

## FORT LAWN, CHESTER COUNTY

A hundred years ago when the only conveyances were buggies and wagons (or railroad cars if one needed to go long distances), every 5 to 10 miles there were villages. Situated at a crossroads or next to railroad tracks, the village was likely to have a store or two, a cotton gin, sometimes a train depot, maybe a boarding house and a small cluster of homes. The village was the service arm of an agricultural community.

In Chester county near the Catawba river and not far from Fishing Creek, there was a community pre-dating the Revolutionary War. During the Revolution the Gastons, Walkers, Stinsons, Andersons and Culps had been doughty fighting Whig Scotch-Irishmen.

The Presbyterians had built Fishing Creek church. The Methodists had placed the first Methodist church in Chester county there, calling it Methodist Union. The church and graveyard were abandoned by the 1850s. The Methodists built El Bethel near Landsford and Roddey Town.

Much of the land around what became known as Fort Lawn had been owned by John A. G. Walker. After Walker's death in the late 1870s, his widow divided the 1,000-acre plantation into lots and streets into a town she intended to be called Walkerville. She offered alternating lots to the Cheraw and Chester Railroad Company as an enticement for the railroad to lay track through her property. The railroad laid the track.

Mrs. Walker had one daughter. The daughter married a Dr. Fort who lived in a large home with a long grove of trees and spacious lawn that stretched down to the tracks. Legend has it that the conductor ignored the name Walkerville, and would, instead, call out: "Everybody off for Fort's Lawn!"

Unfortunately for the town, the business district suffered periodic fires. The stores of Fort Lawn, as elsewhere, were generally built of wood and either wood-burning stoves or careless handling of matches and kerosene were likely to set off fires that spread quickly from one building to the next. Fire departments, even volunteer ones, did not exist.

When the Southern Power Company built a dam at Rocky Mount in 1907, it signaled the growth of the town of Great Falls and took away the potential of growth from Fort Lawn. The small, sleepy town of 2 or 3 stores on Highway 9 remained just that for a half century.

In 1959, led by the town's mayor, Robert G. Lesslie, the Fort Lawn Area Development Committee was formed. The committee planned big. After deciding that they must bid for industries to come to the area, the committee assembled information on all of the possible industrial sites in the area. Besides Mayor Lesslie, committee members Frank Kirkpatrick, W. R. Rhue, J. Coit Wilson, W. H. McFadden, C. E. Thraikill, Lester Leonhardt, Jimmy Nunnery and Bill Revels, worked with enthusiasm to get the ears of powerful people. Lt. Gov. Burnett R. Maybank was one of those who listened.

The hard work and enthusiasm paid off. One year later the Morrison Machinery Company had bought land on Highway 9 near the river. Morrison manufactured special textile machinery of the sort that Springs Cotton Mills could use in its new Grace Bleachery.

Also in 1960, the state highway department was persuaded to "straighten out the Highway 9 and Highway 21 intersection, a terrible traffic hazard, and built an overpass over the Lancaster and Chester Railroad (known as the L&C after Leroy Springs' 1896 purchase of the old Chester and Cheraw line). A popular restaurant, The Wagon Wheel, and a motel were built.

Then the big ones came in 1962 and shortly thereafter. The Springs Cotton Mills, headed by H. W. "Bill" Close, son-in-law of the legendary Elliott Springs, announced the building of a large warehouse complex. The same day that the warehouse was dedicated, ground was broken for a textile mill called the Elliott plant. Close announced that this would be followed by the Frances Plant.

The Springs' plants would employ 650 people—a number that would have been astonishing to the small town of Fort Lawn a decade before. A big talking point in recruiting workers was that all of the plants were air-conditioned. In three years more than \$18 million dollars had been spent on new industry.

Someone calculated that the large warehouse complex alone would hold not only \$19 million dollars worth of cotton at one time, but that the size of the warehouse was such that if one allocated 2 sq. ft per person, the building would hold the entire population of Chester, York and Lancaster counties. (At that time the 3-county population was 149,000.)

The town of Fort Lawn expanded to both sides of Highway 9. New houses went up. The town even laid out a tennis court (something the old-timers would never have dreamed of).