

When railroads were king

■ In 1852, the first wood-powered locomotive reached Rock Hill, supposedly named for track-laying crew's troubles.

The late 1840s and the 1850s witnessed a great railroad boom in South Carolina. The state legislature was in the hands of men who believed that cotton was king, and they were willing to finance the railroads that would haul cotton to the port of Charleston.

Camden was the market town for Lancaster, Chester and York. Transporting cotton to Camden meant putting bales on wagons and then struggling through the mire or dust of unpaved and nearly impassable roads. In spite of attempts to build canals, the Catawba River was not navigable except for short distances.

Because of the difficulties in shipment, any railroad construction was eagerly anticipated. The first railroad to contemplate building in the area was the Charlotte and South Carolina Railroad, which in 1849 became the Charlotte, Columbia & Augusta Railroad.

The exact route that the Charlotte & South Carolina Railroad should take was the subject of much debate. The most western route proposed would have taken the railroad through the village of Ebenezer (now a Rock Hill suburb), but people objected. They considered a railroad too noisy, too dirty and a despoiler of fine cotton land.

Ebenezer residents proposed that the line should run through the "blackjack" land — poor land for growing cotton because it lacked potash. The move away from Ebenezer created Rock Hill, which was destined to outgrow its older neighbor.

About six years passed before the first wood-fueled locomotive reached Rock Hill in 1852. While



Nearby history

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there is no record of how many cars composed the train that day, it is known that the total rolling stock of the railroad in 1851 was four engines, two passenger cars and 12 boxcars.

The Rock Hill site was the highest point on the railroad between Charlotte and Augusta (Withers-WTS Building on Winthrop University sits on the highest hill in Rock Hill). The story is that the crew laying the track encountered so much rock that the supervisor, J. Lawrence Moore, gave the place the name "Rock Hill." At any rate, the village got a post office by the name on April 17, 1852. Two months later, the first train came to Rock Hill.

A trestle was built across the Catawba River not far south of the present location of the Hoescht-Celanese plant. The first train arrived in Fort Mill on July 4, 1852. Fort Mill, like Rock Hill, had less than half a dozen homes before the arrival of the railroad, and most of those homes were scattered. Rail traffic provided a great stimulus for the growth of both towns.

At Fort Mill, the railroad crews ran into quicksand that turned out to be harder to handle than Rock Hill's rock. It took a tremendous amount of gravel, sand and rock before the track could be laid. Most of the labor came from

slaves. Local slave owners would contract labor for the laying of the railroad by their property. Between the river and Fort Mill, a majority of the earth movers were slave women who carried the dirt in their aprons, according to old accounts.

Fort Mill celebrated the arrival of the train and the Fourth of July with a picnic and all-day festivities. Col. A. Baxter Springs, forefather of the Springs textile leaders, hosted his neighbors with a barbecue. His father, John Springs, was one of the major investors in the railroad. A.B. Springs was awarded the Fort Mill contract to furnish the wood that was stacked in wood racks along the railroad.

One of the early locomotives of the C&SC was "The John Springs." Col. Elliott White Springs, a descendant of John Springs, had a 4-foot replica of that locomotive cast into the weather vane that adorns the Williamsburg-style depot of the Lancaster and Chester Railway in Lancaster. It is an interesting reminder of the days when water tanks and wood racks were essential to the transport of goods in this area.

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