

Bridge over Nation Ford brought railroad

*Work using slave labor
began in 1849, wasn't
finished until 1852*

In July 1849, William Murdock, a Scottish engineer, Horace Nims, a New England stonemason, and about 25 slaves Murdock had contracted from local plantation owners were hard at work building the first railroad trestle across the Catawba River.

Richard Austin Springs (who owned the land the Galleria is presently on) wrote his brother in September: "There has been a good deal of chills & fever amongst Murdock's hands, one of them died at the quarry. ... Murdock has finished one pier and has four others above winter water & working at the 5th. His

COMMENTARY

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hands have nearly all been sick - but one escaped - he was working by himself yesterday as I passed. Murdock is an energetic man. Iron bolts for the bridge has arrived at the Ford."

The ford referred to was the Nation Ford, an ancient crossing. The railroad trestle was to run over the crossing diagonally. The quarry was close by, and Horace Nims was in charge of that work. It was later said that the giant granite blocks of stone fit so closely that a knife blade would not penetrate between the stones.

The railroad began as the Charlotte and South Carolina Railroad, but the name had been changed to Charlotte, Columbia & Au-

gusta, commonly known as the C.C.&A.

While Murdock and Nims were hired by the railroad directly, the laborers and their food supplies were contracted locally. Austin Springs had the contract for the west side of the river. The Fort Mill area suppliers were William E. White and Austin's brother, Baxter Springs. A rough group of cabins known as "shanty town" housed the workers.

When they got across the river, Murdock discovered quicksand that was much more difficult to handle than the hard rock on the west side of the river. As it turned out, the two railroad depots would sit on the spots of the greatest difficulty. The west side depot would be named Rock Hill, and the Fort Mill depot would be located at the spot where quicksand was worse.

At Fort Mill, traditional ac-

counts say that black women with heavy aprons carried dirt and sand to supplement the gravel and rock brought in by the wagon load.

In mid-November 1850, William Murdock headed a letter "Nation Ford, York District" and wrote to Baxter Springs, Esq., who happened to be at his wife's home in Georgia:

"I find on examination that the only good road I can get to Steel Creek Bridge with rock is through an inclosed pasture field of yours. I have opened a Quarry at Flat Rock & my best roadway would be up by Philadelphia Church & down by W. E. White Esqr. & along past Capt. Fullwoods then along the ridge in the old field to your railroad shanties & along the ridge through your inclosed pasture then down the field of dead pines to the bridge..."

Murdock went on to state other

difficulties. There was the problem of erecting stables and shanties (perhaps Baxter would let him have the dead pines for that purpose). The dead pines could also heat the shanties in the winter.

Eventually the work was finished. The first train came to Rock Hill in June 1852. The first train entered Fort Mill on a day of celebration, the Fourth of July 1852. There were all-day festivities, with Baxter Springs hosting his neighbors with a barbecue.

One of the major investors in the railroad was John Springs III, the father of Baxter and Austin Springs. John was then splitting his residence between the Connecticut home of his wife in the spring and summer, and Charleston in the fall and winter.

John Springs wrote Baxter, "I am ready to say Huzzar for the Columbia & Charlotte Rd. I ex-

pect in the future you will not only go to Charlotte by R. R. but to Yorkville. Is it not a great change in the condition of the Country?"

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