

Remembering an era of fishing

■ Fisheries were among earliest thriving businesses in the area.

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One of the earliest thriving businesses of this area was the operation of fisheries. The Catawba River was rich in fish. Early surveyors' plats sometimes show the locations of fisheries.

The Surveyor's Platt Book and Indian Commissioners Rent Book, which kept records of leases between the white settlers and the Catawba Indians, show that James Webb, circa 1811, paid rent to Jacob Ayres (for Katy Scott) for the "mill place" and a second rent to James Patterson for the "Fishery."

A fishery could be on a creek. The Indian lease platt of James Clark, who leased land between McAlpine Creek and Sugar Creek in Lancaster District in 1824, shows Fish Trap Branch on the west side of Sugar Creek below Harrisburg Road.

Indications of other fisheries are Fish Dam Road on the south side of the Broad River in Chester County, and Luckey's and Wall's fisheries marked on Robert Mills' map of Chester District in 1824. William Wall is believed to be the first white man to successfully use dip nets on the Catawba. Also, there is Fishing Creek, which starts a few miles south of York and ends in Chester County.

The Catawba River has (or had before the extensive damming of the river in this century) numerous islands. The Hill Island Fishery, "composed of nine small islands," was ordered sold in 1844 by the Lancaster District Court of Equity. Stewart Mitchell bought the fishery for \$681.

When an island was close to a bank of the river, as it was at James Spratt's below Johnnie's Town branch in the Fort Mill area, trap nets were run from the bank to the



Nearby
history

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island. At Landsford, the numerous rocks and relatively shallow water became a natural fish trap. "Grabbling" (i.e., grappling) with bare hands became a sport enjoyed by many.

Of the places on the Catawba where fish might be trapped, there was no spot more famed than the Rocky Mount Fishery above Great Falls. The site was at Little Island, a flat rock about 40 feet square. There was a dispute about whether James Massey or James Trantham had title to Little Island in 1794.

The court declared a "non-suit," and the land apparently stayed in the hands of the Platt family, George Platt having acquired an original grant to Little Island in 1772. Sometime in the early 1800s, Gilson Foote acquired the property.

A Foote descendant, A. Edward Foote of Alabama, has chronicled his colorful ancestor's life in the book "Chotankers." In the chapter "Mountain Island Man," Foote wrote: "Gilson's fishery consisted of fish traps placed every 10 to 15 yards, inserted into a dam to prevent the fish by-passing the traps and to keep them anchored in position."

Foote also wrote: "By the early 1800s when Gilson bought the fishery, the cost of building a trap had increased to \$10, and a typical fishery such as the one at Rocky

Mount, required laborers, 2 of them white to supervise slave workers, 6 days to build a dam and place the traps in the river. The cost of the entire fishery easily reached \$175 to \$200 . . ."

Foote purchased more of Mountain Island in 1815 — about one-half of it, including "a house with a fine spring . . . and a tavern, which had to be reached by boat from the east or by going from stone to stone from the western shore."

The big event of the year in Gilson Foote's time, and until the dam was built at Great Falls in 1904, was the running of the shad, a salt-water fish that ran up the Catawba to spawn in early May of each year. Heavy with roe, the silvery fish would average around 10 to 14 pounds each.

On the first of May, there was for many years a huge picnic on the banks of the river where the fishery operators joined to cook great mountains of the freshly caught fish. While some of the visitors to the river bank brought additional picnic food, others bought from numerous vendors who offered everything from corn dodgers to whiskey. There were two distilleries nearby and, always, mountaineers who never failed to appear with wagon loads of specialties.

According to the historian L.M. Ford, the "shadfest" on the first of May at Rocky Mount also featured gambling, wrestling, fistfights and horse racing. By the 1870s, overfishing (or overnetting) had considerably reduced the amount of fish available. Soon the building of commercial power dams ended a colorful era in our history.

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