

COMMENTARY

Politics on a 'shoestring'

■ 1912 plan to make Rock Hill seat of a new county couldn't muster enough support.

On April 10, 1916, more than 200 delegates from communities bordering the Catawba River descended on the State House in Columbia calling for the creation of a "shoestring county." Supporters planned to make Rock Hill the county seat of the proposed Catawba County.

Who wanted a 47th county and what was the motivation?

Opponents charged that James B. Duke and the Southern Power Co.

were at the root of the scheme that would take away the richest portions of Chester, Fairfield and York counties.

The new county's tax-base gain of 13 cotton mills and two railroads was termed "property robbery" by the old counties. From

the skimpy records available, it is not possible to tell if there was any real basis for the charges that the Dukes were behind the move.

The major obstacle for the supporters of the new county was the 1912 "Act to Prohibit the Establishment of Ill-Shaped Counties." The law required any new county to have at least one-one hundred-twenty-fourth of the state's population; to be more than 8 miles from an existing courthouse; be supported by two-thirds of those voting; and to pay their parts of the debts of the counties from which they were seceding.

Of the 400 needed square miles, Fairfield could contribute 276, York 169, Chester 92 and Lancaster probably less than 50. The shape of the new county would be more than four times as long as wide, and the southernmost point of the county would be more than 50 miles from the county seat at Rock Hill. The distance made a number of Fairfield citizens dubious about supporting Catawba County.

Also, it was iffy as to whether

Fort Mill would go along with the scheme. Fort Mill, angry with Rock Hill over Rock Hill's "antics" at a recent county convention, threatened to not cooperate. Without Fort Mill's cooperation, the proponents of Catawba County might not be able to muster the necessary two-thirds vote.

Agricultural interests in general were likely to oppose a second county.

On May 1, 1916, Gov. Manning announced that he was appointing commissioners to work out the details for the proposed Catawba County. He named J. Steele Brice of York, J. Lyles Glenn of Chester and J.E. McDonald of Winnsboro to represent the old counties. To represent the new county were W.B. Wilson Jr. of Rock Hill, R.S. Mebane of Great Falls and R.C. Reeves of Longtown (Fairfield County).

Two surveyors were to be selected, one by the old counties and one by the new. A third surveyor from outside the area was to be available in case of disputes.

On May 25, a suit "Septimus Massey vs. J.L. Glenn" was filed to determine the constitutionality of the Ill-Shaped Counties Act. Judge Ernest Moore of Lancaster ruled June 8 that the act was constitutional. With friends of Catawba County arguing that the act was unconstitutional, the case was immediately appealed and went on to the state supreme court.

Catawba County was doomed when the S.C. Supreme Court declared the 1912 Act to be constitutional, but the idea of secession was not completely dead. In 1950 at a York County Board of Commissioners meeting, the Fort Mill commissioner, A.S. Goudelock, announced to the board that there was a great deal of sentiment in Fort Mill for creating a new county and asked the county attorney to look into the matter.

Nothing came of it.

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Nearby history

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