



South Carolina's Story

The making of a state

By Ron Chepesiuk and Louise Pettus
of the Winthrop College faculty

May 5, 1983 - July 1, 1983

"Mills' Atlas" was the result of a state-supported project that personally involved three governors of South Carolina and took 10 years to complete. Today, original copies are so highly prized that they are often sold as works of art. The original title was "An Atlas of the Districts in 1825."

In 1815, a professor of mathematics and astronomy at South Carolina College, George Blackburn, impressed the General Assembly with a persuasive argument. Blackburn said that South Carolina was the only state that had no large-scale map. He proposed a map that would "answer all topological purposes of the geographer, the historian, the legislator and the statesman..."

The members of the General Assembly nodded approval. The War of 1812 had just ended and the professor's reminder that accurate maps are essential in wartime struck a chord of understanding.

By a joint resolution, the Assembly voted \$5,000 for a statewide survey. The Assembly further directed that Gov. David R. Williams head the project. The governor selected Professor Blackburn to make the astronomical observations necessary to establish latitude and longitude. Ten months later, Blackburn completed the first phase of the project.

The second phase required that each of the 16 districts be surveyed. Gov. Andrew Pickens Jr. personally chose the surveyors for each district. The pay for surveyors was \$700 to \$1,800, depending upon the size of the district and the roughness of the terrain — Sumter District's swamps defeated two surveyors before Stephen H. Boykin finally completed the task.

Five years after the project's initial appropriation, the state government heard a request from Joel Poinsett that the maps be made available for use in laying out a projected state road to stretch from "Charleston to the Saluda Mountains." Poinsett also suggested that the district maps be engraved.

Poinsett's request coincided with the return of Robert Mills to his native state. Mills, who had been a student of James Hoban, the White House architect, is now recognized as the first United States-born architect.

The Legislature, facing a depression caused by a slump in cotton prices and the expense of building the state road, turned the district map project over to Mills. What had been a public venture came into private hands.

Mills spent two years copying and arranging the surveyors' work. Most copies were done in black ink but some had decorative water-colored

borders.

The maps were drawn on a scale of two miles to an inch. If the district was very large, the page was folded back to 22 inches by 33½ inches. For some unknown reason, the inch scale used on the maps is variable from district to district.

Robert Mills hoped to sell 500 copies at \$15 each. The State of South Carolina, after much indecision, finally purchased 80 copies at the discount price of \$14 but private citizens responded poorly to the offer. Mills lost money.

To make the atlas more attractive to buyers, Mills included a section he labeled "Statistics of South Carolina." He described the chief towns, rivers and canals, and listed the governors' terms along with general information on the government, education and religion.

For historians and local history buffs the most valuable information appears on the maps. These show precise locations of places of interest. For example, Chester County historians can locate "Maj. Hill's Distillery," "Terry's Tan Yard," "Pinchback's Mill" and "Lackey's Fishery."

In Horry County there was no Myrtle Beach, Surfside or Cherry Grove. Only "Conwayborough" and Potatoe Bed Ferry" are within miles of

May 12, 1983
Sparks
Englewood

Murrells Inlet.

Mills moved to Washington, D. C., in 1830 and seven years later he informed the state of South Carolina that the publisher was about to destroy the plates of the Atlas because Mills still owed money on the project. The General Assembly promised Mills \$2,000 if he would send either security or 100 atlases.

Mills was able to redeem the plates. "Mills' Atlas" was updated and saved for the continued enjoyment of South Carolinians.