



Steele's Job: Helping 5.5 Million People 'Catch Up'

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The title is certainly attention grabbing. But I didn't make this up. It was the title of an article in the Durham Morning Herald newspaper in the Sunday edition April 12, 1970. Here's how the article by Herald Staff Writer Ross Scott opened.

WASHINGTON - A former Durham businessman is heading up a unique "partnership" dedicated to helping 5.5 million people in a three-state region 'catch up' with the nation's economic pace.

G. Fred Steele, Jr., one-time Fourth District congressional candidate now federal cochairman of the Coastal Plains Regional Commission serving North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia, has outlined the purpose and goals of the commission and some of the projects in the Tar Heel state.

Following his narrow loss to Democrat Nick Galifianakis in for North Carolina's Fourth congressional seat, my dad received a phone call from then President Elect Richard M. Nixon telling him he learned about the election loss and wanted to bring him onboard his new administration. It was an unexpected call and dad was thrilled. Dad was officially nominated by President Nixon shortly after his inauguration in January 1969 to serve in the U.S. Department of Commerce as the **Federal Cochairman of the Coastal Plains Regional Commission (CPRC)**. The position was an Executive Level V, which required U.S. Senate approval.

Dad's nomination was held up in the U.S. Senate as Democrats drug their feet in and delayed the scheduling of dad's and other Nixon Appointee's approval hearings.

Executive Levels:

Level I – 21 positions (Department Secretaries)

Level II - 54 positions (Department Deputy Secretaries)

Level III - 125 positions (Department Under Secretaries)

Level IV - 346 positions (Department Assistant Secretaries)

Level V – 143 positions (Agency Directors, e.g. DARPA, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Bureau of Mines, National Park Service, Smithsonian Institution, Associate Administrators of NASA, Deputy Dir. Of NSA).

Despite the delays and expectations of challenges from Democrats on the Public Works Committee, dad's testimony only lasted fifteen minutes and there were no opposition. In fact, according to the Winston-Salem Journal (March 26, 1969) Senator B. Everett Jordan, the Democratic committee member from North Carolina, endorsed dad's nomination on the spot

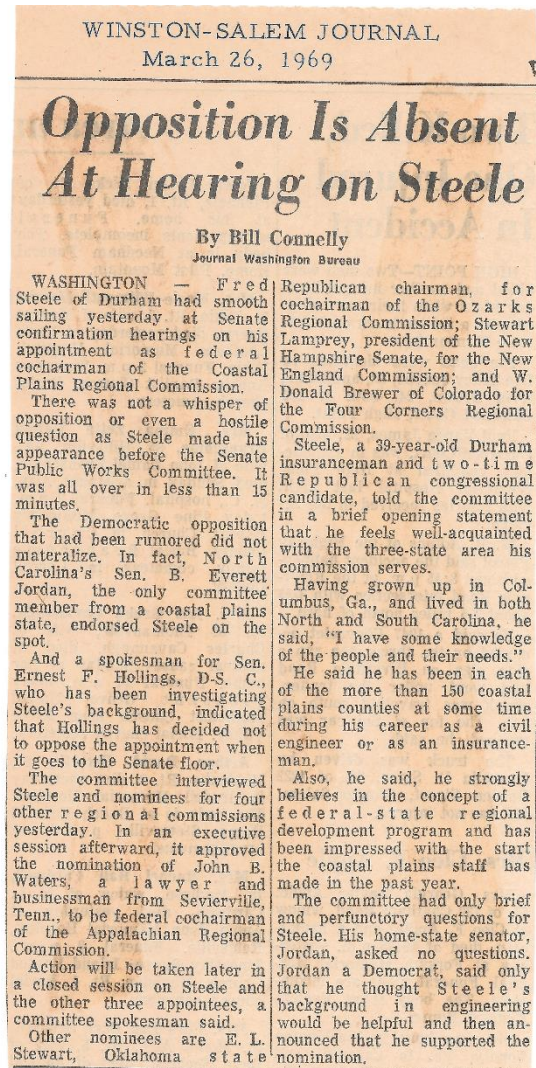
and said "... he thought Steele's background in (civil) engineering would be helpful and then announced that he supported the nomination."

In his opening comments before the U.S. Senate Public Works Committee, dad told the Senators that he was well acquainted with the Coastal Plains region and had been in each of the more than 150 counties included in the region.

Dad was sworn into office on April 11, 1969. His Executive Level V position was the equivalent of a brigadier general in the Army, Air Force or Marine Corps, or lower-half rear admiral in the Navy and Coast Guard. I was made aware of this when I went to pick him up at the Washington National Airport. I was allowed to drive through a gate onto the tarmac and up to U.S. Coast Guard airplane. A Coast Guard Captain (O-6 rank equivalent to a Full Colonel) exited the plane first and descended down the ramp. At the bottom, he turned and came to attention and then saluted as my dad exited the plane and climbed down the steps. Dad returned the salute when he stepped onto the tarmac. I stood in disbelief as my dad was a civilian. When he got into the car, he explained that he was warranted the salute as an equivalent superior officer.

Not long ago, I was going through a plastic storage box that had been in storage for ages and found that it was quite a treasure trove. It included my dad's Flag of Office (shown below) when he was with the CPRC.

My dad's secretary for the five and a half years that he served as Federal Cochairman of the Coastal Plains Regional Commission compiled a scrapbook with more than 100 newspaper clippings and documents about his efforts. Unfortunately, the glue on the newspaper clippings is barely holding after 51 years. My wife JoAnn and I will need to come up with a means of protecting them.





Flag for Heads of Primary Operating Units of Dept. of Commerce

Background

The Commission's primary task is to plan and implement an attack on the economic conditions which cause an annual loss of over \$5 billion in income to the residents of 159 counties of North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia.

----- Coastal Plains Regional Commission Annual Report 1972

Title V of the Public Works and Economic Development Act of 1965 authorized the Secretary of Commerce to designate economic development regions. The Coastal Plains Region, consisting of 159 counties in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, was designated on December 21, 1966. The Commission was formally organized on July 29, 1967. The purpose of the Commission is to develop long-range, comprehensive economic development programs for the region, to coordinate Federal and State economic development activities in the region, and to promote increased private investment.

Source: <https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/finding-aids/fg-89-coastal-plains-regional-commission-white-house-central-files-subject-files>

The Agency's mission was to provide Federal economic development stimulus and educational funding for community colleges and tech schools in an 80,000 square mile area that was lagging behind the whole nation in terms of personal income and economic development.

As illustrated in the map graphic below, the CPRC area encompassed about half of North Carolina, most of South Carolina, and roughly two-thirds of Georgia. It is nearly 80,000 square miles. While the newspaper article cited 5.5 million people lived in the region, the population in 1970 was just over 5.3 million. That's still a very large number of people that were living below the national per capita income level. I was shocked to learn that the national figure was \$3,177¹. The situation in the economically challenged Coastal Plains region was bleak with per capita income \$1,042 less than the national average.

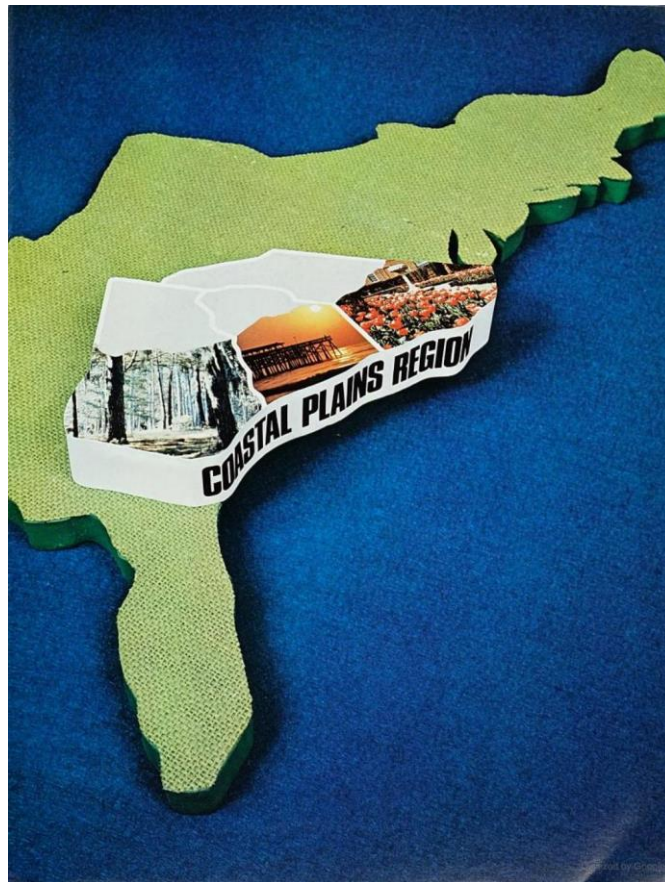


Image from: COASTAL PLAINS REGIONAL COMMISSION ANNUAL REPORT 1972

The 1972 CPRC annual report succinctly spelled out the causes of the lower per capita income.

1. Predominantly low-wage, labor intensive industries
2. Comparatively lower capital investment
3. Workers had lower skills
4. Wages generally lower than the national average
5. Civilian participation rate lower than the national average
6. Underemployment a bigger problem than unemployment

¹ <https://www.multpl.com/us-income-per-capita/table/by-year>

The region's predominant manufacturing industries were textile, apparel, wood products, and food processing. These four accounted for 60% of the manufacturing jobs, which are among the lowest paying in the nation.

Given the region's economic woes, the Commission

In his role as one of the Federal Cochairman of a Regional Commissions, he served as a member of the **Federal Advisory Council on Regional Economic Development (FACRED)**. The council was chaired by the Secretary of Commerce. Dad served under three Secretaries: Maurice Stans, Peter G. Peterson, and Fredrick B. Dent.

During his 5.5-years as the Federal Cochairman of the CPRC, dad's counterparts were the Governors of the three states

North Carolina Governors:

Robert W. (Bob) Scott, a Democrat, 1/3/69 – 1/5/73

James Holshouser, Republican, 1/5/73 – 1/8/77

South Carolina Governors:

Robert E. McNair, Democrat, 4/22/65 – 1/19/71

John C. West, Democrat, 1/19/71 – 1/15/75

Georgia Governors:

Lester Maddox, Democrat, 1/11/67 – 1/12/71

Jimmy Carter, Democrat, 1/12/71 – 1/14/75

I did a Bing search on "Coastal Plains Regional Commission" and discovered several useful links. Per requirements of public record keeping, the National Archives maintains a massive paper collection of government documents. A very small subset is available online. General Records of the Department of Commerce are kept in Record Group 40, which covers the period of 1898 – 1991.

Here are some snippets from the newspaper article *Steele's Job: Helping 5.5 Million People 'Catch Up'*. I have highlighted his direct quotes.

The federal co-chairman acts as liaison between the commission and the federal departments and agencies and as coordinator of the various federally funded programs earmarked for the

region. The three governors make project recommendations for their areas and set state-level priorities for their projects.

According to Steele, a major goal of the commission is to create an equitable distribution of economic opportunity throughout the region and turn the tide of “people migrations” to northern cities and to municipalities where industry and job markets create healthier economic climates.

And since industrialization and job skills must be evenly matched, a top priority for North Carolina has been the funding of community college and technical school programs during fiscal year 1970.

...

Steele emphasized the need for planning in the development of the region and for coordination of projects. He said studies have been conducted in the region to indicate what types of industry could best be located there and findings shared with the State Department of Conservation and Development.

And, he added, the commission is seeking to orient vocational programs toward skills sought by those industries. “I never want it said that we trained an unemployed carpenter to be an unemployed machinist,” he stated.

“We are trying to upgrade technical training as quickly as we can,” he said. “Our (Coastal Plains) economy has been based on agriculture for 200 years. Now we have moved into the industrial revolution. We’re a little behind,” he said.

Still, Steele praises the region for its abundance of “God-given” resources. “The region has good climate, water and people who are willing to work,” he said. “We are not bothered so much by unemployment as underemployment.”

I created a spreadsheet using data from the Commission’s 1972 Annual Report to show how they funded projects 28 projects that year across the three-state region. The majority of the projects are educational institutions, followed by small regional airports and water and sewer systems.

Coastal Plains Regional Commission Annual Budget			
Supplemental Grants-in-Aid FY 1972			
Locality	Description	Amount	% of eligible cost
Greenville, NC	ECU Development Center	\$ 98,200	20%
Kinston, NC	Lenoir Community College (Phase II)	\$ 81,000	42.4%
Near Union, NC	Roanoke-Chowan Technical Institute	\$ 300,000	20%
Southport, NC	Southport Water and Sewer Systems	\$ 144,000	24.5%
Myrtle Beach, SC	Emergency Sewage Treatment Facilities	\$ 268,000	33.5%
Bonneau, SC	Bonneau Fish Hatchery	\$ 100,000	23.4%
West Columbia, SC	Columbia Regional Technical Center	\$ 500,000	66.7%
Beaufort, SC	Beaufort Regional Technical Center Phase II	\$ 500,000	66.7%
North Charleston, SC	Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Technical Education Center	\$ 50,000	80%
Manning, SC	Clarendon County Vocational Education and Manpower	\$ 100,000	16.7%
Orangeburg County, SC	Orangeburg-Calhoun Area Technical Education Commission	\$ 240,000	12%
Dranesville, GA	Tri-County Vocational High School	\$ 200,000	28.6%
Tifton, GA	Henry Tift Myers Airport	\$ 131,250	30%
Fort Valley, GA	Peach County Comprehensive Vocational High School	\$ 150,000	25%
Alma, GA	Bacon County Comprehensive Vocational High School	\$ 52,000	26%
Bainbridge, GA	Bainbridge Comprehensive High School	\$ 150,000	30%
Cuthbert, GA	Randolph County Comprehensive Vocational High School	\$ 60,000	30%
Cairo, GA	Grady County Comprehensive Vocational High School	\$ 150,000	30%
Marion County, GA	Buena Vista Industrial Park	\$ 166,623	52.8%
Baxley, GA	Baxley Municipal Airport Improvements	\$ 46,500	30%
Buena Vista, GA	Marion County Airport	\$ 66,830	25%
Valdosta, GA	Valdosta Comprehensive High School	\$ 150,000	80%
		\$ 3,704,403	
Demonstration Grant Program			
Lumpkin, GA	Westville Historic Handicrafts, Inc.	\$ 60,000	80%
Skidaway Island, GA	Ocen Science Center of the Atlantic Shellfish Mariculture Facility	\$ 300,000	75%
Carteret, Dare & Hanover Counties, NC	NC Department of Administration Multi-Purpose Marine Resources Center	\$ 2,400,000	66.7%
Williamsburg County, SC	SC Advisory Committee for Technical Training Mobile Training Unit	\$ 50,000	73%
Charleston, SC	Charleston County Parks, Recreation and Tourism Commission Rebellion Road Tourism Complex	\$ 15,000	47%
Columbia, SC	SC Advisory Committee for Technical Training Mobile Recruitment Unit	\$ 45,000	56%
		\$ 2,870,000	
	Total	\$ 6,574,403	

The following pages includes a pictures of the four members of the Commission in 1972, info from the National Archives about the CPRC, a copy of dad's Oath of Office, and a page from the Nixon Library showing information about the CRPC.

TO THE CONGRESS
OF THE UNITED STATES:

In Fiscal Year 1972, the Coastal Plains Regional Commission made major strides toward implementation of the *Economic Development Plan* adopted at the start of the year.

The Commission's record of projects and activities related to its role of accelerated economic development in the Coastal Plains Region is one to which we can point with pride.

This document, the fifth Annual Report of the Coastal Plains Regional Commission, is more than a record of accomplishment during a twelve-month period it is also a window to the future for this vast Region and the potential benefits that can accrue to its citizens and the Nation as a whole by an active, meaningful regional program.

Pursuant to Section 510 of the Public Works and Economic Development Act of 1965, we take pride in presenting to you the Annual Report of the Coastal Plains Regional Commission for Fiscal Year 1972.

Respectfully submitted,



G. Fred Steele, Jr.
Federal Cochairman

Members of the Coastal Plains Regional Commission: (L to R) G. Fred Steele, Jr., Federal Cochairman; Governor John C. West, South Carolina; Governor Jimmy Carter, Georgia, 1972 State Cochairman; Governor Robert W. Scott, North Carolina



<https://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/040.html#40.8.1>

**40.8 RECORDS OF THE FEDERAL ADVISORY COUNCIL ON REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (FACRED) AND FEDERAL COCHAIRMEN OF REGIONAL COMMISSIONS
1966-81**

History: Title V of the Public Works and Economic Development Act of 1965 (79 Stat. 564), August 26, 1965, authorized the Secretary of Commerce to designate economic development regions to promote regional development. Each commission consisted of a Federal Cochairman and governors of states in the designated region. FACRED, established by EO 11386, December 28, 1967, and chaired by the Secretary of Commerce, provided coordination, guidance, and review for the regional commissions. Federal Cochairmen of the regional commissions were members of FACRED. Federal role terminated by the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 (95 Stat. 766), August 13, 1981, which repealed Title V of the Public Works and Economic Development Act, effective October 1, 1981.

Textual Records: General records of FACRED, 1968-81.

OATH OF OFFICE

FOR

FEDERAL COCHAIRMAN, COASTAL PLAINS REGIONAL COMMISSION

Under

The/Secretary reads:

Do you, G. Fred Steele, Jr., solemnly swear that you will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that you will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that you take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; that you will well and faithfully discharge the duties of Federal Cochairman, Coastal Plains Regional Commission on which you are about to enter, **SO HELP YOU GOD?**

Mr. Steele **replies:**

I will, SO HELP ME GOD.

April 11, 1969

My dad's Oath of Office.

FG 89 (Coastal Plains Regional Commission) (White House Central Files: Subject Files)

Abstract

These Presidential historical materials are in the custody of the National Archives and Records Administration under the provisions of Title I of the Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act of 1974 (44 U.S.C. 2111 note), and implementing regulations. In accordance with the act and regulations, archivists reviewed the file group to identify private or personal as well as non-historical items. Such items, if found, have been withdrawn for return to the individual with primary proprietary or commemorative interest in them.

Materials covered by this act have been archivally processed and are described in this finding aid. Items that are security classified or otherwise restricted under the act and regulations have been removed and placed in a closed file. A Document Withdrawal Record (NA Form 14021) has been placed in the front of each folder describing each withdrawn item. Employees of the National Archives will review periodically the unclassified portions of closed materials for the purpose of opening those which no longer require restrictions. Classified documents may be reviewed for declassification under authority of Executive Order 13526 in response to Mandatory Review Request (NA Form 14020) submitted by the researcher.

- **Linear measurement of materials:** 2.5 in.
- **Approximate number of pages:** 400

Organizational Note

Title V of the Public Works and Economic Development Act of 1965 authorized the Secretary of Commerce to designate economic development regions. The Coastal Plains Region, consisting of 159 counties in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, was designated on December 21, 1966. The Commission was formally organized on July 29, 1967. The purpose of the Commission is to develop long-range, comprehensive economic development programs for the region, to coordinate Federal and State economic development activities in the region, and to promote increased private investment.

Scope and Content Note

The records consist of correspondence, memorandums, transmittal memorandums, press releases, and reports. Primary correspondents include President Nixon, Maurice Stans, John L. Campbell, **G. Fred Steele**, James Duvall, Burt W. Roper, and members of the Commission. Topics include Federal Co-chair testimony before Congressional committees, Accelerated Public Works Program, the Commission's "Regional Economic Development Plan of August 1971," the sixth meeting of the Federal Advisory Council on Regional Economic Development, revenue sharing, and appointments to and resignations from the Commission. Oversize Attachment 7155 has been processed and integrated into the collection.