

The Catawba River Floods of 1901 and 1916 - the Wylie Dam Bridge

Earlier I had expressed some confusion about newspaper articles concerning the old bridge just below Wylie Dam. I have now read the papers relating to the 1901 flood and wanted to give you my thoughts.

The confusion related to a June 12, 1901 article in The Journal that said "eight of the nine that were washed away were recovered ---". After reading another report in the same newspaper and reports in the other area newspapers, I am convinced that this article had information on two different bridges (the Wylie Dam Bridge and Nation Ford Railroad bridge) intermingled in the same paragraph. Below are some specifics relating to the Wylie Dam bridge gleaned from newspaper articles.

The bridge is shown in Lindsay's 1907 postcard photo. It was called "Sutton's Ferry Bridge", "County Bridge", "Catawba River Bridge", "Road to Fort Mill Bridge" and probably other similar names. It was located just below the 3/4 mile long island that is just below Wylie Dam. This island has been called "Sandy Island", "Fewell's Island", "Carrother's Island" and probably other names.

The river gets deeper just below this island. There are rocks in the river with iron rings in them that appear to be the remains of rope or wire ferries - perhaps a part of "Neely Ferry", "Madison Neely Ferry", "Fewell Ferry" and maybe others that were located at this spot. The remains of the bridge are just downstream from the rocks.

The October 3, 1900 Fort Mill Times describes the bridge. "The water is covered by three spans, of about 120 feet each, resting on four pairs of steel cylinders filled with concrete - two pairs in the water and one pair on each bank. The floor of each span is laid of 6 by 2 lumber on seven stringers, which are supported at proper intervals by cross beams, and these are in turn supported by a framework of steel and iron, which forms an open system of angles connected above the bridge by other steel work, so as to present to view something like a skeleton of a frame for a perfect covering. Loads of 12 or 13 feet in height can pass under this framing. The whole structure is pleasing to the sight. Painters have been covered iron and steel and the banister with a dull red coat. Bluffs of sufficient height on each side of the river seem to guarantee crossing at

any time after wooden approaches are built. These are being frames at Hickory, N.C., and are expected to be in place within two or three weeks". A new steel bridge over the Catawba River was being described in great detail. In the same article, the bridge was said to be 25 feet above the river. The next steel bridges built over the Catawba, that I know of, would be Roddey Bridge (1912) and one near Lake Norman (1912).

Within months, the flood of 1901 would hit. To give you an idea of the volume of water, it was estimated that the Catawba River rose 32 feet above normal levels in the 1901 flood. The measurement was 151,000 cubic feet per second of water. Today, a water level of 3,000 cubic feet per second is maintained for Lily Fest at Landsford Canal. I don't go on the river in a kayak when water levels are above 4,000 - just too risky for my skill level. Levels of 500 to 20,000 are fairly common depending on activities at the Dam that are primarily related to rainfall - this raises or lowers the water level of the river 5-6 feet depending on the distance from the dam. People who go on the river use real time data from a website to see current conditions (equipment at 21 bridge). The 1916 flood was estimated to be 65 feet above normal water levels but there were no exact measurements - the equipment was all washed out. With the building of the dams on the Catawba, the effect of floods has been dampened to a large degree.

The May 29, 1901 Fort Mill Times said this of the bridge. "The water reached the sleepers bearing the floor of the new County Bridge and early Tuesday morning a raft struck the center of the bridge and knocked it about five feet out of line. However, it gradually sprang back into position at the waters receded and it was not thought to be seriously damaged. The wooden approach on this side of the bridge was carried away but was found landed about a mile down the river. There was much rejoicing that the bridge was not entirely carried away, as was momentarily expected and as probably would have been the case had another raft struck it." The bridge had survived the 1901 flood, unlike the railroad bridge a few miles downstream, but a far greater flood was just ahead.

The July 20, 1916 issue of the Fort Mill Times said:

"LOCAL STORM LOSSES - Catawba river bridge, built 16 years ago at a cost approximating \$10,000 and only recently repaired by the county at an additional cost of several hundred dollars, was swept away Sunday

at noon by the irresistible volume of storm water that came rolling and plunging down the river as a result of the immense amount of rain that fell in the Catawba watershed from 1 o'clock Friday afternoon to 10 o'clock Saturday morning. The bridge was on the main thoroughfare between Fort Mill and all the balance of the county, and its destruction will result in great inconvenience to the people of this section.

There were three spans of steel and iron in the bridge, the length of which was about 100 feet, and at either end of the bridge was a wooden approach about 100 feet in length. The foundations, in the stream and on the banks, were of concrete and steel. These were undisturbed, it is thought, by the rush of water. The destruction of the bridge was due in great measure to the congestion, on the north side of a great pile of debris, the pounding of which by tons of water finally caused the bridge to give way. Nothing was left to mark the site of the old bridge so far as the eye could see Monday morning, but when the water receded some of the piers were found in place and the framework of the bridge was resting on the river bottom a short distance below where it stood. No one here had ever before seen the river so high.

"Fort Mill people are already speculating on the time of the probable restoration of the bridge. Not a few are of the opinion that it would be unwise to build another bridge on the site of the old one ----".

The location of the bridge had not been very popular either in Fort Mill or Rock Hill since it was built in 1900. Numerous newspaper articles talked of the additional 5-6 miles it added to the trip between the two towns. In 1912, there was even an article that supported the reopening of Nation Ford to reduce the distance between the towns. Newspaper coverage of the 1916 flood was extensive in both Rock Hill and Fort Mill. The bridge washout was lamented, but both newspapers lobbied for a new bridge location the day of the flood.