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Weaver, William Trotter [1]

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18 July 1858–6 Nov. 1916

William Trotter Weaver, pioneer in furnishing electric power to western North Carolina, was born in the Reems Creek valley near Weaverville [2], the youngest son of James Thomas and Hester Trotter Weaver. When he was four his father joined the Confederate army and, as lieutenant colonel of the Sixtieth North Carolina Regiment, was killed in December 1864 while leading his regiment at the Battle of Murfreesboro [3], Tenn. Hester Weaver and the children took refuge near Spartanburg, S.C., where William for a time "went to school to a Miss Julia Lee." At the end of the war the family returned home, and young Weaver walked two miles each day to attend the Methodist Academy near Weaverville, which became a college for men in 1870. After completing the sophomore year at the college when he was eighteen, Weaver became a clerk in a store at $12.50 per month. This enabled him to pay for his own education and that of his younger sisters.

Weaver's business career began when he was employed by the Saluda Manufacturing Company, a cotton mill, in Columbia, S.C., for which he became sales manager. Returning to western North Carolina in 1882, he entered into a partnership to sell shoes in a general furnishings store on Pack Square in Asheville. In September 1885, during the administration of President Grover Cleveland, Weaver was appointed postmaster at age twenty-seven. With the expiration of Cleveland's term, Weaver's political appointment ended, but he was long remembered for his successful delivery of the mail "during the great snowstorm of 1888." Also during the 1880s he was elected captain of the Asheville Light Infantry, a unit of the state militia. As was then the custom, he thereafter was referred to as Captain Weaver.

Joining the staff of the National Bank of Asheville, he became its president in 1896 on the eve of a national financial crisis. Although the other banks in the city collapsed, all of the depositors of the National Bank of Asheville were paid promptly and in full before the doors were finally closed in October 1897. Weaver's business acumen was credited for the bank's excellent condition.

During the period 1890–96 he was the moving spirit behind the establishment of the first electric street railway in Asheville. This line connected the center of town with the village of Biltmore [4] near which George Vanderbilt [5] was then building his splendid château, completed in 1896. After some financial difficulties the street railway was acquired by the Asheville Electric Company, which Weaver had formed in October 1897. Indeed, it was the necessity for providing power for the various street railways then operating in the city that inspired him to undertake his most imaginative and daring enterprise—one that would have a lasting effect on the region.

The city of Asheville saw its first electric street railway in 1886 and limited public electric service in 1889. In 1890 E. G. Carrier, a hotelman and entrepreneur, built the first hydroelectric plant near Asheville, producing 40 kilowatts of direct current. In 1892 two generators were erected on Upper Hominy Creek [6] to produce 250 kilowatts for the rapidly expanding railways and street lighting. These facilities were incorporated into Weaver's electric company in October 1897. By 1900 this company was serving 100 street lights and 5,000 incandescent bulbs. At this time Weaver recognized the possibilities for a much larger plant on the French Broad River [7] below Great Craggy Mountain [8], five miles north of Asheville.

In 1903 he was able to secure financing in Boston and began constructing his own power plant. The Weaver plant opened in 1904, generating power from a granite dam that fed the waters of the French Broad River [7] through a canal to the turbines downstream. By 1908 the W. T. Weaver Power Company supplied all of the Asheville Electric Power Company's needs for the four consolidated street railway lines in the city. In subsequent years the W. T. Weaver Power Company completed other plants along the French Broad River at Ivy and Elk Mountain. On 1 July 1916 the Elk Mountain plant came on stream producing 13,000 kilowatts for the system.

July 1916 proved to be a fateful month, however. On the tenth, six days of torrential rain began, resulting in the failure of the dam on Lake Toxaway [9] upriver near Brevard [10]. In this greatest flood disaster of the century, power plants along the river were inundated, and 185 feet of the dam at the Craggy plant were washed away. Weaver was at the scene almost constantly, laboring with the workmen under nearly impossible flood conditions in an effort to save the equipment and repair the damage. Exhaustion and exposure took their toll. He became seriously ill in August and died three months later at age fifty-eight. He was buried in Riverside Cemetery [11], Asheville.

Weaver had been a steward in the Central Methodist Church of Asheville [12] and a leader in the building program that produced an imposing stone church. He was also a leader in the Masonic lodge. Although a strong Democrat [13], he never sought public office but was a frequent public speaker. His avocation was raising livestock, and with Haywood Parker, a local attorney, he imported the first herd of Angus cattle into that section of the state.

After Weaver's death the power company continued under the direction of T. S. Morrison until 1923, when it became part of the Electric Bond and Share Company. Later consolidated with the Asheville Power and Light Company, it was acquired by the newly formed Carolina Power and Light Company in 1926.

Weaver was married on 1 Feb. 1887 to Annie Laurie Johnston, the daughter of businessman William and Lucinda Gudger Johnston and the sister of Thomas D. Johnston, a congressman from Buncombe County [14] in 1885–89. They had one daughter, Dorothea Johnston.

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1 January 1996 | Rhoades, Verne, Jr.; Rhoades, William Weaver

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