

History of the White Man on S. C.'s Catawba River

by Louise Pettus to the Catawba River Task Force
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Turn your thoughts back to the year 1701. A young Englishman in his twenties by the name of John Lawson has just landed at the port of Charles Town. In his pocket he carried a commission from the Crown to be the first Surveyor General of North Carolina. He was not trained to be a surveyor. He was instead a college graduate with a special interest in botany. There was a belief among some of the European scientists of his day that in the New World one would find the cures for the diseases of the Old World. They believed that over here would be found rare plants whose roots, berries, or bark had special healing qualities. Lawson had wangled the appointment of surveyor general in order to get free passage and pursue his hobby.

He hired some Indians as guides and started on the Ashley River intending to follow it upstream into North Carolina. From the Ashley river he went up the Santee, and then the Congaree, next the Wateree and at present-day Camden the Wateree became the Catawba River. All along the way he stopped at Indian villages. He found the villages spaced about ten miles apart and he found the people of each village were very different in their customs and habits from the people in other villages.

On the Catawba River Lawson found the Waxhaw Indians living in a large and flourishing village in what is still called the Waxhaws of Lancaster County. Lawson wrote a lengthy account of the Waxhaws - a most unusual and fascinating group. It is the only account of them that we have because within 18 years the Waxhaws will completely vanish - victims of a smallpox epidemic and warfare which caused the few who did survive to go to other tribes - it is thought that probably the Catawbas took them in.

Next, Lawson visited the Catawba villages. He states that he saw a field in cultivation that was seven miles long. He was referring to the famous Kings Bottoms - a stretch of very fertile soil in the Indian Land section of Lancaster County. The seven miles stretched from where Sugar Creek flows into the Catawba River down to Twelve Mile Creek which is on the north side of the present-day village of Van Wyck. It is the

same area in which the Catawba potters found their favored clay. Frequent flooding of the river kept the river bottoms rich.

Lawson went to the chief village which was later called Turkeyhead - at least it is called that on some of the early land leases. That site is easily located today because it will later be the site of a grist mill and Roddey's bridge which spanned the Catawba River prior to the flood of 1916.

All of the Catawba Indian villages were east of the Catawba; six have names and most were in Lancaster County with at least one large village in Fort Mill township. There is a reason for the Catawba villages being on the east side of the river besides the greater fertility of the soil on the Lancaster side. It seems that at least 100 years before the white man came, the Catawbas and Cherokees had a great battle. So many were killed on each side and they were each so exhausted that they made a truce. The agreement was that the land on the west side of the Catawba river between the Catawba and Broad Rivers would not be occupied by either tribe but that each could hunt in the area. Indians in the Ohio Valley had the same sort of arrangement with each other when they designated the area of Kentucky as a hunting ground for all.

Now, to have good hunting ground one must have good grazing areas. Extensive pasture lands are necessary and the Indians achieved this by creating a vast prairie through the slash and burn method of ridding an area of trees and allowing the grasses to grow.

The first settlers found miles and miles of grassland with peavines that grew waist high and canebrakes along the creeks. There were a few buffalo and a vast number of deer and smaller animals and many birds. Flocks of Carolina parakeets and pigeons were in such numbers that sometimes when they roosted on the trees the limbs broke from their weight.

One of the most interesting descriptions of the land comes from Lord Cornwallis, the British General, in the Revolutionary War. Cornwallis had gotten up to Charlotte, N. C. where one of the Waxhaws men, Col. William Richardson Davie, had so harassed him that Cornwallis called Charlotte a hornet's nest and retreated. Cornwallis came down into the Fort Mill area and in his day book Cornwallis wrote that the countryside looked like an English park. He noted splendid hardwood forests,

chiefly oak and hickory, "with no underbrush but greensward as far as the eye can reach." This parklike atmosphere, Lord Cornwallis said, "alternates with level green prairies with buffalo and deer pasturing over them and an abundance of wild turkey racing through open woods." That was 78 years after John Lawson made his journey.

Let us go forward a half century. In the 1820s the whole state of South Carolina and its districts were surveyed for the first time. Robert Mills put the results of the survey together in the form of an atlas. Along with a map of each district, Mills had an accompanying narrative. The actual narratives were written by individuals in each district. Mills was only the compiler. Anyway, I would love to know who the writer was of the York District narrative. This unknown person wrote that the trees in York District were mostly oak, poplar, hickory, chesnut and a few short leaf pine. Besides these trees, along the Catawba river there were in addition, sycamore, sassafras, dogwood, ironwood, hackberry, walnut, buckeye, horse chesnut, redbud, cucumber tree, magnolia, paupau and some sugar trees. One sugar tree measured 10 feet around, or three feet in diameter. The author said about the sugar tree, "It has been many times tapped and sugar formerly made from the juice." He also noted a sycamore tree that measured 28 feet around and 9 feet in diameter. In other writing Robert Mills wrote that there was in this entire state no place more pleasing than the banks of the Catawba river.

When the white man came to this area they found many trails used by animals and the Indians. These generally followed the ridges and crossed the streams at the point of natural fords. Some of the most important crossings are still called by their original names. The Tuckaseegee ford crossing is in North Carolina. The Nation Ford was a part of an Indian trading path that started in Philadelphia, came through Richmond, Virginia, Salisbury, NC, Charlotte and Fort Mill and then crossed the Catawba river back of the Celanese Plant at Rock Hill exactly under¹ where the Southern Railway trestle is now, became Nation Ford Road, then Eden Terrace² through Winthrop campus on the road that Byrnes auditorium now sits on, found its way to Saluda street and on down to Chester where it entered the town of Chester on

¹Rita Kenion insists that it was not exactly under (as several early writers have written) but could be "near".

²Called the Columbia road until the mid-1930s when the new residential area was developed and the neighborhood had a contest to select a new name for their street. They voted and chose Eden Terrace and

another Saluda street, went on to Saluda, SC and forked there with one leg of the journey going to Augusta, Ga. and thence to the Mississippi River.

Below Nation Ford the next major crossing was at Land's Ford. between Lancaster and Chester counties. Land's Ford would in the 1820s be the site of an attempt to build locks for a canal that was to be part of a system of canals that would allow the planters of this area to float their bales of cotton down to Charleston. In March of 1831, John Springs III of Fort Mill wrote a letter to his son Leroy in New York city: "Twelve days ago Andrew and myself took water at the Old Nation Ford with 46 bales of cotton and in five days landed it safe in Camden and sold it for 10- cents and the Boat on its return is bring two Mill stones for a mill William E. White and myself are now engaged in erecting at the Ford."

Local farmers had earlier petitioned the state legislature to open up Sugar Creek for navigation from McAlpine Creek to where Sugar Creek flowed into the Catawba- a distance of about 10 miles. The petitioners were confident that not only would they benefit but that the 25 miles of Sugar Creek that lay in North Carolina would surely also be opened by the North Carolinians who, too, would want to float their cotton to Charleston.

The grand scheme never came about. First, the engineers could not figure out a way to get around the Great Falls and the locomotive was invented so that railroads made canals less necessary. Still, it was the year 1851 before a railroad came to this area. The C.C.& A. (the Charlotte to Columbia and Augusta railroad) literally created the towns of Rock Hill and Fort Mill by establishing depots in the wilderness.

Later, where there were once fords there will be ferries and at other spots, too. The first ferry on the Catawba river was between Highway 5 and Highway 9 at York County's Ten Mile Creek not far above the Chester County line. McClanahan's Ferry was in existence in the 1750s. Every ferry was franchised by the state. The state set the rates that the ferry could charge for individuals, horses, wagons, cattle, sheep, hogs, etc. It is interesting that they always let clergymen ride free as well as people going to church on Sunday.

Later, bridges would be built where the ferries were. When you cross over a bridge on the Catawba you can be certain that a ferry once ran on that spot and there

then petitioned the change.

were some ferries where today there are no bridges. An example would be the crossing from York County to Lancaster County that came across the river at the spot where the Catawbans had their chief village known as Turkeyhead. In the 1850s there was a ferry there and a large grist mill that was called the Turkeyhead Mills, and the spot is still known today as the Ivy Mill place. John T. Roddey of Rock Hill built a bridge across at that spot in order to find a shorter way from Rock Hill to Charlotte but this bridge was lost in the great Flood of 1916. That flood washed out every single bridge and railway trestle on the entire Catawba River from up in McDowell Co., NC in the mountains to Camden.

The ferry at Van Wyck was the last state-operated ferry in South Carolina. The Ashe-Bradford Bridge across Highway 5 was dedicated in Oct. 1959.

And of course there is the role of Duke Power in our history. The India Hook dam between Rock Hill and Fort Mill was the site of the first hydroelectric plant on the Catawba River. It was completed in 1905. At that time the lake was only about 5,000 acres. The dam washed out completely in the flood of 1916 and it took 6 months to rebuild it. In 1926 Duke expanded the lake to 12,455 acres. The backwaters were so shallow that mosquitoes were a tremendous problem. James B. Duke hired a malaria expert, Dr. F. M. Boldridge, to get rid of the anopheles mosquito. He was so successful that for the first time people began to consider leasing lake front lots from Duke Power but very few people lived on the lake before World War II.

For a hundred years there were hunting and fishing clubs that leased land for camps and would annually meet when the shad were running or it was deer or turkey season. When they built India Hook dam it prevented the free run of fish upstream. I have read that fishermen would make dip nets out of barrel hoops and loose netting which they attached to 6 or 8 foot poles. One person on a good day might take as much as 200 lb. of catfish and carp. There were no limits and no fishing licenses were required.

By the way, the lake was not named Lake Wylie until 1960. Before that it had no official name but most people called it Catawba Lake.

The building of the dams and the electrification of this area had a tremendous effect on this area as you all know and there is no need for me to go into all of that.

And also, you may know that 15 cities and towns get their water from the Catawba River. I think that is impressive, too. Thank you.