

River's falls may be silenced, but memories are still great

Dams have now quieted mighty roar of narrow section of Catawba

Lying between Chester and Lancaster counties is an area that has, for more than 200 years, attracted sightseers, land speculators, fishermen, mill operators, canal builders and the United States Army Corps of Engineers. The center of all this attention is known as either the Catawba Falls or the Great Falls.

In his "History," written in 1786, Dr. David Ramsay described the Catawba Falls as "grand and curious." Robert Mills wrote about the falls and labeled them the "Great Falls" on the Chester District map, printed in his 1826 Mills' Atlas.

The Great Falls were created by an extreme narrowing of the Catawba River channel that forced the water through a deep, rocky chasm. Huge piled boulders narrowed the width of the river from 180 yards to about one-third the distance.

There were no perpendicular falls but within a length of about 150 feet there were 20 falls cascading over a twisting and turning path. The churning waters foamed and sprayed across the entire river. Gradually, the waters subsided as the riverbed expanded to 318 yards in width.

The vigor of the falls left a great impression. Dr. Ramsay referred to the water's action as the "gloomy horrors of the cliffs," and said, "Nothing in South Carolina is equal to the Catawba Falls." The noise of the falls was most impressive to a generation that had never heard a steam locomotive or a motor of any kind.

The best drawing of the "wild and romantic" falls was made by Benson Lossing and appears in his book, "The Pictorial Field Book of the American Revolution," published in 1852. A Revolutionary War battle was fought at nearby Rocky Mount and soldiers who were in the Revolutionary Battle of Hanging Rock camped at the falls. Gristmills and fisheries were built near the falls before the 1800s. Shad made annual runs up the river in the spring and traps groaned with their weight. Fish fries were one of the great recreations of the time. The fishery at Rocky Mount was the most famous on the river.

The Santee Canal Company was chartered in 1786 with the express purpose of navigating S.C. waterways. The fever for canal traffic grew after Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1794 and cotton became so valuable. Upcountry cotton planters and their representatives continuously sponsored bills in the legislature for canal projects.

Building a canal around the Great Falls of the Catawba even became a part of the military defense of the United States. President Washington proposed three U.S. arsenals in 1798 - one in each section of the country. Arsenals were planned for Springfield, Mass.; Harpers Ferry, Va.; and the "vicinity of Rocky Mount and the Great Falls of South Carolina."

Army engineers were sent to

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the area and the building of barracks for "Mount Dearborn" began. The Catawba Company, successor to the Santee Canal Company, was to build a canal that would bypass the falls. An armory was planned to manufacture small arms using iron ore from Hill's Ironworks on York District's Allison Creek.

None of the projects was completed. The participants were never able to cooperate, and undoubtedly all were partly to blame. Gen. Thomas Sumter, Judge John F. Grimke, the Catawba Company, the U.S. Secretary of War and local militia units each played a role in the failure. In a few years, the barracks were in ruins and no boat ever circumvented the falls.

When Lossing visited the site in 1852, he examined a small mill, owned by Daniel McCullough,

which turned out cotton yarn. The yarn was used on home looms to make a rough cloth. Rocky Mount was in the path of Sherman's march and the McCullough cotton mill was burned and never rebuilt. For six days, Sherman's troops used the site as a base from which to ravage the countryside.

The Great Falls were not harnessed until the 20th century when hydroelectric plants and dams were erected along the Catawba River. The first dam, built by Southern Power Company, later owned by Duke Power, was built at India Hook near Rock Hill in 1904. Two years later, James B. Duke, Dr. Gill Wylie and William States Lee dedicated a dam at Rocky Mount. The Great Falls of the Catawba were finally subdued - along with the old dream that some day upcountry men could navigate without obstacle to Charleston.

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