ORIGIN OF COLUMBIA

The story of choosing a new location for the state capital has several themes: political advantage, financial gain, and, no doubt, justice.

An opportunist who foresaw the inevitable transfer of the capital from Charleston to the midstate was Gen. Thomas Sumter, the tall, gallant, and venturesome patriot dubbed "The Gamecock" by his British foes. As an elected leader of militiamen he became a general in command of a brigade. Most of his troops were from the three-quarters of the territory of South Carolina that comprised the Up Country above the coastal plain. He realized they would be a political force to be reckoned with, and in 1783 Sumter laid out a town where he owned property on the High Hills of Santee. In hopes that it would be selected for the state capital he named it Stateburgh (Stateburg). It turned out that his plans were premature.

The proposal to move the capital from Charleston emerged officially for the first time when the General Assembly adopted a resolution in 1785 to have a legislative committee investigate the feasibility of locating the seat of government at a central point in the state and report back at the next session. The resolution was referred to the Grievance Committee. On February 22, 1786, Gen. Charles Cotesworth Pinckney of Charleston, an obdurate opponent of moving the capital from his home city, announced as chairman that the committee was not ready to report.

The House of Representatives reacted testily and sent an opinion to the Senate that future meetings of the legislature should be held in the most central and convenient part of the state. This response spurred the Grievance Committee, which came back March 6 with a recommendation that Camden be chosen as the site of the state capital. The House rejected the report immediately, 68 to 54.

Before the day was over John Lewis Gervais, senator from the election district of Ninety Six and a former Charleston merchant, introduced in the Senate a bill to remove the capital from Charleston to the site of the future city of Columbia. The measure provided for election by the General Assembly of commissioners who were authorized to lay off 650 acres of land near Friday's Ferry on the Congaree River, on the hill where Thomas and James Taylor resided. They were to divide it into blocks and sell off lots of half an acre each, reserving four acres for state government buildings. The bill also directed that funds from the sale of the lots be used to construct a State House and a residence for the governor.

Every purchaser of a lot was required to build a two-story house, not less than eighteen by thirty feet, within two years or forfeit the land. (When this regulation proved impractical, the building restrictions were withdrawn.) James and Thomas Taylor could reserve two acres each. No name for the town was proposed.

The Taylor brothers, sons of Virginians, had lived since childhood in the Columbia area. Both were among Richland County's wealthiest citizens and largest landowners, increasing their possessions by grants and purchases. The state government sold them undeveloped land at 10 cents an acre. Among their other purchases, Thomas Taylor and Col. Wade Hampton I bought and divided 18,500 acres in Richland.

The census of 1790 revealed that James Taylor was the county's largest slaveholder, but Thomas was more prominent in public affairs. He was a colonel in the Revolutionary War, was wounded by a saber after being captured, and escaped during a march to Camden. Colonel Taylor was a member of the first and second Provincial Congresses, then later a member of the national Congress, and a state senator at the time Columbia was chosen as the capital site. Subsequently, the state appointed him commissioner charged with governing Columbia's affairs while the town was under state rule. He lived until 1833.

When Senator Gervais' bill was brought up in the Senate for second reading on March 9, further disagreements arose. Sen. Arnoldus VanderHorst of Charleston moved to strike out the designation of the Taylors' property as the location for the new capital and proposed instead that the commissioners recommend a site.

Then Sen. Daniel DeSaussure of Charleston suggested putting the capital on Col. William Thomson's Bellville plantation on the west side of the Congaree near its junction with the Wateree River. (Thomson represented St. Matthews and Orange districts in the state Senate.) Sen. David Oliphant of St. George, Dorchester, a physician, opposed the DeSaussure recommendation on grounds that the Thomson place was as unhealthful as Pon Pon.

(Pon Pon, an Indian word meaning "big bends" and designating the South Edisto River in Colleton County, was the popular name of an area where the British established a port called Willtown or "New London" to compete with Charleston. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, preached in the original church there. Willtown faded out of existence for many reasons, not the least of which was that it was mosquito-infested and malarial.)

Colonel Taylor was sickly when he lived on low ground, Dr. Oliphant went on, but after moving to Taylor's Hill he quickly recovered and was now quite well. On the other hand, Colonel Thomson was contemplating leaving his Bellville plantation and moving to Virginia for his health. Which he did. He was at Sweet Springs, Virginia, when he died in 1796 at the age of sixty-nine. Colonel Taylor lived to ninety years of age.

VanderHorst again attacked the Taylor's Hill proposal, suggesting sarcastically that if the new capital was placed there it should be called Town of Refuge because it would be beyond the pale of justice, law enforcement would be weak, the laws would be a laughingstock, and the town would be a refuge of outlaws.

Gervais said he would not mind if the capital became a town of refuge, but not in an opprobrious sense. He would like to see it as a place where the oppressed of every land might find refuge "under the wings of Columbia." This was the first time that "Columbia" was mentioned openly in the legislative debates as the name of the new capital favored by supporters of the Gervais bill.

It was a word that was in popular currency late in the eighteenth century. A feminine adaptation of the name of Christopher Columbus, discoverer of America, "Columbia" was coined by Phillis Wheatley, a Massachusetts slave girl who became the first Negro poet of the New World. She used it in a tribute to George Washington, and it was quickly taken up and repeated in poems of the period—the personification of the United States as a beautiful and heroic woman.

The issue of a capital site was temporarily laid aside. Sen. John Barnwell of Beaufort (St. Helena's) told his fellow 1786 lawmakers that if the suggested name of the new South Carolina capital was derived from Columbus, its adoption would be raking up the ashes of the dead. He preferred a name to honor the immortal memory of a living hero, George Washington. (If his suggestion had been taken, the South Carolina capital would now be sharing the name of Washington with one state, thirty-one counties, fifteen towns and cities, and various other geographical designations.)

"Columbia" received a majority vote as the name preference, and on the final vote to send the bill to the House it carried by 11 to 7. It was the first town or city in America to bear that name.

Arguments over location & name of S.C. capital.

Source: Columbia
J.A. Montgomery

Then the physical specifications of the new capital were laid down, still without agreement as to its location. Dr. John Budd of the House of Representatives said if a new town was to be devised, he hoped the creative act would expressly direct that the streets be at least sixty feet wide to benefit the health of the residents.

His own city of Charleston had narrow streets which many people blamed for the summer miasma. Medical science later proved that the endemic malaria was spread exclusively by the female anopheles mosquito, but this scourge of the Low Country was not eliminated until the discovery of DDT sprays in the mid-twentieth century. Columbia's wide streets may not have improved the health of its inhabitants, but, thanks to Doctor Budd, they have helped avoid some of the bad effects of today's burgeoning automotive traffic.

There were other foresighted legislators as well. Col. Richard Lushington and Commodore Alexander Gillon of Charleston thought that 640 acres was entirely too small for a capital. The House accepted their amendments to increase the size to a square two miles on each side.

Up to this point in the legislative discussions, General Sumter had maintained silence on his Stateburg ambition. Now he made his move. He recalled that when he served on the 1785 committee to examine sites, it found that the Friday's Ferry-Taylor's Hill location was above the center of the state. The place he considered most convenient was Stateburg. He had withheld mention of it because he owned land there, but had concluded that delicacy or modesty might prove injurious to the public. He now stood forward for his site on the High Hills of Santee twenty-five miles east of the site of Columbia.

The Friday's Ferry area was not so wholesome or healthful as claimed, he said, and was surrounded by barren, sandy soil good for producing no timber but pine. Land to the south and southwest was so poor that planters lived ten miles apart. Another drawback was that navigation was extremely bad in some parts of the Congaree River.

To the contrary, he continued, the Wateree River that flows by Stateburg was superior for shipping and navigable much farther into the Up Country. Also, the water was good, the air wholesome, and the land produced better crops. As convincing as his argument was, the general's speech did not sufficiently sway the legislators.

Patrick Calhoun, from his own district, took issue with him. Calhoun thought Friday's Ferry's growth of pine trees was an asset. He had seen a mill with seven saws working at once to convert pines around the ferry into lumber. Furthermore, he believed that Friday's Ferry was more central to the state than Stateburg.

(Tradition has it that Stateburg failed by a single vote to become the state capital, but legislative journals contain no record of such a vote. General Sumter's proposal failed for lack of support.)

Opponents of the Columbia site and name still had not given up. Edward Rutledge and Gen. C. C. Pinckney gave their backing to Senator DeSaussure's previous proposal that the new capital be placed on Colonel Thomson's place at Bellville, more than twenty miles below Granby toward Charleston.

Judge Henry Pendleton of Charleston, representing Saxe-Gotha (Lexington), spoke up for Taylor's Hill overlooking Friday's Ferry.

A vote on the site was taken by the House, and Taylor's Hill won by 65 to 61. But on the final reading an amendment was tacked on naming Bellville as the favored site. The amendment passed, but the Senate refused to concur.

The Assembly appointed a joint conference committee with Edward Rutledge, an opponent of Columbia, as chairman. Rutledge reported March 18 that the committee was unable to agree. When this happened the Up Country members, fearing the consequences of postponing action, deserted Rutledge, shifted to Judge Pendleton's side, and carried a motion to recede from the amendment. The bill favoring "Columbia" for the capital was passed.

It was ratified March 22, 1786, as "an Act to appoint Commissioners to purchase Land for the purpose of building a Town, and for removing the seat of government thereto." The reason given for the removal was that "continuing the seat of government in Charleston is productive of many inconveniences and great expense to the citizens of the State."

Commissioners were "authorized and required to lay off a tract of land two miles square, near Friday's Ferry, on the Congaree River, including the plain of the hill whereon Thomas and James Taylor, Esquires, now reside, into lots of half an acre each, and the streets shall be of such dimensions, not less than 60 feet wide, as they shall think convenient and necessary, with two principal streets, running through the center of town at right angles, of 150 feet wide; which said land shall be, and the same is hereby declared to be, vested in the said Commissioners, and their lawful successors, for the use of this state."

The commissioners later changed the minimum width of Columbia streets from sixty to one hundred feet. And they drew up plans for a capital twice the size called for by legislative resolution. The original intent was to make Columbia one mile square—one mile on each side. This was changed to "two miles square" with the obvious intent of having each side two miles long, which actually gave the capital an area of four square miles (two times two equals four).

Commissioners were to reserve eight acres for public buildings and sell one-fifth of the remaining lots at auction for no less than 20 pounds each. The entire cost of the 2,560 acres of Columbia to the state of South Carolina was 4,727 pounds, 6 shillings, and 9 pence, or about $10,000 in today's currency. This amounted to less than 2 pounds per acre purchase price for the state as compared with its minimum selling price of 20 pounds. Sales were brisk and attracted speculative buyers, including legislators living at a distance.

When the commissioners had sufficient funds in hand they were to build a State House that would include accommodations for courts and public officers such as the secretaries of state and treasury and the surveyor general. They were also to build a residence for the governor. The seat of government for South Carolina would be moved to Columbia as soon as the necessary public buildings were ready.

The original commissioners were Commodore Alexander Gillon of Charleston, Judge Henry Pendleton and Col. Richard Hampton of Saxe-Gotha, Gen. Richard Winn of Winnsboro, and Col. Thomas Taylor, who lived on the site of the proposed town. They immediately went to work.

One of their first moves was to appoint a surveyor. Edwin L. Green in his *History of Richland County* published in 1932, wrote: "John Gabriel Guignard, it is said, was the surveyor in charge of laying out of the new town. His compass is still in the possession of his descendants. It is also claimed that the survey was made by Philip Pearson, first clerk of court of Richland County, born and reared here, long a surveyor in this region. A compass in the possession of the Geiger family is said to have been used in the survey." The sesquicentennial history, *Columbia 1786-1936*, did not mention the surveyor in

the text, but pictured a "compass used by John Gabriel Guignard in original survey of Columbia."

A Charleston newspaper reported on May 1, 1786, that "the new town called Columbia appears in a very forward way of being soon erected"; sawmills were building on every stream in the vicinity, and land prices had already risen 150 percent.

Original Columbia was laid out in a grid of streets having ten blocks to the mile—twenty blocks from border to border. The perfect square was broken only by the Congaree River, where some of the city territory was under water. The first sale of Columbia lots was held "before the Exchange in Charleston" on September 26, 1786. All salable land in the city was not sold by the state government until about 1805. The boundaries were the present Whaley (Lower Boundary) and Harden streets, Elmwood Avenue (Upper Boundary), and the river.

As directed by the founding act, two 150-foot-wide streets ran through the center of the town. The north-south thoroughfare was named Assembly Street in honor of the bicameral legislature. The east-west boulevard was called Senate Street. The first State House was built in the block bounded by Assembly, Senate, Richardson (now Main), and Gervais streets, facing Assembly and the Congaree River. The present grounds extend the area between Senate and Gervais to Sumter Street. The State House faces north in the center of Main Street.

The original street names of Columbia paid honor to a diverse group of men, one woman, and even commodities associated with the fledgling city and its parent state. Streets east of and parallel with Assembly Street were named in honor of general officers of the South Carolina militia. Westward from Assembly Street to the Congaree River, all streets except one were named for Continental Army generals who served in South Carolina. (Gates Street acquired an unsavory reputation as a center of criminal activity. As it was rehabilitated in the twentieth century and respectable establishments moved in, its name was changed to Park Street, the name of its extension beyond the original town boundary.)

By proclamation of Governor Charles Pinckney issued November 2, 1789, state officers were directed to move their records to Columbia by December 1. The State House, a two-story wood frame building with half the first floor in a basement, was ready for the first Columbia meeting of the South Carolina General Assembly, January 4-20, 1790.

Although only four years old, Columbia was equipped to entertain the thirty-one senators and 202 representatives. The village had accommodations for 217 persons and the stabling of 310 horses. Granby across the river offered additional room for 109 persons and 72 horses.

Speculation and opportunity drew a diverse population to the fledgling town. Besides the cotton and indigo planters, cattlemen, ferrymen, and sawmill operators already there, new Columbia attracted lawyers, rope manufacturers, teachers, horsemen, ironworkers, building contractors, carpenters, physicians, druggists, surveyors, merchants, and innkeepers.

Richland County had a total of 1,437 slaves. The largest slaveowner was James Taylor with 160. Wade Hampton I, who had an estimated 3,000 slaves in several states, listed 86 in Richland. Thomas Taylor had 70 and Thomas Rives, 32.

Rives and Thomas Taylor owned taverns. The one belonging to Rives, a Virginia native, was on two lots at the southwest corner of Senate and Richardson (Main), across the street from the State House.

Ordinary life was simple, plain, and neighborly in the village of Columbia, and quiet except for special events. Among these were horse races and the social, religious, and civic assemblies held in the new capital. Sessions of the legislature provided the most excitement each year. In addition to taverns and boarding houses, private homes were generous in their hospitality to the out-of-town lawmakers.

Two months after the General Assembly adjourned, a state constitutional convention was held in Columbia, May 12-June 3. Charlestonians opposed to removing the capital to Columbia, who were still rebuilding the State House that had burned in 1788, made a last-ditch stand to return the seat of state government to their city. The movement led by Charles Cotesworth Pinckney was barely defeated, 109 to 105.

Columbia was written into the state constitution of 1790 as the permanent capital of the state of South Carolina. Charleston converted its State House into a county courthouse. With modifications, it continues to serve that purpose. And Columbia's claim to being the state capital was never seriously challenged again.

120 years after the first English settlement in South Carolina, at Charleston, the capital was moved exactly 120 miles, from Charleston to Columbia.■

Exactly one year after the South Carolina Constitutional Convention of 1790 was held at the new wooden State House in Columbia, the building was used for functions honoring the town's most famous guest, President George Washington. 1791

He noted in his diary that the fledgling state capital was "an uncleared wood, with very few houses in it, and those all wooden ones." The State House was "a large and commodious building, but unfinished."

The president was on a tour of the South, riding in an overhauled coach that he called his "chariot." It was painted white and decorated with fancy designs. The frame and springs were gilded.

"I was accompanied," Washington wrote, "by Major Jackson, my equipage and attendance consisting of a chariot and four horses—four saddle horses besides a led one for myself and five—to wit—my Valet de Chambre, two footmen, Coachman, and Postilion."

Escorted by a delegation of leading Columbia citizens on a two-day trip from Augusta, the president crossed the Congaree River Sunday, May 22, 1791, on a rope ferry—one pulled by hand along a cable that extended from bank to bank.

History does not record where Washington slept in the South Carolina capital. Probably he stayed at Col. Thomas Taylor's inn. Washington's practice on this journey was not to visit in private homes.

p. 3 of Origin of Columbia

Source: Columbia by J.A. Montgomery