read message board posts of people seeing all kinds of strange things," George said, "Like even a church steeple peering up from the depths. I was always frustrated that nobody could give precise coordinates of where they were seeing this stuff. To be honest, it was fascinating to me to think that a town could get covered by damming a river, and I got a little obsessed with learning all I could about it."

Diving in SML is quite risky, according to George and other experienced divers. The fact that there are fully grown trees at the bottom of the lake makes entanglement a real concern. One posting by a diver who was on a body recovery mission at SML had this to say to other divers about his experience:

"I would avoid diving Smith Mountain Lake, it is a flooded valley and deep…50 feet from shore, we were in 90 feet of water. Upon entering the water and making the descent, it was nice for the first 30 feet. Then we started going down through tree tops in a flooded forest. At the bottom there was silt, tons of tree limbs and mud… Upon coming up, we had to thread our way through the forest. Definitely a spooky dive…"

He went on to warn of the heavy boat traffic, a major problem for divers, as you can imagine. Other postings warned of fishing line and lures, lost beneath the surface over the years by folks fishing SML, which also add to the risks.

Such warnings may have kept George from actually searching for the underwater town on a dive, but it didn't keep him from locating it on old maps. Its name was Monroe, and George knows exactly where it is!

"The Smith Mountain Road that today terminates at Vista Pointe, would actually keep going, bending south for about 800 feet before turning east for 1200 feet. A final turn to the northeast for 1000 feet would bring it to Monroe, just south of the Anthony Ford Bridge. The 'town' sits at coordinates 37o 02'06.2" N x 79o 34'43.6"W under about 155 feet of water. The bottom of the old river is about 175 feet deep," George says, adding, "Smith Mountain Parkway that terminates at Parkway Marina would have kept going south-south-east for about 2500 feet and hit the bridge on its north side.

"That would be an interesting dive for sure."

Although George is pretty certain that buildings were removed by APC before the flooding took place, seeing the foundations of buildings and the remnants of old bridges would be fascinating to a diver. To locate Monroe, George used old photos from 1949 USGS (United States Geological Study) photography, and overlaid them onto present day satellite photos.

In an article appearing in the summer 1998 edition of The Pittsylvania Packet, a publication of the Pittsylvania Historical Society, historian Herman E Melton tells of the founding of the town of Monroe and of its demise.

In the article, entitled The Forgotten Town of Monroe, Melton tells of two brothers, Abner and Charles Anthony, who bought over 300 acres of ground in Pittsylvania County in 1814. The Anthonys, who settled in Campbell and Bedford Counties in the mid-1700s, had vast landholdings in those counties along with a grist mill and three ferries (fords): One ferry crossed the Otter River in Campbell County; the second one crossed the Staunton River at the northeast corner of Pittsylvania County; the third ferry was downstream toward Leesville. Note: An 81 mile section of the lower course of the Roanoke River in Virginia is known as the Staunton River.

The land which they bought in Pittsylvania County was across the river from the second ferry. They obviously saw the potential for development of a community. Abner, who became the guiding light, quickly divided 50 acres of the land into lots, which went on sale on July 7, 1818. The description of the lots indicates that Abner was planning a bustling town, Melton says.

Melton found tax records for 28 lots. He also learned of a petition for the founding of the Town of Monroe in Pittsylvania County that was sent to the Virginia General Assembly along with 119 signatures in December of 1818. The petition was quickly approved.

"There is evidence that some commercial activity transpired, and some indication of population density in the area at one time," Melton writes, adding that it is likely that a post office was established in the town. The town stayed on the land records through the Civil War, but disappeared from tax rolls in 1869.

Melton found that there were very few land transfers once the initial 28 lots were sold. There is proof that at least one pub was established in the town. Benjamin Rives of Monroe applied for a license to sell "ardent spirits and operate a house of private entertainment". The cost of the license was $4.50 for one year.

Melton's findings concur with what George found on old maps – Vista Pointe might be sitting on or near what was once a Monroe town lot. "It is certain that the Anthony's Ford (ferry) crossing lay on what is presently County Route 626," Melton writes, "Its route no doubt ran through the Town of Monroe, since there are 19th Century maps that label that road as the 'Monroe Road.'"

Anthony's Bridge replaced the ferry sometime in the 1800s, and when Smith Mountain Dam was built downstream Anthony's Ford Bridge had to be abandoned and removed. Melton also made the observation that had Monroe thrived like some other towns in the area, its presence might have prevented the construction of Smith Mountain Dam. He speculated that Monroe's isolation in a rugged terrain might have been a significant factor in its demise.

Sources not mentioned in text: The Franklin News Post, April 2, 1984; South Boston Virginia News article by Tom McLaughlin and Susan Kyte, October 24, 2012; Appalachian Power's Website; Wikipedia; scubaboard.com.