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Red clay yields grand element for building – brick by brick

Our red clay makes excellent bricks, but there is no evidence the early colonists considered that. Timber was too abundant to think of building with anything but wood. Conversely, in the Charleston area there were many homes built with bricks that arrived as ships' ballast from England.

Louise Pettus

NEARBY HISTORY

In 1799, James Latta, a successful merchant, was determined to have himself a combination brick store and home in the heart of the village of Yorkville (now York). Like Charleston merchants, Latta built a store, office area and kitchen on the first floor. The family lived on the second and third floors. He also had a piazza overlooking an interior garden.

The foundation of Latta's house was granite. The brick came from England. It is estimated that 750,000 bricks went into the house. All of the brick was pulled by oxen from Charleston to Yorkville on unpaved, rutted roads. There were between 200 and 300 cartloads. The walls are 7 bricks thick. The Latta House was finished in 1803 and is still standing across the street from the York County Courthouse.

A contractor, Thomas B. Hoover, was building homes in Yorkville at least as early as 1820. In 1831 Hoover was hired by William Elliott White of Fort Mill to build White's second home, this one of brick. The home is known today as the White Homestead, property of the Close family of Fort Mill, who are descendants of William Elliott White.

In 1911 the White Homestead was inherited jointly by Elliott White Springs and his father, Col. Leroy Springs. Workmen were hired to renovate the house. They found the original contract made with Hoover. Hoover had used 6 iron brick "moles" (molds), which he rented from Robert Clendenin, a Yorkville lawyer. The clay most likely was local. It is believed that the White Homestead is the second-oldest brick home in York County.

From the 1830s on, there were built more and more brick structures, especially churches and store houses. However, there were still stores of wood construction built on the main streets of local towns up into the 1900s.

Winthrop College came to Rock Hill from Columbia in 1896. All of its buildings have been of brick construction. Used in the first two buildings, now known as Tillman Hall (formerly Main Building) and Margaret Nance (formerly North Dormitory), was brick made on the site by a company owned by W.N. Ashe of Yorkville. Ashe used convict labor, loaned by the state.

In 1906 Ashe built a large brick plant across the Catawba River in Van Wyck next to Seaboard Airline Railway tracks. The plant still operates but is now owned by an English company, Boral.

Fort Mill got a brick company, called the Charlotte Brick Co., in 1901. Land was bought from Samuel Elliott White that was near the Dinkins Ferry and the Southern Railroad tracks about two miles from town. Three of the four owners were Charlotte businessmen. The fourth owner was B.D. Springs, a Fort Mill native.

Dormitories were built to house about 75 workers, almost all of them single. Perhaps more than half were European immigrants. There were a number of stables for the mules, a necessity in early brick plants. The "village" was called Grattonsville. The road to the old site is today called Brickyard Road.

No sooner was Grattonsville in operation than it was struck by a tornado in mid-May 1901. Most of the buildings were demolished, though the machinery was not badly damaged. The Fort Mill Times reported that mules were pinned down in their stalls and that a cow belonging to B.D. Springs was killed. All of the chickens were killed – except the rooster, and he was completely stripped of his feathers.

Oddly, the tornado took away the walls and roof of the brick company's office building but left the desks and chairs in place. The company survived until at least World War I.

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