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Records reveal Catawbas' scope

■ Villages were spread along east side of river, not confined to tribal lands of later era

For more than 1½ centuries the Catawba Indian tribal lands were concentrated in an area not quite 1 mile square. The tendency is to think that the Catawbas always had villages in the same area, west of the Catawba River, but this is not so.

All of the maps, journals, military records and correspondence from the late 1600s up to the Nation Ford Treaty of 1840 indicate that Catawba villages were concentrated on the east side of the river.

When John Lawson came through this area in 1701 he visited Catawba villages along the east side. He did not name them but he did describe a field of corn and vegetables that stretched for 7 miles between Twelve Mile creek, just north of present-day Van Wyck, and the mouth of Sugar Creek. Later, this great field, which

supplied more than one village, came to be known as "the King's Bottoms."

In 1715 some white traders attacked some Catawbas who were delivering skins to the traders. In revenge the Catawbas killed all of the S.C. white men involved in the skin trade. There is a letter from Gov. Alexander Spotswood of Virginia in which he notes that the Catawbas had sent two children from each of the 14 Catawba towns as hostages. This is the first time that the number of Catawba towns is mentioned in the historical records.

Only 13 years later William Byrd of Virginia, who was involved in the Virginia/Catawba trade, wrote that the largest Catawba town was Nauvasa (also written Nasaw and Nassau) and that besides Nauvasa there were five more villages lying along the Catawba River within a distance of 20 miles.

There is a reference to a Nauvassee being the first Catawba village reached on the Nation Ford Road (originally called the Okeeneechee Trail).

When Carolina split into North and South Carolina, the Catawba Indians were given the option as to

which colony they wished to be a part of. They chose South Carolina, but the N.C.-S.C. boundary line was not drawn around the Catawba Indian village areas until 1772.

By the 1750s Nauvasa was referred to by whites as either "Old Catawba Town" or "Hagler's town." King Hagler was the most famous of all Catawba chiefs in the colonial period. William R. Bradford of Fort Mill in his history of Fort Mill locates Nauvassee on that section of the Nation Ford Road "near what is now the intersection of Banks Street and Fairway Drive."

The colony of North Carolina built a fort near Nauvassee to protect the Catawbas from northern enemies during the French and Indian Wars (1756-63). South Carolina built a fort just north of Twelve Mile Creek at the same time. Some time after King Hagler was ambushed and killed in 1763, it appears that Nauvasa lost its prominence.

Cook's Map of 1773 shows the main crossing of the Catawba River to be just north of Twelve Mile Creek in Lancaster County

either at the spot, or close by, of this century's Ashe's Ferry. The road was then called the Steele Creek Road. It is thought to be the same road that President George Washington followed in 1791 on his southern tour.

Old Indian trails followed ridges (or it might be said that the buffalo, which were present in this area when the white man arrived, tended to follow the ridges and made the paths that the Indians used). Later, the white man used the same trails and widened them and called them wagon roads (the most famous was the "Great Wagon Road to Philadelphia," now U.S. 521 in Lancaster County).

So it is most likely accurate to say that the sites of the early Catawba villages would be found along ridges, and not in lowland areas.

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Nearby history

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