



John Tippett

Life Along the Rappahannock: An Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by
Nancy Milroy
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Since 2016, Friends of the Rappahannock has been interviewing individuals with unique knowledge related to significant events affecting the Rappahannock River watershed, and the communities that inhabit it. This project's goal is to collect and preserve significant and endangered oral histories of people living along the Rappahannock River, from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Chesapeake Bay. These audio-visual documentaries will be available for generations to come.

Oral history refers both to a method of collecting information through recorded interviews of informed narrators with singular perspectives on significant historical events, and to the product of that process. Recordings are transcribed, and reviewed by the narrator, to provide researchers with primary source material. These accounts reflect the narrator's experiences, perspectives, and historical understandings rather than a definitive account of history.

Friends of the Rappahannock is a non-profit, grassroots conservation organization based in Fredericksburg, Virginia. It works to educate everyone about the river and to advocate for actions and policies that will protect and restore the Rappahannock River. This project is a collaborative effort with the University of Mary Washington Department of History and American Studies.

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Friends of the Rappahannock requests that researchers submit a bibliographic citation of any published work in which "Life Along the Rappahannock" interviews are used, and, if publishing in a digital medium, include a link back to the project's homepage.



John Tippet

John Tippet served as executive director of Friends of the Rappahannock from 1999 until 2014, overseeing the group's role in several landmark accomplishments, including the adoption of Low Impact Development (LID) ordinances by area localities, the removal of the Embrey Dam, and the placement of 4,232 acres of riverfront property into perpetual conservation easement. Mr. Tippet is currently an adjunct instructor for Earth and Environmental Sciences at the University of Mary Washington.

00:00:01

Milroy:

It is April 13th, 2017. I'm in Fredericksburg, Virginia at the Friends of the Rappahannock building, and we are doing an oral history interview with John Tippet about the history of the Rappahannock River. My name is Nancy Milroy, sitting to my right are Matt Griffiths and Woodie Walker who may come in later and ask some questions. But, I'm going to begin by asking you about your earliest experiences on the Rappahannock River.

00:00:24

Tippet:

Well I think the first time I came to the Rappahannock was as a teenager, maybe 16 years old, and I was into, you know, just getting exploring rivers, I kind of knew that I wanted to do something with water since I was a kid. I had a two person kayak, and a friend and I put in on Ruffin's Pond with the intent to paddle down to Port Royal. Which we did, but when we got to

the end of Ruffin's Pond we realized there was a 20-foot dam there, so we had to lower our boat down with some scavenged rope to get the boat over the dam, and then spent an overnight floating down the Rappahannock and got a sense of at least the tidal portion of the river. I remember a thunderstorm coming in as we rounded the corner in the river and we made a beeline for the shore, and then flipped our boat upside down and huddled under that for a couple hours until we could put up a tarp. That was my first experience and it wasn't until later that I experienced the "other river" which is the Rappahannock above City Dock and the rapids and everything which was just fantastic. I grew up on the Potomac which was really my first love as a river. Or I grew up on the Piscataway which is the upper tidal reaches, then spent a lot of my childhood summers on the lower Potomac. I literally was on the water all the time, catching crabs and fish and trying to live off the river as much as I could during the summer. And back then crabs and oysters and fish were a lot more plentiful, it was before the oyster decline. But I fell in love with rivers on the Potomac, and knew that I wanted to do something with water from an early age.

00:02:46

Milroy:

So you grew up in the Chesapeake Bay region?

00:02:50

Tippett:

Yeah I grew up in Maryland right on the Potomac.

00:02:54

Milroy:

You had mentioned the dam earlier on the Rappahannock, what dam was that?

00:02:58

Tippett:

Well there's a little Dam at [00:03:00] the end of Ruffin's Pond in Spotsylvania County, at the end of Massaponax Creek. That's still there. We didn't know about it when we put in. It surprised us.

00:03:15

Milroy:

So you've described your childhood a little bit and your experiences in the natural world. How would you say that those experiences have influenced your interest in the natural environment, and possibly rivers?

00:03:29

Tippett: Well I think at first it was just for fun, you know. I mean, I got a lot of pleasure out of being on the water, and I was fascinated by the water. I was fascinated that you could go out, and when I was young, at the right time of the month you could go out and fill up a bushel

basket of crabs in an hour just scooping them off the surface. And I loved that proximity to nature and being able to live off the water. But I was also a real geek, and I loved to think about how things work, and I loved to tromp around in wetlands and get up to my waist in mud and see things we could find and explore. I think exploring was probably the biggest part of my childhood that led me toward water, and then helped me to slowly appreciate it. I think I went into the field because it was fun, I liked it, and I developed my conservation ethic along the way. I didn't grow up in a family that had any particular conservation ethic, but the more I studied what I thought--what I felt was fun, the more I developed a sense of "these waterways are really important. Oh, that thing that I tromp around in is a wetland and it's important," and I grew to develop my own sense of stewardship and conservation ethic and that kind of led me to go into the field.

00:05:18

Milroy:

So where did you go for your undergraduate or graduate educations and how were those experiences?

00:05:26

Tippett:

Well I went to undergrad at Allegheny College in Pennsylvania, and I went there specifically because at the time it was one of the very few undergraduate liberal arts schools where you could get a degree in Environmental Science. In fact, I was able to get a degree in Aquatic Environments as an undergrad, which I thought was just really cool. Otherwise I didn't know anything about how to choose a college, that's just where I ended up. But I was lucky and I ended up in a place that had a [00:06:00] fantastic Environmental Science program and with a strong focus toward water. It had a joint program with Duke University, so that kind of fed me into the Master of Environmental Management program at Duke in North Carolina. That was transformative for me because that was a professional degree program, a Master of Environmental Management, and it really helped me to see how I could turn my passion into a career. It helped me develop the skills and connections that I'd need to be able to make it a career. While I was there I got to intern at a couple places, and I interned on the Chesapeake Bay with a company called Environmental Concern on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay and that's where I did my Master's research. That company was half non-profit and half for-profit, and their non-profit side was education and their for-profit side was wetland construction and mitigation. So I got to see in real life some of the jobs environmental scientists can have. That kind of led me to focus on water resources and resource ecology was my focus, and specifically water and watershed management.

00:07:53

Milroy:

So what doors did these experiences, these internships, these levels of education open for you, in terms of a career? So currently, you're a professor at the University of Mary Washington, with environmental science, how did you get there?

00:08:12

Tippett:

A convoluted path. I'm not an academic per se. There was kind of three options for environmental careers when you come out of school: government, business, or nonprofit work. Business being like consulting services. And so my first job was with the soil and water conservation district in Connecticut, so that was kind of quasi-governmental. I worked on implementing a watershed management plan through a federal 319 grant through the Clean Water Act. [00:09:00] I learned more in six months there, you know real stuff, real practical skills, than I think I did in my whole educational experience. It was a fantastic learning environment, especially the first six months. But I had just gotten married and my wife and I had planned to do something together, so after we got our student loans paid off, we decided to quit our jobs and spend a year in Appalachia doing volunteer work. So we worked with an organization out there in a little town called Martin, Kentucky, population 500, and worked in the mountains doing a variety of things. My wife worked in emergency assistance helping people with a seed program to help them cultivate gardens, and I worked in a community health program, or community and environmental health program, and did all kinds of things ranging from helping people monitor their high blood pressure to teaching kids about environmental stuff at a summer camp. We spent a year there living together in a community of other volunteers in Kentucky, which was a great experience for us. And then we knew that that was the only time in our lives we were probably gonna have a chance to do that. So it was either do it at the beginning of our lives, or get too busy and not be able to do it. So we did it early on and then came back and entered into our careers. So my first job was back in North Carolina at Research Triangle Institute, which was kind of on the corporate side. I was a consultant in the water quality department and we provided services mainly to state and federal government to help them. We did a lot of research on really cool stuff, and we got to do a lot of state of the art GIS work and doing assessments to figure out how effective Best Management Practices are on farms and how much the economic value of those is if you're gonna trade the nutrients between different sources. And a bunch of other stuff, and I was there for about four years and learned a lot. But the thing about working in the private sector, even though we were doing great state-of-the-art work was that I felt like my work was one or two orders removed from being able to make a difference, you know or at least me making a difference. It always [00:12:00] depended on somebody else taking what I did and hopefully doing something good with it, you know, like I provide the computer model but somebody else would have to do something with it at the state. And you only got to work on whatever the contract from the state government was, which wasn't necessarily, wasn't always the things you wanted to do or the things that had the most potential for difference. And I really felt looking around that the nonprofit sector had probably the greatest opportunity for somebody in the environmental field who wanted to make a difference, and in particular I felt like there was a real lack among the environmental nonprofit community of leaders who operate in a proactive fashion. The nonprofit community was really good at knowing what they were against, but not particularly good at knowing what they were for, and in particular how to make those things happen that they're for. What I really wanted to do was to be the environmental scientist to lead a nonprofit from the perspective of

environmental science and not a reactive, reactionary approach. So I started looking for one where my thinking matched up with the thinking of the organization and I was fortunate enough to find that here at Friends of the Rappahannock which was closer to my old stomping grounds. I couldn't have been more happy when I made that transition from the private sector to nonprofit, and I never looked back. It was everything I hoped for and more, and ten times harder than I ever thought it would be, too. When you have so much opportunity, and literally in a position like this with a small organization, and you drive to work and see a problem, you can put your resources on that problem that day. But there are a lot of problems everywhere, especially in a 2,700 square mile watershed, so the challenge was narrowing things down, figuring out where to focus so that we didn't become a mile wide and inch deep. I kind of jumped ahead of your question but that was kind of my progression from education to jobs.

00:14:43

Milroy:

That was a perfect transition because I wanted to ask you when you got and how you got involved with FOR, and when you arrived with this organization what were the most pertinent issues or needs of the organization that you knew that you could address? [00:15:00]

00:15:01

Tippett:

So, I mean I came to FOR as a scientist, but that was the smallest and easiest portion of what FOR really needed. FOR was a baby organization and really just hanging on from financial perspective. I was hired and they said, "We've got enough money in the bank to cover you for six months, and after that, you know that's all that exists and you're on your own." I had to figure out how to develop funding, that was just to cover me, you know, we had me and a part time assistant. Actually when I started the Executive Director was part time and there was a part time assistant. And so one of the biggest challenges for me was learning how to fundraise and to bring in consistent funding. In retrospect I can look back and what really helped us was developing, as we started to apply for grants and do projects and interact with local governments and such, it was developing that perspective or reputation as an organization that focused on science first, basing its opinions not on knee-jerk reactions but on what does the science say. And that won us the respect of a lot of people, including granters, that for the first time, we got our first significant grants after that, and got on the grant treadmill, which has its own challenges. So to answer your question, the fundraising was big, but also, the second big thing was having a vision and being able to cast that vision and spread it, and really in this case to the board of the organization that were people who liked the river, but they didn't necessarily have a vision for what they wanted to see. I mean, they weren't used to thinking about rivers in terms of watersheds, or about the issues that affect a river at a watershed scale, and water quality. It was more about, "What's the latest thing we need to fight?" that somebody may be building on the side of the river, and that's just a very small piece of managing a watershed because whether it's built on the side of the river or not, there's still--as you well know--everything drains into the river. So [00:18:00] building a vision for what the organization was going to be, a whole watershed focus, not a Fredericksburg focus. A science-based

decision-making process, and in particular being proactive, not just waiting around for somebody to propose a development we could then be against, but developing programs--and the bulk of our programs--that would be about getting ahead of the curve and dealing with issues like stormwater management and changing the way it's done before it happens. So changing the structure, changing the system, so that now when we look back and say we changed the regulatory process in multiple counties and then at the state level, everything that happens after that is then essentially affected by what we did when we got the codes changed.

00:18:58

Milroy:

To take a step back, you described FOR's original and possibly current visions and concerns, but can we talk about its origins, and I guess, the public reception to both those visions as well as how it came about.

00:19:18

Tippett:

Yeah, of course I wasn't here in '85, when it started, and the credit really goes to Bill Micks, who started doing cleanups and getting people together to clean up the river by canoe, and he would advertise them in the newspaper, people get together for a cleanup. And I think it was somebody at the local newspaper who said, "So what's the name of your group? You keep advertising these cleanups," and they said something like "Why don't you call it the 'Friends of the Rappahannock,' and you have a name to put down for your next cleanup." And that's how that was born, and then those cleanups eventually morphed into people meeting, as I think Bill has probably related, and they started meeting in the basement of a cafeteria here in Fredericksburg, an old **Hot Shoppes Cafeteria**, and decided to form an organization that eventually they chartered in 1985 for the protection of the Rappahannock River. It was for several years entirely volunteer-driven. Bill Micks was on the first board, Marcia Keener was one of the key leaders in the early years. In fact, Marcia kind of ran the organization out of her bedroom or her basement, I can't remember which, but Marcia played a big role in the leadership and trying to professionalize [00:21:00] the organization and build relationships with elected officials, and working on trying to get the first grant, which was from the Virginia Environmental Endowment in 1988. It was a challenge grant, where they gave us a certain amount of money and said, "We're gonna challenge you to develop a fundraiser, number one, and then to reach a certain membership target." So it was a challenge grant to get the organization started. The organization had to raise a concomitant amount of money with the first fundraiser, and start building membership logs. So in lots of ways Virginia Environmental Endowment was the first step in getting us professionalized, and that allowed the organization to hire its first staff person, Warren Wise, who was the first executive director. Marcia Keener was really a key leader along with Bill Micks, and one of the early chairs, a guy by the name of Larry Gross.

00:22:25

Milroy:

I suppose we're here today to address the original discussions on the Embrey Dam removal. What was your initial role in the Embrey Dam's removal, what kind of discussions were in place?

00:22:46

Tippett:

When I got here in 1995, the Embrey Dam had been an issue on the burners at FOR since FOR had begun. There had always been an interest in somehow figuring out a way to get rid of the dam because it was a safety hazard, a child had died on it, playing on it, and also the recreational canoeists didn't really like having to portage around it, et cetera, et cetera. But not a whole lot had happened. Our local representative, by the name of Senator Edd Houck and the Senator in the Virginia General Assembly, had been the biggest proponent of removing the dam, he was one of our partners. He had been pushing for money and such for a long time. The one thing that had happened by that point is we'd gotten funding, or the city had gotten funding to go in behind [00:24:00] the dam and take samples to see if the sediment was contaminated. By that point when anybody mentioned removing the dam, the first thing that came up was "No, you can't remove the dam because we've had hundreds of years of gold mining in the watershed, and there's the potential for mercury"--which was used for the removal of gold from the sediments-- "there's potential that that could well have accumulated in all the sediments behind the dam." At the head of the dam, we had almost twenty feet, well, seventeen feet of sediment, which kind of tapered out, that had been there for a long, long time, since 1854 when the original crib dam was built. The contractor came in and did a bunch of samples and came back and the report was clean, they couldn't find any sediments, and so the fact that the sediments were clean was the first big hurdle that was overcome. Everything that FOR had done up to that point was lobbying at the state level, and it was kind of like squeezing a turnip that had already had all its juice squeezed out. There was just no money; getting the money for the study was a coup, but getting the money to remove the dam--now I'm kind of proceeding past my arrival--one of the things we started to realize is, we're about three orders of magnitude off between the kind of money that exists at the state and how much money was needed to remove the dam. The local governments, Spotsylvania and Stafford, and the city, were simply not forthcoming with money. They were all struggling, particularly in those time periods, they didn't have the money, they were struggling to build their next high schools and the thought of spending a few million dollars on removing a dam just simply wasn't in the cards. That's where it stood at that time, was in pretty much a stalemate.

00:26:44

Milroy:

In terms of community support, or a lack of, even state support or a lack of, who was leading both?

00:26:56

Tippett:

From the state [00:27:00] we had support, at least moral support, from the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, who actually have a fish passage specialist on staff, Alan Weaver. There

was always, there was interest, but no money. And we had Senator Houck, with plenty of interest but no ability to really move significant amounts of money out of the General Assembly, other than a study. The local governments were somewhat ambivalent, except the city and Spotsy, the city in particular, had a vested interest for the longest time in keeping things the way they were, because the dam diverted water into the canal that runs behind the building here and into a pipe that fed the drinking water plant. The dam was needed for quite a long period of time because it provided the drinking water for the city. The next big thing to happen after the study that cleared the sediments was the removal of the need for the dam because of water supply, and that happened through the work of a fellow on City Council named Gordon Shelton. Gordon advocated for a new water supply to be built on the Rappahannock that would be a partnership between the City of Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County, and that would not rely on a dam on the river but instead would use a model called a "side-stream skimmer" where they dam up a tributary, but that tributary, that watershed doesn't have anywhere near enough water for their needs, so they sip water from the Rappahannock during high flows to fill up the basin behind it, a side-stream skimmer reservoir. Which is a great approach and is now used on three reservoirs, all of the water reservoirs on the Rappahannock, essentially. Mott's Run already existed as a reservoir, but they worked through Gordon Shelton's work, working with the county, and then Hal Wiggins, who was working with the Corps of Engineers in his regulatory position with the Corps, worked together and eventually came up with a plan that created a new water supply at Mott's Run by creating a pump station that would fill up Mott's Run reservoir, and then a water treatment works up there. Once that was built [00:30:00], the Cossey Water Plant, which was what the city relied on, could be shut down, it was antiquated anyway. That was the last formal reason for the dam to exist. At that point, the pipe no longer required water. The only thing the dam did at that point was provided water for the aesthetic benefits of the canal, which was important to a lot of people, still is important. The question became, "What do we do with this thing?" That was where it stood, that was the second hurdle. Did I answer--what was the other part of your question?

00:30:50

Milroy:

Can you think of any other complications or considerations that FOR had to face when proposing such a project?

00:31:00

Tippett: What we decided to do, once that hurdle had been cleared, FOR took the lead in trying to coordinate all the stakeholders on the issue. In this room we hosted a lot of meetings of multiple agencies, particularly Virginia agencies, coming together and hashing out what needs to be done and how much money it would cost. We had a lot of those, and they didn't particularly go very far. We came up with a position statement that we wanted to see the dam removed, and also that if the dam was removed we didn't want the sediment released, we wanted it to be dredged out before the dam was taken down. That complicated matters for some people. The Corps was quite happy, they had said "There's no big deal, you don't need to, you can release the sediment," but we weren't going with that. That was at the same time when we

were just launching the plans for each river basin to reduce their sediment loads and their nutrient loads, called the river basin plans, it was foolish to say “Okay, we’re going to release hund--thousands upon thousands of cubic meters of sediment here at the dam while we’re paying farmers lots of money to keep the sediment on their fields.” It just didn’t make any sense. So we said even though this was one of our primary goals, we won’t support it unless the sediment gets dredged. After awhile we realized that we weren’t going anywhere with the state. [00:33:00] We started reaching out, and thankfully we had a board member, his name is Tom VanArsdale, and because he worked as a lobbyist for agriculture in his day job, he had connections with Senator Warner and Senator Warner’s staff, as well, well enough so that he could invite Senator Warner down to go fishing. We began a regular process every year of having Senator Warner come down and go fishing, and we developed a relationship with him and his staff. It was on one of those fishing trips where I had taken him out fishing and we were right below Embrey Dam, and you’ve kind of got a captive audience when you’ve got somebody in a canoe, and I was bending his ear on a couple things while we were fishing. Of course, one of them was removing this dam that was in front of us, and he was a very sharp mind, and he asked a lot of really incisive questions about “Where’s the support? What’s the problem?” I was telling him the local governments, there’s not really much in the way of opposition, it’s just we don’t have the funding to make it happen. He is a sportsman, and he cared about fish, and he said “This is silly, this dam here,” and you could tell he was thinking about it. We loaded the boats back on top of the van and we were coming down this roadway, the access road that leads right back to the Friends of the Rappahannock office, and he kind of reached his arm over the seat in the van to the back of us, and he said “I’m gonna take that on as a personal project.” Those were his words, and lo and behold, it was probably four weeks later that we got word that there had been an appropriation of \$100,000 for what’s called a “reconnaissance study.” That’s a very first step, \$100,000 is a tiny little drop in the bucket of what it takes for the federal government to do something. But it was a study, it was money to fund the Corps of Engineers to look at the issue and say “Is there federal interest in removing the dam?” I think with some pushing from Senator Warner, they determined that there was federal interest in removing the dam. Whatever, however they defined federal interest, I dunno. But they spent the \$100,000, which the Corps was happy to get, and they made the decision that there was federal interest. That was the first in what became multiple hurdles of getting funding for the dam removed. [00:36:00] This is where FOR played a really key behind-the-scenes role that most people don’t know about, because really it was only a handful of us who were involved in going to Capitol Hill and meeting with Senator Warner as things got dicey on this project. That happened a couple times. We had been doing over the period, for the prior seven or eight years, had been doing a lot of community efforts so that the community was generally positive about the dam removal. We had been doing fish lifts, where we teamed up with the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries and would get a load of Friends of the Rappahannock volunteers on the far bank and Game and Inland Fisheries would use their stun boat to stun fish and then our volunteers would form a line all the way around a very long portage around the dam, and then we would have the buckets come off of the stun boat and pass them around and carry them person to person to person all the way around, and then release them and the shad--it was shad, and blueback herring, occasional American shad, gizzard shad--then release them upstream. They would

always make the front page of the region section every time we did a fish lift 'cause it was fun, it was something different, and a picture of someone releasing a fish and letting them go upstream. Everybody, who read the paper at least, over the years got the impression, "Okay this dam is blocking something, it's blocking fish passage." We always made the point, it's blocking roughly 700 miles of historic spawning habitat. I think those efforts, and then as we really started putting some effort into building public support, we started running a shad planking event at Old Mill Park. Shad planking has a Virginia political history as an event where you nail shad to a plank and then put them over a smokey fire and they cook and all the politicians talk and do their thing. We did it as a demonstration, really, 'cause the Health Department wouldn't let us actually feed the shad to anybody, which was kind of funny, but we did it as a demo and a lot of people came out just to see what the old shad plankings were like, and we had bluegrass bands and stuff. We did that for maybe three or four years, and we called it the Shad Festival and shad planking, and it was a big thing, kind of similar to what we do for Earth Day now [00:39:00] at Old Mill Park. Again, carrying the drumbeat of education to build support. By the time Senator Warner got involved, we could say to him, "We've got support from the public, we don't have opposition from the local governments, and they're nominally supportive they just don't want to put money into it." That's what he said to us, "If you can show to me that there's community consensus in removing this dam, then I will work on getting the funding to do it." We felt that was our marching orders, so that was actually the impetus for the shad events and really keeping a steady drumbeat in the media, letters to the editor, building a general positive public support about the need to remove the dam. Meanwhile, there were a lot of issues that came up behind the scenes with the funding, potential funding, for removing the dam. There's two things the federal government, authorization and appropriation, and you get one but then you still have to get the other. Great news came when he got, I forgot which one comes first, authorization or appropriation, but one of them came, and we held a big press conference here, and we had both state senators here, and we cleared out that whole room and had a huge press conference, and the head of the Corps of Engineers and such. But then we actually had to go the second step, and Congress had to formally make the money available, and that's where things got a little tricky because as it turned out, when the Corps of Engineers gets involved in doing a project at a local level for a government, like removing a dam or dredging, they require cost share. The federal government will pay, like, fifty percent or seventy-five percent, and the local government pays the other part. In our case, the local governments were not forthcoming with money, even with the federal government coming in and offering to pay seventy-five percent, the County of Stafford, City of Fredericksburg, County of Spotsylvania said "Sorry, we don't have the money." The state complained because the cost of the federal government doing it was probably five times the amount of the cost that it would have been for what the state was thinking it would [00:42:00] have cost. Whenever the federal government gets involved in things prices get jacked up really, really high. People heard that it's gonna cost \$8 million to remove the dam, so the state got indignant. Our friends at Game and Inland Fisheries started giving us this kind of thing, "Well, we could have done it for two million." And we were like, "Well guys, maybe you could have done it, but you didn't do it, and you haven't been doing it, and we've been trying to get you to do it and get the money through the General Assembly and it has not been forthcoming." There was a certain amount of animosity or indignance from our partners

there that we went to the feds. And then within the federal government, there was this problem that, there were two problems. One, our local government wasn't gonna do their share. That led Senator Warner, who was in a very unique place--he couldn't have been in a better position, because he was the chair of the Senate Armed Forces Committee. And the Senate Armed Forces Committee, obviously, controls the money for all military activities. In particular they passed an act called the Water Resources Development Act which controls the Corps of Engineers and all the money they get. That comes up for renewal every so often, and it was coming up for renewal. So the Senator created a bill that said the Corps of Engineers will pay for the removal of the dam at one-hundred percent, and appropriated that money. That got the Corps of Engineers mad, for two reasons. Number one, this undermined their process of local governments sharing, which could cause a bad precedent for everything in the future. And second, the whole thing about the money for Embrey Dam coming in was a run-around of their actual system, because the way it normally works is Congress gives them a lump sum of money and the Corps uses their own prioritization process to figure out the projects that should be funded within their purview. They may prioritize dredging a channel in Tallahassee as more important. If they were gonna do Embrey Dam, they wanted it to be subject to their own prioritization of funding. Truth be told, it probably would have never come up to the top of a funding when it's competing against keeping navigation channels open, 'cause this is really not a navigation channel. When the money [00:45:00] came through a Senator like that, this is what they call pork barrel, pork barrel politics where it comes through a local legislator and it's meant to serve their specific needs. The Corps didn't like that, they didn't like being told how to use money, but Senator Warner, and Tom VanArsdale was there at the committee meeting when he said it, essentially the Water Resources bill was coming up for vote, and the Corps of Engineers complained, and he said "No Embrey Dam, no bill." This was huge. This was a dinky little project in the scheme of things nationwide that they're dealing with, but because this one man had taken it on as a pet project, that's how it got through. Sometimes it's all about who you know, and not about what you know or what you do. In this case, Embrey Dam simply would not have happened if Senator Warner hadn't put his foot down and said "No Water Resources Act unless this dam gets funded, the removal of the dam gets funded." That's how we were able to get the \$8 million that covered it in total, with the local governments not having to chip in money. They were finagled a deal where the land where the dam touches on either side, the local governments would "donate" that to the process, but that was their so-called contribution, which wasn't really anything really, 'cause the money for the land came back to them anyway. He was responsible for it. There were multiple times during the process where it seemed like things were gonna fall apart because of the Corps, or the Senator was wavering a little bit because he had heard some news that maybe there was some conflict, and there wasn't unanimous support, and so we would trudge up to Capitol Hill and have a meeting with him and his staff, and make sure that everything was stable and kept the train on the rails a number of times. Ultimately, the money got appropriated and it happened. As far as opposition, the only real opposition that we encountered was a family that lived on the other side of the river, the **Blankenbekers**, who were concerned that the explosives for removing the dam would damage their home. That was their dream home that they had built, and they liked the view of the impoundment behind the dam. We spent a lot of time climbing the hill [00:48:00] and sitting on

their veranda up there talking through with them and helping them to come to some level of comfort with the idea, and the Corps made a contract with them that they would cover if any damage did occur to their foundation they would cover it, and they inspected every single nook and cranny of their basement before. Nothing happened. Getting them onboard was the one main thing, otherwise we were fortunate, I think, having all the efforts with the community, and the education, paid off in the end. We had very little. It was *nothing* compared to the conservation easement that came years later, where we encountered a very significant opposition that we had to do a lot to educate and counter. Embrey Dam was a slam dunk from that perspective. The hard part was getting the funding.

00:49:02

Milroy:

You had mentioned \$8 million--

00:49:04

Walker:

Nancy, I want to step in for just a second. Your timing, how are you for time?

00:49:09

Tippett:

I'm open.

00:49:11

Walker:

Okay, 'cause we had promised about an hour or so, if you're okay, I think this conversation's going superb, superbly, well, excellent, we're really hearing some cool things. I know we can edit this, me breaking in, I want to make sure you're good. You guys are good? Because this is great, this is what we wanted. I think we should try to wrap up by around eleven, if we're at that point, that's another twenty minutes, maybe about five 'till, Nancy, to give us time for some wrap up and I want to shoot a couple pictures. Does that work for you?...You're welcome.

00:49:58

Milroy:

So you had mentioned \$8 million being perhaps estimated cost, or was that the total cost? How did those two, the real versus the estimated cost compare?

00:50:07

Tippett:

Yeah, they did it within budget. Well, it might have gone up to ten million, I'm not quite sure. There were some issues with dredging that added on. I can't remember the details on that side, but it was either eight or ten. The next thing that happened after the dam, they dredged as we had requested but they dredged a new channel on the I--on river right, and the river was quite wide. They dredged a new channel expecting the river to go back to its old size. But when the

dam was blown and everything drained out, what we were left with was a huge area of unconsolidated sand and silt on river left [00:51:00] that covered several acres. It was not stabilizing, it was not gonna stabilize, and this was sediment that we had really wanted removed anyway, and they had only removed it in the channel on river right. So we pushed really hard, and wrote letters to the Corps, and things got a little testy for awhile, but then the Corps finally agreed to come back and remove that sediment that's now ground sediment, it would have been dredged sediment, now it's on the ground and it's five feet deep or in some places a lot deeper, on all of river left. So they spent a lot of effort with the contraction, that's I think how the price may have gone up some in the end. Doing what looked like earth moving, getting rid of all that sediment. Because it was unconsolidated, sand and loose stuff, it just wasn't gonna, it was washing away with every rainfall event. Literally it was just calving off like icebergs calve off the ice sheet, every time the rain came up, and so we really pushed on that to get that sediment removed. So they brought in this mega, mega excavator with the huge buckets and the huge dump trucks, and spent a month out there just scooping out the sediment that would have otherwise gone downstream with future storm events. But there was still sediment, that obviously didn't get cleaned up, and the stretch of the river between Embrey Dam and City Dock, in particular, got a pretty substantial pulse of sediment, several inches that got deposited right after the dam, and it took a few years for that to get flushed out, and in some places it has filled in holes that used to be there, and it's shallower than it used to be, today.

00:53:18

Milroy:

To come to the end of the interview, I guess I'd like to consider, given your years with FOR, and spending time on the Rappahannock River with this project, how's the river changed since you first encountered it, and since the removal of the Embrey Dam?

00:53:37

Tippett:

Right here, where the dam is no longer visible, that's a striking change. That area that used to be, that had been underwater since 1854 is now a stretch of some of the best rapids [00:54:00] on the river, and really scenic. For that stretch of river, it changed enormously. Otherwise, not a lot, largely because we've got thirty-one miles of river above Fredericksburg that's in permanent conservation easement. That's not changing. And in the city itself, not too much. Not a whole lot of changes other than that. The removal of the dam was probably one of the most significant ones, significant things that happened. I mean, we can talk about things like downstream, where there's development happening on the shore for retirement communities and stuff, that's changing the face of the river a bit. There's been a change in the fish community, we know that fish are getting up now, to the far reaches. It was really amazing, I think it was a year after or two years after the dam came down and we got a call from a friend of mine at the soil and water district who was standing at the gate, the water-gate to Lake Pelham in Culpeper. He said "I'm standing here at the gate and there's all these fish, they're bumping their heads against the gate, trying to get into the lake. I've never seen this in my life, this must be the fish that have been wanting to come upstream." Of course, all the Game and Inland Fisheries have confirmed

that as they've done the sampling. It took longer than they expected for a lot of the fish to get upstream, but they're getting there. How that ecology's gonna play out, the change in that, is still something to be seen, is still working out.

00:56:15

Milroy:

What are your current and future hopes for Friends of the Rappahannock?

00:56:21

Tippett:

Well, for the organization I think the most important thing is that it can continue to be a proactive force for the river. That the organization keeps its sights on the issues that are affecting the water quality of the river and get in front of them, and try and be a force for positive change. For the longest time that's been stormwater, and that's where I put a lot of my emphasis. There's issues coming up like fracking, that are another issue where FOR's been out in front of the issue. [00:57:00] Maintaining, and I would say this for any non-profit, is to maintain a strong vision for what you want to be and focus on that, and be careful about trying to become everything to all people, because it's really easy for an environmental group, for a group that is in the environmental arena, to want to start being all things environmental. I think what's helped us at FOR is to, and sometimes it's been hard for people to hear this, we have to keep a relatively tight, it's almost like having vision restrictors on. That our role is the river, and/or things that relate to the river. We do that because there is nobody else focusing on the river. You can very easily become spread out into just becoming a generic environmental group, and the challenge with that is when you have limited staff resources you end up being thin across a lot of areas instead of deep in a couple areas. That's one of the things I hope that FOR continues to do, is to be deep and focused specifically on issues that relate to the river. What was the other half of the question?

00:58:33

Milroy:

Future hopes?

00:58:35

Tippett:

For anything?

00:58:36

Milroy:

Both the river and the organization. I think you've addressed that.

00:58:40

Tippett:

That was for the organization. For the river, I think, we're at a potential positive tipping point with the bay and the river as decades of work and investment in getting nitrogen and phosphorous down are starting to pay off, all of a sudden in the past three years oysters are coming back, and that's like the canary. Once those oysters come back we're gonna have a positive feedback loop that cleans up water, gets more oysters, which cleans more water, which gets more oysters. I think one of the best things that we can do is facilitate a healthy recovery of shellfish in the Rappahannock, because probably more than any single thing that will help the estuary reestablish its ecology. Concurrent with that is making sure that we continue to build a constituency for the river and make sure that this organization is the place where people go when they care [01:00:00] about the river, from the headwaters to the mouth of the river, that FOR is the one that's there leading when it comes to restoration and education and advocacy.

01:00:18

Milroy:

Matt or Woodie, do either of you have any questions that you'd like to know from Mr. Tippett?

01:00:25

Walker:

No, thank you.

01:00:26

Milroy:

Well, sir, thank you for your time. Any last [words? Remarks?]

01:00:33

Tippett:

I'm glad you're doing this. Thank you for inviting me.

01:00:35

Milroy:

Thank you.