

Harnessing South Carolina's Great Falls Was No Easy Task

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

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

Rocky Mount was the most famous on the river.

The Santee Canal Company was chartered in 1786 with the express purpose of navigating South Carolina waterways. The fever for canal traffic grew after Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1794 and cotton became so valuable.

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 United States arsenals in 1798, one in each section of the country. Arsenals were planned for Springfield, Mass., Harper's Ferry, Va., and the vicinity of Rocky Mount and the Great Falls in South Carolina.

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 incline. The churning waters foamed and sprayed across the entire river. Gradually, the waters subsided as the river bed expanded to 318 yards in width.

The vigor of the falls left a great impression. Dr. Ramsey 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 Battle of Hanging Rock camped at the falls.

Grist mills 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

Army engineers were sent to 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 in York County.

None of the projects was completed. The participants were never able to cooperate, and undoubtedly all were partly to blame. The secretary of war, Gen. Thomas Sumter, Judge John F. Grimke, the Catawba Company, and local militia units each played a role in the failure. In a few years the barracks were in ruins and no boat 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. The factory did not use slave labor, a rarity in South Carolina at that time.

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 this century. Duke Power Company has erected hydroelectric plants and dams along the river. In all, it took three power plants to subdue the Great Falls of the Catawba.