Displacing the Dead:
Mapping the Tennessee Valley Authority's Submerged and Relocated Cemeteries

A Digital Humanities Project by Maren Loveland, English Department

Overview

My project presents a study of the cemetery relocation practices and surveys of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in the 1930s and 1940s. The TVA was established in 1933 for the purpose of centralizing energy production and distribution in the southeastern United States. However, one of its lesser-known projects of the twentieth century was managing the relocation of cemeteries that would be flooded by dam and reservoir creation.

To better understand this history, I analyze the TVA's material and photographic archives, as well as their dataset cataloguing the tens of thousands of bodies relocated or flooded along the Tennessee River. My project reads against the archival grain to ultimately theorize climate migration as not only a relocation of the living, but a displacement of the dead. This cultural study uses ArcGIS and Tableau to map, visualize, and imagine the TVA's relocation surveys through three central themes: labor, afterlife, and grief.


Methodology and Tools

To begin answering the questions of my project, I had to analyze the data using Tableau. Through using this data visualization tool, I was able to better understand where, when, and how the TVA was relocating cemeteries. Several of the graphs I created are pictured below, showing the distribution of graves over time and TVA project. After working with the data in this way, I then utilized ArcGIS mapping and ArcGIS StoryMaps to spatially visualize the TVA cemetery projects. By using ArcGIS story maps, I was able to put the numeric data in conversation with the photographic and material archives of the TVA, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the cemetery relocation surveys.

Number of Graves Surveyed Per Year by TVA for Cemetery Relocation
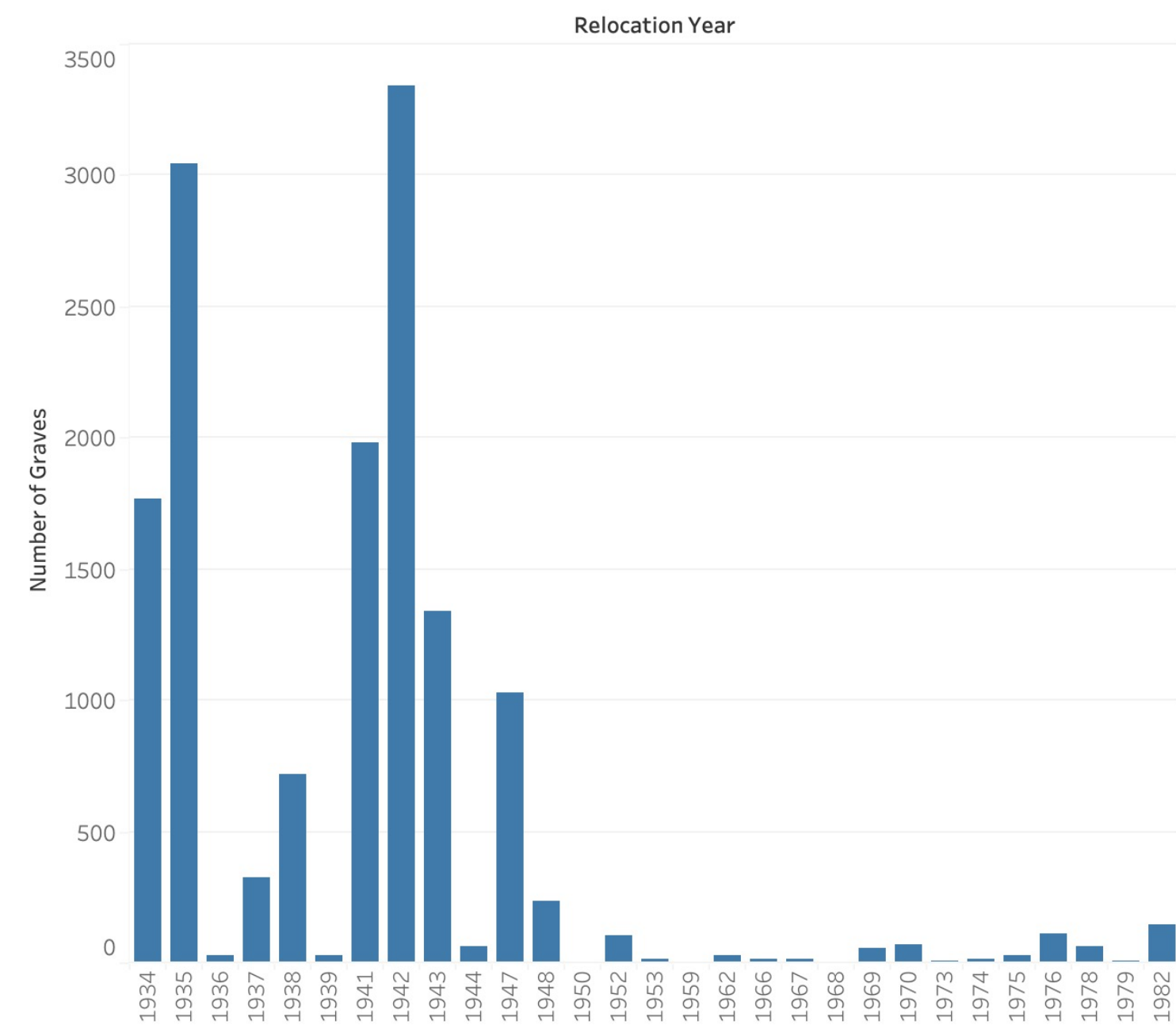
Number of Graves Surveyed per TVA Project
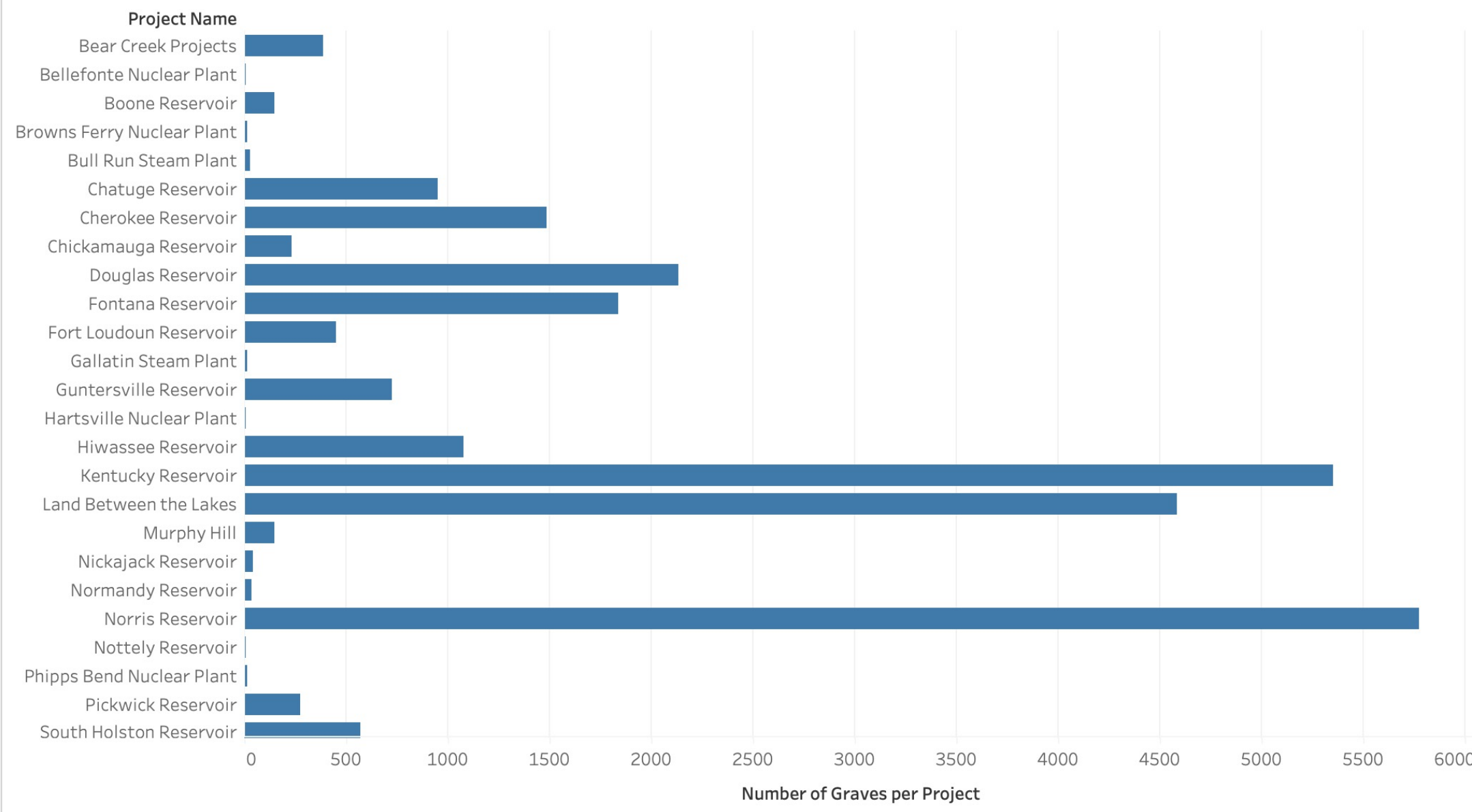
After gathering this data, I realized how the bulk of the TVA's data was produced in the 1930s and 1940s, and the most displacing projects were the Norris Reservoir, the Land Between the Lakes, and the Kentucky Reservoir. This allowed me to better understand my data and narrow my focus while searching through the TVA's immense archives. In doing so, I found one of the most important materials of my project so far, pictured below.
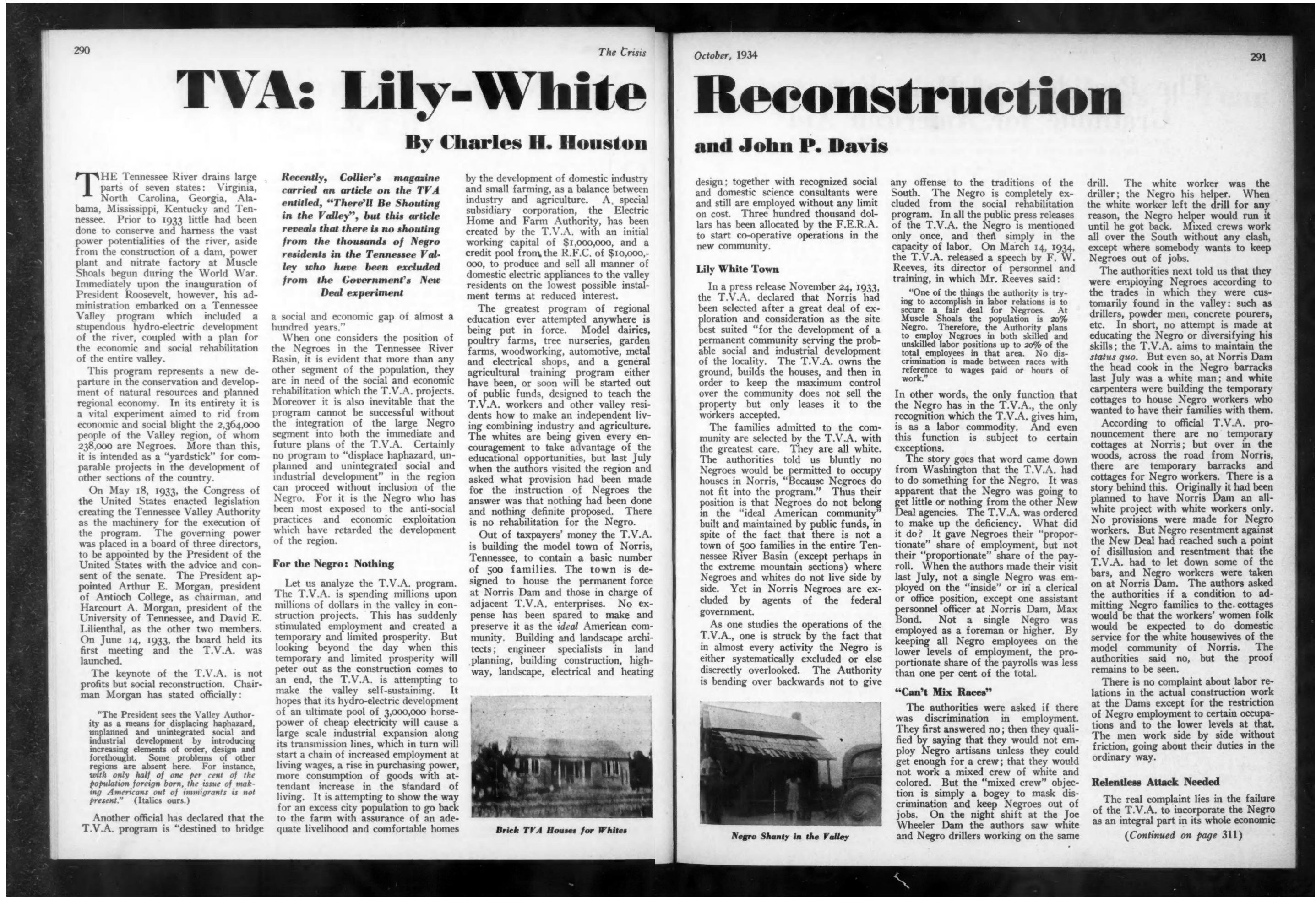
As the TVA surveyed the slave cemeteries of the South, it actively worked to exclude Black workers in the agency, as a 1934 issue of *The Crisis* makes clear. The publication's article, entitled "TVA: Lily White Reconstruction," reveals the systemic racism of the TVA's projects built along the Tennessee River, particularly at the Norris Dam. This exclusionary history undoubtedly affected the outcome of the cemetery surveys, resulting in the flooding of the majority of slave cemeteries.

The repercussions of dispossession by enslavement and racial capitalism, embodied by the TVA in this moment, are actively realized in what scholar Saidiya Hartman observes as the "afterlives of slavery." The TVA's racist exclusion of Black labor begs the question: which corpses have the right to be moved? Whose deaths are deemed worthy of labor? What is the intersection between the rights of the living and those of the dead? Too often, these questions are answered by the values of the living, who project their structures of power onto the dead.

Mapping Displacement

Tennessee Valley Authority Cemeteries (Including Relocated and Flooded Graves)
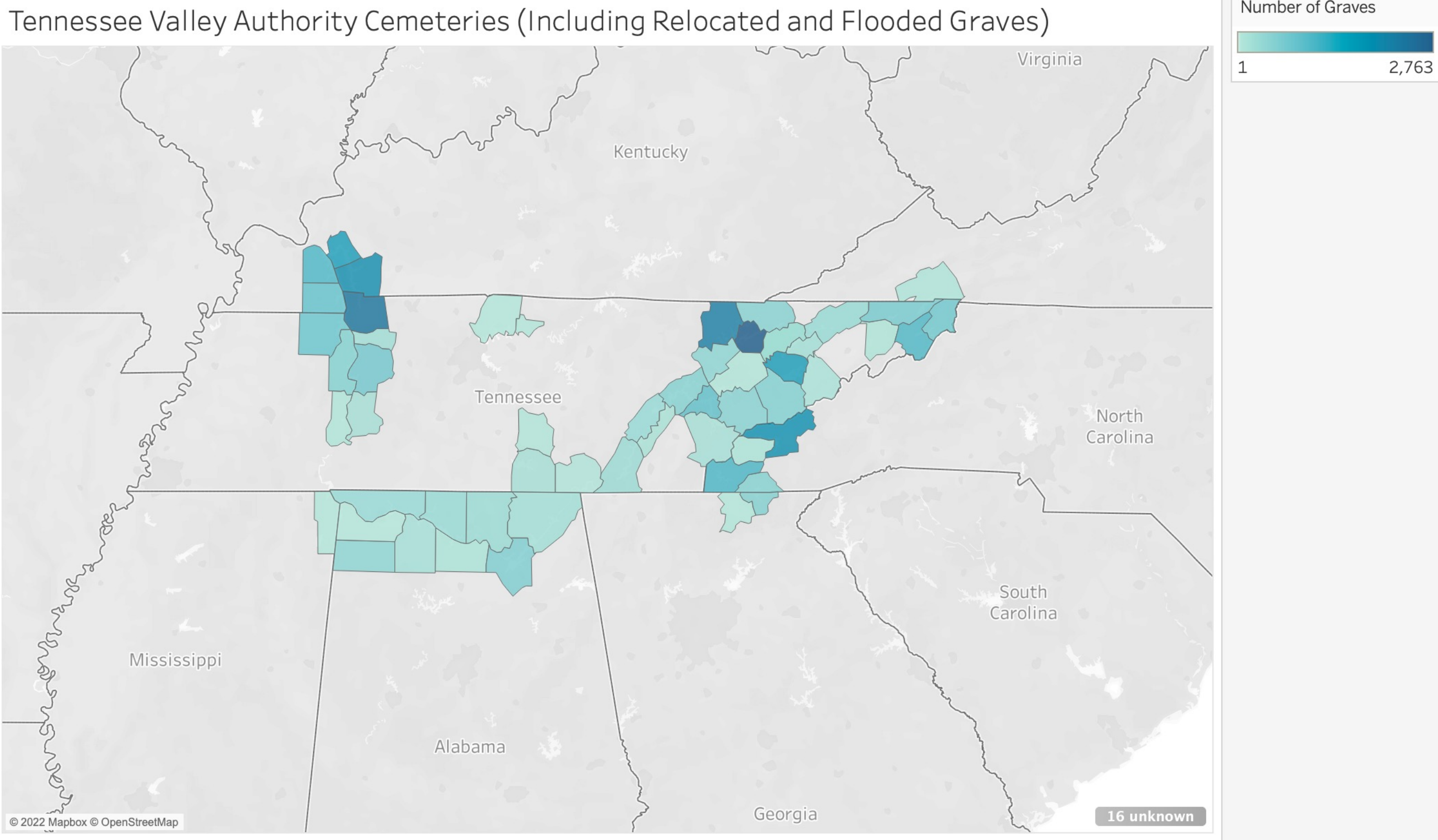
The above map displays a visual representation of cemeteries that were either moved or flooded by reservoir and dam creation. With this visual, it becomes apparent that while the TVA was working across state boundaries, their infrastructural labors generally clustered around the Tennessee River.

As I continue to progress my research for this project, I hope to specifically map the graves of enslaved and Native American individuals to track their displacements in the wake of settler colonialism and the nuanced politics of climate migration within infrastructure landscapes. This research avenue will be something I continue to pursue in the future as an essential part of my dissertation.

References

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Acknowledgements