

Federal armory brought changes

LOCAL

THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER

along banks of the Catawba

In 1798, the U.S. government decided to establish three armories to produce weapons for the U.S. Army and state militias. One armory was built at Springfield, Mass., one at Harper's Ferry, Va., and the other at Rocky Mount on the Catawba River in Chester County.

In 1802, President Jefferson's secretary of war, Henry Dearborn of Massachusetts, took on the task of implementing the orders. He decided that 50 acres of land would be sufficient and approached one of the S.C. senators — Thomas Sumter.

Sumter, who had been a Revolutionary War general in this area, happened already to be involved with the Catawba Navigation Co., which had plans for building ca-



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nals to float goods from North Carolina to Charleston.

Sumter had also been one of the major land speculators of the state, and some of his dealings were suspect, not to speak of the manner in which he managed to end up some 25,000 acres of state land intended to be shared with the veterans under his command, and another 90,000 acres he gained through adroit political maneuvering.

Dearborn had said 50 acres was

adequate; Sumter presented the war department with a bill for 523 acres at \$6 per acre, a sum of \$3,138. If the War Department had checked, they would have found that Chester County land deeds showed only one purchase by Sumter and that he paid \$200 for 250 acres. The remaining acreage offered by Sumter was actually owned by the Catawba Navigation Co.

Col. Christian Senf, state engineer, lived at Rocky Mount. He was given the authority to lay out the plans for the War Department. It also happened that Eli Whitney was in the state persuading (successfully) the S.C. legislature to buy his patent for the cotton gin. A few years before, Whitney had greatly impressed President Jeffer-

son with his demonstration of interchangeable parts for rifles. Whitney agreed to help Senf.

Three major buildings were planned for the armory. The principal one was 80 feet by 30 feet and had two stories. There also was a building to house the trip-hammer and another for "stocking, finishing, and polishing." In addition, there was a powder magazine and a 100-foot by 32-foot building for "reception of muskets."

Barracks were built for 50 workers and a guard of 20 men. A two-story house was built for the superintendent, the paymaster and the storekeeper. All of the buildings were of stone or brick.

The buildings were on a bluff with a great view up and down the

river. The magnificent falls, which were then called Rocky Rapids, were 198 feet in height.

A quarter-mile north, where the channel narrowed, a man by the name of Gill had a small mill. At first, Gill's slaves provided much of the labor for the armory, but he and Senf soon disagreed over water rights, and Gill withdrew the slaves. White men from the countryside and a number of Philadelphians replaced the slave labor.

The \$5,000 given Senf for construction was soon eaten up in labor costs. Also, many of the Northern workers got sick and some died.

In 1806 Senf was replaced by representatives from the Army

Corps of Engineers. A few months later Senf was dead at 53. Capt. Alexander Macomb, one of the corps' best young engineers and future head of the corps, was brought down from West Point to complete the task. Sixteen officers, including a number of West Point men, came with Macomb.

During Senf's time the spot had gone by the name of Rocky Mount, the hamlet where Senf lived. In 1807 Captain Macomb changed the name from Rocky Mount to "Mount Dearborn on the Catawba, U.S. Establishment."

To be continued.

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