

CANAL FEVER

In 1809, as a result of a petition on the part of two York District men, James Harris and James Hutchison, and a Lancaster District resident, Dr. Cunningham Harris, the S. C. Legislature passed a Public Act, Title 14, as follows:

"Be it therefore enacted, that James Harris, James Hutchison and Cunningham Harris, shall be, and they are hereby appointed commissioners, with full power and authority, by means of dams, locks, canals, and clearing the obstructions now in the way, or by any other means or ways whatever, by them deemed most adviseable and proper, to clear out and make navigable the said Sugar Creek, from Harrisburgh on said creek, to the junction of the same with the Catawba river."

Harrisburg was a small settlement on the Lancaster District side of Sugar Creek that boasted an academy, a grist mill, a store, and a few houses. Many old York plats show the "Road to Harrisburg."

Many of the creeks were surveyed and assessed as to their ability to carry boat traffic. Robert Mills, the architect who served as state engineer for a period, thought that dredging some of the creek bottoms and keeping the banks clear cut would be sufficient to float bales of cotton to the Catawba and thence on to Charleston.

Before railroads came into existence (the first was built in England in 1825), farmers of the upcountry had one only way—wagoning—to get their produce to Charleston, the nearest seaport. The home-made crude wagons were unbelievably noisy. There was no axle grease, only tar which would dry out before many miles were passed. Squealing wheels could be heard for a mile or more.

Plantation owners dreamed of floating their produce downstream to Charleston. Flat boats would be able to transport much more than wagons and the cost would be far less.

So it was that entrepreneurs, like James Hutchison and the two Harrises, set out to get a franchise from the state in order to build the requisite dams, locks and canals. Hopes were high and, in a spirit of optimism, it was assumed that eventually a network of canals would benefit all.

There were few craftsmen in this area who had the needed building skills. The S. C. Board of Public Works advertised for skilled labor and eventually got most of it from abroad.

The Fishing Creek Canal, in Chester County north of Great Falls, was built in 1817 by the contractors, Briggs and Thomas. Thomas Caine, a native of Liverpool, England was hired to do their smithing. While most of the imported craftsmen left when their work was completed, Caine stayed and did smithing for local farmers until he died in 1883, nearly 90 years of age.

Of excellent construction, the Fishing Creek Canal was one of a series of four canals north of the Great Falls. A better known site is the Landsford Canal. One of the reasons it survives is due to the skill of the builder, Robert Leckie. Leckie, a Scotsman, who was both an engineer and stonemason, experimented with what he called "hydraulic cement," a mortar which turned out to be effective under water. The Landsford Canal has withstood the ravages of nature for over 175 years.

Canal fever turned out to be a delusion that lasted from 1791 to the mid-1820s. Most of the streams were too shallow for long periods in the year. The Great Falls of the Catawba River proved to be impossible to tame before this century when it was dammed in order to produce electricity.

Even if the Harrises and Hutchison had managed to clear Sugar Creek (and there is some evidence they did, at least for a time), there never was a way for them to effectively float goods all the way to Charleston.

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