

# Lock keeper's house holds the key to history of canals

*The original building mirrored architecture used for waterways*

In recent years a great deal of attention has been paid to the Rock Spider Lily and the remains of the Landsford Canal on the Catawba River and deservedly so. But there is another attraction at Landsford that is seldom mentioned but interesting if one knows its origins.

The lock keeper's house at Landsford Canal State Park was built in 1823 downriver closer to Great Falls. Designed by architect Robert Mills, the house combined stone masonry and the arch in the lock keeper's house along the same lines as the canal's stonework.

The roof and interior of the building had collapsed by the time Carl T. Julien photographed the house at its original site. He made this observation: "Who but Mills would have expended so much care in the construction of so simple a thing as a lock keeper's cottage? The window ledges are not slabs of stone set on other masonry, but are a part of the larger blocks of stone on which they appear to rest. Large blocks were cut, or sculpted, to have the appearance of smaller blocks."

In the early 1970s, the stones were moved to the park and a new interior and roof built. Mills had designed four canals of the Catawba-Wateree system. This is the only remaining lock keeper's house. It now serves as a museum.

The lock keeper used mules to pull the boats through the canal rather than using poles. It is said that this was to save wear and tear on the river's fragile bottom.

Robert Leckie, a Scottish engineer, got the contract for building the locks at Landsford. Leckie's contract with the state called for a payment of \$1,000 per mile and 35 cents for each cubic yard removed. In November 1824, Leckie protested that John Couty

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who had been appointed engineer over Leckie, was "not an honest man" and was giving him orders that reduced the strength of the canal.

One example given by Leckie was that the "foundation of the Lock at the stone Bridge was solid rock, and said John Couty caused me to blast out between three and three feet six inches of said rock and substitute in its place puddle [brick mortar] and build the heavy masonry on it; and the walls of said Lock settled considerably..." Couty struck \$2,745.65 from Leckie's bill.

A bitter man, Leckie left Landsford. The state still owed him \$3,239.95 and he saw no hope of getting his money.

The Landsford Canal, according to Mills, was two miles long with five locks. It was not the first in South Carolina. The Santee canal was begun in 1793 and finished in 1800. It was 22 miles long with 10 locks. The Santee took care of goods from Columbia to Charleston. The Upstate rivers were tougher and Rocky Mount near the town of Great Falls proved to be the toughest of all.

There was an attempt to bypass the Great Falls at Rocky Mount by digging the Fishing Creek Canal which was started in 1823 under the direction of John McCullough, contractor. The fall was 121 feet and would have required 15 locks. It was never completed.

There were all sorts of problems. The large gates were made of untreated wood. Spring flood waters were a hazard. Droughts left water too low for the boats to negotiate the canals. Owned and operated by the state, the canals proved very costly to maintain. Mills had sold the legislature on the idea that the canals would reach all the way into the Midwestern states and be highly profitable. At the time the state budget was \$250,000. The legislature appropriated \$1 million for the canal project.

South Carolina's canal system was intended for transportation of upcountry goods, mainly cotton, to the port of Charleston. As the canals were under construction, railroad locomotives and rail systems were being built in England. Much cheaper and capable of going in any direction, the railroad was less expensive and quickly became the transportation of choice.

Louise Pettus is a retired Winthrop University history professor. Her column appears Sundays.

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