

Cannons in the Catawba?

By Louise Pettus

What Happened?



Capt. Samuel Elliott White's replacement cannon can be seen in Fort Mill's Confederate Park.

The only official military action in York County during the Civil War came at the end and was only a skirmish. Generally known as Stoneman's Raid, the conflict occurred at the Old Nation Ford crossing of the Catawba and close to a railroad trestle.

Facts about what happened on April 19, 1865, at the Nation Ford crossing are few. Speculations are many, which is not surprising. It was a hurried action in the waning days of the conflict.

There is evidence that an earthen platform was built near the bridge with at least one artillery piece placed on it. It is known that the bridge was burned at the same time as the military action.

What is still debated is which side, Union or Confederate, built the platform and which side burned the bridge? And what happened to the cannon? There is certain evidence of one cannon and some say there were two.

Back in 1989, Sam Thomas, then a history graduate student at Winthrop, wrote a paper for an archaeology course and examined the site of the gun placement that was being threatened by bulldozers plowing up fill dirt for house construction. The gun site itself was in the midst of a trailer park southeast of the bridge.

The earthwork was about 20 square yards within its parapets. After examination, Thomas felt that it was only large enough to hold one gun or cannon. It was well placed for defense of the trestle or for stopping invaders attempting to cross over the ford.

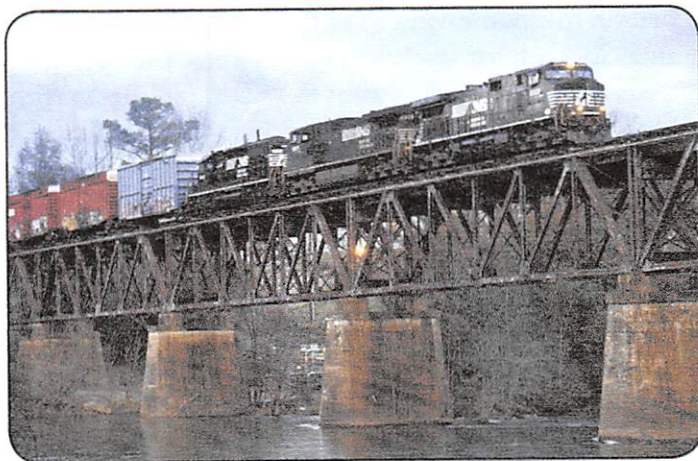
Who built the gun placement? There is plenty of disagreement over that question. Local citizens, usually long after the war, had conflicting memories as to whether it was built by Confederate or Union troops, but compiled evidence seems to tilt toward Confederates—perhaps not regular soldiers but the hastily put together Home Guard of old men and boys along with some slave labor.

Who burned the trestle? The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies contains a report dated 21 April 1865 from John C. Breckenridge, Secretary of War for the Confederacy, stating, "It is said that our own men have burned the Catawba bridge."

On the other hand, according to some accounts, it was Gen. George Stoneman's 6,000-member cavalry brigade, of which 400 participated in Stoneman's Raid, that set fire to the trestle and then built the gun emplacement in an attempt to stop fleeing Confederates from crossing at the ford.

In 1876, a York County member of the state legislature, J.R. Haile, wrote his reminiscences of the volatile election of 1876, which saw the election of Wade Hampton as governor and the end of Reconstruction.

Haile wrote, "And so as election day drew nearer, the boys decided to fish out a cannon which was buried in the mud at the bottom of the Catawba river at a point near the railroad bridge. This piece of artillery was mounted on a hill overlooking the river on the north side, by the Confederates during the Civil War in order to protect the bridge [train trestle] from destruction by Sherman's army which was invading the state.



This trestle is the third constructed on the same 1852 pillars. The original was burned near the end of the Civil War and its replacement was lost in a flood in 1916.

"The old cannon had been captured, however, by Stoneman's cavalry, spiked, dismantled and thrown into the river. After it was resurrected by the 'boys,' a log chain was put around it and it was pulled out of the tawny stream by a team of four mules and dragged to Fort Mill. There the spike was drilled, put by Jack Downs, the village blacksmith. It was then mounted in a grove about 200 yards south of the depot and was used throughout the remainder of the campaign."

Haile went on to tell how "Captain" Thomas Jesse Harris took over the duty of firing the cannon. There came a time when Harris loaded it too heavily, causing the cannon to fall apart.

Capt. Samuel Elliott White of Fort Mill paid to replace the Catawba River cannon with another he brought from Charleston and placed at Main Street's Confederate Park. That cannon had served in the coastal defense of South Carolina during the War. *L*

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