

## COMMENTARY

# Traders followed ancient footpaths

At least three decades before Charles Town was founded in 1670, Virginia traders had established regular trade routes into the Catawba Indian land.

The Virginia traders, many of them ancestors of York County settlers, followed ancient footpaths from Fort Henry on the James River to the Catawba villages.

The ancient path was called the Occaneechee Trail. It passed through the area we call downtown Charlotte and split at Nations Ford on the Catawba River between present-day Fort Mill and Rock Hill.

The Saluda trail started west of the Catawba on the same route as present-day Nations Ford Road in Rock Hill, which runs into Eden Terrace and winds through Rock Hill until it links with Saluda Street. It leaves Rock Hill on Saluda Street and enters the town of Chester on Saluda Street and makes its way to Saluda, S.C.

The south prong of the Occaneechee Trail extended down the eastern side of the Catawba River to Camden and crossed the Congaree River. A network of trails linked towns and crossroads now known as Georgetown, Monck's Corner, Ninety Six, North Augusta,



### Nearby history

LOUISE  
PETTUS

Dorchester, etc.

Crossing the Savannah River, the trails linked with others until they crossed the Mississippi River.

Catawba pottery of ancient design has been found from Louisiana to Maryland.

Over these trails Indians carried 50 to 100 pounds of deerskins on their backs from as far as 700 miles from Charles Town.

Gradually, the English fur traders organized pack trains of merchants to go into the Indian villages to pick up the skins in greater quantities. Horses carried cloth, guns, ammunition and trinkets to exchange. Twenty to 30 horses, wearing bells to drive off flies, would be led by three or four whip-wielding drivers.

By 1715 there were more than 200 licensed English traders working out of Charles Town. These merchants fanned all over the southeast and dealt with more

than 426,000 Indians who acknowledged allegiance to South Carolina.

Virginia had surrendered her trading empire to South Carolina, but South Carolina would not hold it for long.

The Yemassee War (1715-1717) is attributed to the abuses of traders and to white settlers taking up Yemassee hunting land in the southeastern section of South Carolina. The Yemasseys were soon joined, in a general way, by 15 Indian tribes. One of the Yemassey allies was the Catawba tribe; it is the only instance in history where the Catawbas fought against the South Carolina government.

The South Carolina colony survived the war only because the Indians did not cooperate among themselves and the largest tribe, the Cherokees, switched sides and aided the colony.

In 1738 a slave ship brought in smallpox. White traders carried smallpox to the Indians, who lacked both immunity and knowledge of treatment.

The Waxhaw Indians were so reduced that they no longer existed as a tribe, although it is thought that a remnant were taken in by the Catawbas. The Catawbas themselves were greatly diminished — perhaps to less than half their former number.

By 1740 the Catawbas were closely allied with the South Carolina provincial government. Trade with Virginia became practically nonexistent. By 1750 the deer and beaver had been so thinned that little trade was possible. The days were gone when a Catawba hunter could supply a family with 100 to 200 deer, plus all the turkeys and fish they could eat, for \$25 a year.

The first settlers of this area came down the old Occaneechee Trail from Lancaster, Chester and York counties in Pennsylvania, some of the families having stopped in western Virginia for a generation or more.

The old trail widened to accommodate wagons and became known as the Great Wagon Road to Philadelphia.

There is currently an effort to persuade the U.S. Post Office to issue a stamp that would commemorate the Great Wagon Road in the same manner as a recent stamp commemorating the Oregon Trail.

□ □ □

Louise Pettus is a retired history professor from Winthrop University. Her column appears Saturday.