

Virginia's Roanoke Valley History

European settlers first discovered the Roanoke Valley, nestled between the Blue Ridge and Allegheny mountains at the southern tip of the Shenandoah Valley, over three centuries ago, but the history of the valley stretches back thousands of years, to geological events that created this vast expanse of ridges and valleys and left alternating limestone and salt deposits in an area that would later come to be known as "Big Lick." Animal herds came first, mostly bison, elk and deer, and then Native American hunters, particularly the Toter tribesmen.

The earliest written evidence of the Roanoke Valley dates from 1671, but local historians date the first settlements to 1740, when Mark Evans and Tasker Tosh claimed the best land.

The Roanoke Valley, like most of the early frontier, was not for the faint-hearted. The salt marshes that once made the valley a fertile hunting ground were also the cause of the countless deaths. Militias were a necessity against frequent Native American and British raids. General Andrew Lewis, who distinguished himself in the Battle of Point Pleasant in 1774, purchased land in then-Botetourt County (later formed into Roanoke County) that eventually encompassed the present limits of the city of Salem.

Roanoke had less auspicious beginnings, although it soon became the busiest commercial center west of Richmond. Once a rough, tawdry outpost along the Wilderness and Great Roads, it was never more than a bumble collection of hamlets, including Gainesborough and Big Lick, until Frederick J. Kimball brought the railroad to town in 1881.

The 19th century was the Age of the Iron Horse. Several railroad companies, including the Virginia & Tennessee, the Atlantic, Mississippi & Ohio and the Shenandoah Valley Railroad, were established in this area around the time of the Civil War, but they soon went under. Several Philadelphia financiers, led by Kimball, realized, that with the discovery of bituminous coal in West Virginia that money was to be made in Southwestern Virginia, and decided to establish a railroad junction between the north-south SVRR and the east-west AM&O.

When some enterprising locals got wind of the plan, it took a Paul Revere-esque midnight ride to Lexington with a satchel containing \$10,000 to convince the railroad executives to establish the junction in Roanoke. The grateful locals almost renamed Big Lick after Kimball, president of the newly formed Norfolk & Western Railway, but he instead urged them to rename their city in honor of the river that runs through the valley (the name comes from a Native American word, "rawrenock," which refers to white shell beads used to trade.) Thus, Roanoke was born.

As Roanoke was gradually evolving into a bustling center for transportation and commerce, Salem was developing its own unique character. Designated the seat of Roanoke County when it was carved from Botetourt County in 1838, Salem was an important stopping point for pioneers and traders looking to make their fortune along the western frontier. Even today, Salem, which became an independent city in 1968, maintains an identity completely separate from Roanoke. When Norfolk & Western merged with Southern Railway, becoming Norfolk Southern, and moved its headquarters elsewhere, the economic future of the Roanoke Valley was left in doubt. Over the past two decades, however, the valley has rebounded, becoming a center for healthcare, banking, shopping and tourism. With true pioneer spirit, the valley flourished from nothing more than a salt marsh to be the Capital of the Blue Ridge.

A History of Roanoke

Known as the “Capital of the Blue Ridge,” and a crossroads for commerce, the City of Roanoke’s history began in the 1740’s. Mark Evans and Tasker Tosh came from Pennsylvania and took up land near the salt licks where Indian and animal trails crossed in the center of the valley.

For generations those salt marshes, or licks as they were called, had been a gathering place for buffalo, elk and deer, as well as for the Indians who hunted them. The salt marshes were to lend their name to the first village in the Roanoke Valley which started on the east-west path as Gainsborough in 1834, the town soon came to be known as Big Lick.

Roanoke County was formed out of Botetourt County in 1838m with a county population of approximately 5,000. There was an unknown, but certainly not a large, number of slaves in the area. The town of Salem became the county seat and boasted a population of about 200, with Big Lick, connected by a narrow brick road.

The railroad came to the valley in 1852, but missed Big Lick. So, the little town moved to the tracks, taking its name with it. The original town became Old Lick. In 1874, the new center was chartered as the Town of Big Lick.

Seven years later, with the coming of the Shenandoah Valley Railroad, Big Lick was renamed for the river the the county. Roanoke was devised from the Indian word “Rawrenock,” a name for shell beads worn by the Indians used as trade goods.

In 1882, Roanoke became a crossroads for the railroad, which eventually became the Norfolk and Western Railway. This marked the start of the town’s rapid growth, leading to its charter as the City of Roanoke in 1884. Its historic market, which also began in these early years, remains vibrant as one of the oldest in the country and still is an anchor of downtown commerce.

Roanoke City soon became the largest city in Virginia west of Richmond, and still is today with the population of nearly 100,000. It is the center of the Roanoke Valley, a 230,000-population area also comprised of Roanoke, Craig and Botetourt counties, the Town of Vinton and City of Salem. Roanoke also is the largest city off the scenic Blue Ridge Parkway, which offers four Roanoke area exits.

Roanoke is now a center for transportation, distribution, trade, manufacturing, health care, entertainment, recreation, attractions and conventions. Five times in the past decade, Roanoke has been awarded the “All-America City” designation.

The city’s most valuable attractions is its star, a 100-foot-high illuminated steel and concrete structure, which has been a beacon at the top of Mill Mountain for more than 50 years. It stands as a “symbol of friendliness, industrial and civic progress of Roanoke.” Press releases identified Roanoke as the “Star City of the South.” Some nights, the star’s glow can be seen for a 60-mile radius and is in a landmark for night-time aviators. See the Roanoke Star history below.

The Roanoke Star



Indians wandering between the parallel ridges of the Allegheny Mountains named their great valley, Shenandoah, “daughter of the stars.” Here, nestled in this beautiful valley, is the progressive-spirited “Star City of the South” – ROANOKE. And, visible from just about every part of this city is the splendidly illuminated, 100 foot tall Roanoke Star. Below are some facts of interest about our most notable landmark.

Erected.....	1949
Height of structure	100 ft
Height of Star.....	88.5 ft
Weight of steel structure.....	60,000lbs
Weight of Star.....	10,000lbs
Weight of concrete base.....	500,000lbs
Depth of base.....	6.5ft
Visibility from air.....	60miles
Length of neon tubing.....	2,000ft
Current consumes.....	17,500watts
Height above sea level.....	1,045ft

The Star is illuminated every night red, white, and blue.