In 1815, Archibald Murphey, a state senator from Orange County, entered a resolution that “it is expedient to provide more efficiently for the improvement of the inland navigation of this State” and asked that a joint committee of the Senate and House of Commons be appointed to report on the matter. Murphey headed the committee, and probably wrote most of the report himself.

As with education, Murphey believed that “internal improvements” to permit better transportation should be the responsibility of the state. Many rivers could not be navigated without canals, and the western part of the state did not have enough roads. Neither problem could be solved by individuals or small groups of people, and so the state needed to step in. Murphey proposed not only to improve transportation but to set up market towns and drain eastern wetlands for agriculture.

The state tried to enact some of Murphey’s plan in the 1820s, but ran into two major problems. First, not enough money was available — the state lost money on investments, failed to collect what was owed it, and mismanaged funds. Second, not enough trained engineers were available — in large part because not enough money had been spent on education, the other half of Murphey’s great plan for North Carolina.

Many legislators, particularly those representing wealthier eastern counties, did not support spending money on improvements to transportation that would not benefit the people in their districts. Many also believed strongly that it was not the proper role of the government to build roads and canals — government, they argued, must be kept small and limited, or it would become dangerous to liberty and to the people’s welfare.

Eventually, by the 1830s, it became clear that the future of transportation was in railroads, but not until the 1850s did North Carolina embrace the need for publicly funded transportation improvements.

The committee to whom was referred the resolution on Inland Navigation, and so much of the message of his excellency the governor as relates to the same subject, Report, that the time has come when it behoves the legislature of North Carolina to provide efficiently for the improvement of the inland navigation of the state. To delay this provision, is to postpone that national wealth, respectability, and importance which follow only in the train of great internal improvements. With an extent of territory sufficient to maintain more than ten millions of inhabitants, under a system which would develop the possible resources of our agriculture, we can only boast of a population something less than six hundred thousand and it is but too obvious that this population, under the present state of things, already approaches its maximum. Within twenty-five years past, more than two hundred thousand of our inhabitants have removed to the waters of the Ohio, Tennessee and Mobile; and it is justifying witness the fact that thousands of our wealthy and respectable citizens are annually moving to the west in quest of that wealth which a rich soil and commodious navigation never fail to create in a free state; and that thousands of our poorer citizens follow them, being literally driven away by the prospect of poverty. In this state of things our agriculture is at a stand; and abandoning all idea of making the soil of the soil, men are seeking the way to wealth through all the innumerable paths of speculation. In this way individual property contributes but little to the national wealth; and what is still more lamentable, habits of speculation are succeeding to habits of steady industry; and our citizens are learning to prefer the extravagant, but stationary, to the slow yet regular gains of the second. The perversion of things is gradually undermining our respectability, and converting the character which we bore of being industrious, enterprising farmers and thriving mechanics, into that of shopkeepers and speculators. This rage of speculation has given a licentious value to house and lots in the several towns of the state, but has not advanced the price of lands in the county; and whilst the people, whom we have sent to work the soil of other states and territories, have raised the price of their lands from two to four dollars, the price of ours has remained stationary. What is the cause of this strange condition of things? Is the soil of this state too poor to reward the labors of the mechanic and agriculturist with its products? Have we no navigable streams by which those products can be taken to market? We have as good a soil as any of the southern Atlantic states can boast of—fine rivers intersect our state in different directions, furnishing superior means and facilities for an extensive internal commerce, to those enjoyed by any of our neighboring states; butwe have not availed ourselves of the means which Providence has thrown in our way—We have suffered year after year to pass by without seizing opportunities to improve our condition; and whilst we admit that internal improvements are essential to our prosperity, we seem to act upon a contrary principle, and to expect that national prosperity will come without national labor. It is surely worse than foolish to expect the rewards of industry without its toils, or national prosperity without expenditure; and we ought always to bear in mind, that it is the duty of the government to aid the enterprise of its citizens, and to afford them facilities of disposing, to advantage, of the products of their industry.

Among the various objects of internal improvement, the opening of our rivers, the cutting of canals, and the making of turnpike roads, are of primary importance, and first claim the attention of the legislature.

Six large and commodious rivers intersect this state in different directions—the Roanoke, the Neuse, the Tar, the CapeFear, the Yadkin and the Catawba. These rivers, with their tributary streams, water almost every county in this state; and were it practicable to adopt a general system for the improvement of the navigation of each other these rivers, and various streams which run into them, it is impossible now to calculate the advantages which would result from it. It would certainly not be improper to say, that within five years after this improvement shall have been made, the value of all the lands in the state will be doubled, and the productions of our agriculture increased three fold. Taking the value of our lands at $53,506,519, (the amount of the late assessment under the act of Congress), at the end of those five years we might safely estimate the value at $107,000,000. And taking the annual productions of our agriculture at $30,000,000, which is certainly below the true price, it would result that the public burthens of the state would be reduced, the taxes levied for the support of the government would be proportionately reduced, and the increased productions of our agriculture would contribute but little to the national wealth; and what is still more lamentable, habits of speculation are succeeding to habits of steady industry; and our citizens are learning to prefer the extravagant, but stationary, to the slow yet regular gains of the second. The perversion of things is gradually undermining our respectability, and converting the character which we bore of being industrious, enterprising farmers and thriving mechanics, into that of shopkeepers and speculators. This rage of speculation has given a licentious value to house and lots in the several towns of the state, but has not advanced the price of lands in the county; and whilst the people, whom we have sent to work the soil of other states and territories, have raised the price of their lands from two to four dollars, the price of ours has remained stationary. What is the cause of this strange condition of things? Is the soil of this state too poor to reward the labors of the mechanic and agriculturist with its products? Have we no navigable streams by which those products can be taken to market? We have as good a soil as any of the southern Atlantic states can boast of—fine rivers intersect our state in different directions, furnishing superior means and facilities for an extensive internal commerce, to those enjoyed by any of our neighboring states; butwe have not availed ourselves of the means which Providence has thrown in our way—We have suffered year after year to pass by without seizing opportunities to improve our condition; and whilst we admit that internal improvements are essential to our prosperity, we seem to act upon a contrary principle, and to expect that national prosperity will come without national labor. It is surely worse than foolish to expect the rewards of industry without its toils, or national prosperity without expenditure; and we ought always to bear in mind, that it is the duty of the government to aid the enterprise of its citizens, and to afford them facilities of disposing, to advantage, of the products of their industry.

The growth of our commercial towns is of peculiar importance to the character of the state. Whilst we continue to send our products to the markets of other states, we shall be forever of that independence of character which it should be the pride of our citizens to cherish. One species of dependence—not another: and having hitherto been dependent upon Virginia and South-Carolina, for markets for the greatest part of our produce, we have in some measure become dependent upon those states for our opinions and our prejudices. It is the duty of the legislature to contribute as far as possible to break the spell that binds us to this dependence, and so to change the political arb of North-Carolina, that she shall move as a primary and not a secondary state in the system of the confederacy.

Primary Source: Archibald Murphey Calls for Better Inland Navigation

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SITUATION, BOUNDARIES, AND

North Carolina is situated between 33° 53' and 36° 33' N. It is bounded north by Virginia; east by the Atlantic; south by see. Its mean length is about 362 miles, and mean breadth 12 miles, or 28,032,000 acres.

FACE OF THE COUNTRY, SOIL, AND

Along the whole coast of North Carolina is a ridge of sand, places by narrow sounds, in others by broad bays. The passage dangerous, and Ocracoke inlet is the only one, north of Cape the counties on the sea-coast, the land is low and covered with 60 or 80 miles from the shore is a dead level. Beyond this, the most western part of the state, rises into mountains. In the land and covered with immense forests of pitch pine; in the swamp in the upper country, wheat, rye, barley, oats, hemp, and Indi
This 1821 map shows the rivers mentioned in this report.

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CAPES, INLETS, SOUNDS, AND

The three principal capes are, Cape Hatteras, Cape Lookout, and Cape Hatteras, particularly Cape Hatters. Numerous
inlets are, Currituck, Roanoke, and Ocracoke Sound, in the N. E. part of the state, is 60 miles long from east
municates with Pamlico Sound and the ocean, by several nar-
coast, by a canal cut through Dismal Swamp. Pamlico Sound is 86 miles

Great Dismal Swamp is in the north-east part of the state, an
long from north to south, and 10 broad, and embraces about
trees. In the centre is Drummond's pond, 15 miles in circum-
Swamp, lies between Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds.