

Action at Rocky Creek recalled

*The tale of a bridge
built by free men – and
their ensuing adventure*

In 1905 a local history buff, L.M. Ford, wrote about his memories of Chester County's Rocky Creek, one of the major sites of the earliest settlements. Writing in the Chester News and Herald, he first told of the construction of a bridge over the creek in 1856.

Aleck Baker, a free black man, contracted to build the bridge. Helping him were his son Hamp Baker and Bill Sanders, also a free black man. The two younger men wished to marry two slave women, Rebecca and Susan Jones, who were owned by Dr. W.E. Hall. They planned to marry in Ohio. They assumed that since Ohio was a free state that would free the two women. Rebecca and Susan's brother Zach helped them.

The party got as far as Charleston, where they were all captured except for Hamp Baker, who managed to escape. Dr. Hall "strapped" the women and their brother. Bill Sanders was turned over to the sheriff who, according to the law of the time, was obliged to administer a strapping

NEARBY HISTORY

Louise
Pettus



over several days. (S.C. law established the number of blows a runaway had to endure, so the sheriff had no choice except that it was considered more humane to divide up the licks over several days.)

Aleck Baker and Bill Sanders finished the bridge in 1858. It lasted for 30 years until an especially strong freshet (severe flood) in 1888 swept away many gristmills on the Catawba River. The 1890 replacement bridge was built on stone pillars by an Atlanta firm for \$12,000. The bridge was also constructed taller in the hopes of saving it from floodwaters that often were able to float away the body of the bridge.

Another of L.M. Ford's stories about the Rocky Creek area dealt with the two distilleries that were there in the period 1800-1840s. Ford said all the stores in the area sold whiskey. Besides the local product, wagons would come down from the N.C. mountains and stopped at people's doors. The mountaineer was usually ready to sell a three-gallon jug of whiskey for \$1 or a 40-gallon bar-

rel for \$10. It was Ford's observation that about every home kept a \$1 bill set aside in anticipation of a whiskey wagon stopping.

Actually, whiskey served as the major medicine of the time and was dispensed rather freely to all members of the family. If children had intestinal worms then they would be dosed with whiskey with enough sugar to make it palatable. Whiskey was the best painkiller available to surgeons before anesthesia was discovered in 1846. A sick horse was given whiskey for whatever ailed it.

Ford said that during the era of free-flowing whiskey some behavioral problems developed. He characterized these problems as "gambling, boxing, wrestling, fist-cuffs, fist and skull fights, throwing bullits and horse racing." It seems that the term "throwing bullits" in the early 1800s was somewhat different from the terms used in sports today.

Ford was referring to throwing small cannon balls found when nearby Fort Dearborn at Rocky Mount was abandoned by the U.S. Army in favor of West Point. Young men would attempt to throw the cannon balls as far as

they could to determine a winner. The aim was for distance rather than accuracy.

Tempers tempered

In the early 1850s, the Temperance Movement that swept over the United States also touched Chester County and considerably reduced the rowdiness that had prevailed for nearly a half-century. As in other places, the organization called "Sons of Temperance" took over. The "Cold Water Crusade" called for prohibition. The Chester Sons of Temperance built a lodge but were not able to sustain their early fervor and died out after a few years.

The Masonic Order inherited the house built by the Sons of Temperance and met there for a few years. Then the house was moved and became a schoolhouse. After a few more years, the Masons moved back into the house.

It was burned by Sherman's troops in February 1865.

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