

## BIGGER'S-MASON'S-WRIGHT'S FERRY

An 1811 act of the S. C. legislature establishing "certain Roads, Bridges and Ferries" included the following:

That the ferry on the Catawba river, in York district, commonly called Bigger's ferry, and lately, by law, vested in Dr. John Allison, be, and the same is hereby, re-established; and vested in James Mason, his heirs and assigns, for the term of fourteen years. And that the following rates of ferriage, and no more, be received at the same, to wit: — for every foot passenger, four cents; for every led horse, four cents; for every rider and horse, six and a quarter cents; for every carriage with two wheels, horse and driver, twenty-five cents; for every four wheeled carriage, driver and horses, seventy-five cents; for every hogshead of tobacco, horse and driver, twenty-five cents; for every head of black cattle, sheep, goats or hogs, two cents.

In 1827, following the death of Daniel Mason, the ferry was vested in his widow, Nancy Mason. Nancy Mason was allowed to keep it for 7 years at the same terms except that "she be allowed the sum of 12  $\frac{1}{2}$  cents for every man and horse.

In 1841 the above ferry was rechartered. James Mason and his heirs sold their right to operate to James L. Wright and William Wright for 7 years. The road that led to and from the ferry was now termed the "great road leading from Yorkville, South Carolina, to Charlotte, North Carolina." In this century the "great road" received a number — Hwy. 49, a part of the national road network.

Sometime around the turn of the 20th century, perhaps as a result of the Great Flood of 1904, ferry service across the Catawba River was dropped at the site of Wright's Ferry. People from the town of York and northern York County found that, if they wanted to go to Charlotte, N. C., they had to go through Gastonia, N. C., an addition of about thirty-five miles. After much debate and political maneuvering, Mecklenburg County, N. C. and York County, S. C. agreed to build a bridge over the site of the old Wright's ferry route. W. M. Boyd, a Mecklenburg citizen, the access land on both sides of the river and agreed to sell.

Mecklenburg County paid for two-thirds of the cost of construction of the projected \$120,000 needed to build the bridge which would have concrete supports and a plank flooring covered with asphalt. Mecklenburg also hard-surfaced the road from its side of the bridge into Charlotte. York County, which customarily built all of its roads and bridges with convict labor, ran into all sorts of problems from bad weather to quicksand and had only three miles of paved road by the date of the bridge opening on August 17, 1923.

The governors of both Carolinas and numerous county officials were present that hot day in August, along with a crowd estimated at over 10,000. There were community bands and scout bands. Local farmers contributed free barbecue. Cold drink stands and picnic tables were spotted over the landscape. There was a forty-acre parking lot but it was not large enough for all the cars which lined the roadsides for two miles. The Pathe and International motion picture companies filmed the celebration for distribution through the nation.

Following the speeches by the two governors, a highlight of the celebration was the appearance of stunt pilots who flew under the bridge to the awe of the crowd. First, two young men from Charlotte, P. R. Redfern and B. F. Withers, Jr. swooped a Curtis plane under the bridge. Later, Capt. Elliott White Springs of Fort Mill, a World War I flying ace and local hero, made a perfect flight under Buster Boyd bridge.

The following spring York County asphalted the road from York to the North Carolina line.

By Louise Pettus, "Nearby History" column in York Observer, May 30, 1993.

From *Chotankers-A Family History* by A. Edward Foote, Thornwell Book Publishers, Florence, Alabama, 1982. p. 163-64:  
(About Rocky Mount):

“One of the largest industries drew on the resources of the Catawba in another way. The industry was fishing. During this time Gilson Foote acquired the rights to the Rocky Mount Fishery, the most famous of several fisheries on the Catawba. More than one source of the time called it ‘celebrated’ for producing great yields of shad during the spring. James Massey and James Trantham had clashed over the fishery a few years before Gilbert Foote’s purchase because both claimed title to ‘Little Island’, a flat rock about 40 feet square, which Trantham attempted to use as the main location of his fishery business.

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. In many rivers, canoe and boat traffic required a boat sluice, greatly reducing the efficiency of the fishery. But at Rocky Mount the swift currents and rock obstructions prevented water traffic anyway, eliminating demands for navigational access through Foote’s Fishery.

The fishery site was first used by the Indians, but by the time of the Revolution it had been under the control of the white settlers for several decades. William Wall was probably the first white to use a dip net with great success on the Catawba.

As the nature of the fishery improved with permanent construction under succeeding owners investment grew significantly, helping to compensate for the reduction in the natural supply of fish passing down the river. By the early 1800s when Gilson bought the fishery, the cost of building a trap had increased to \$10.00 and a typical fishery, such as the one at Rocky Mount, required laborers, two of them white to supervise slave workers, six days to build a dam and place the traps in the river. The cost of the entire fishery easily reach \$175 to \$200.

Gilson, Jr. would have looked forward to the biggest event on either side of the river of the entire year, the May picnic at the head of the falls. Gilson Foote joined the other proprietors of Catawba fisheries on the first Saturday of May for a dinner of fish cooked on the river bank—a tradition marking the end of the major fishing season when the shad were “running’.

While Gilson Foote had no trouble in being an enthusiastic supporter of traditions where celebration, food, whiskey, or beautiful women were involved, he was not adverse to breaking other traditions, such as one established by Archibald Gill. Gill would not do business at the Rocky Mount Fishery on Sunday.

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When Lossing visited the site in 1852 he examined a small mill, owned by Daniel McCullough, which turned out cotton yarn. The yarn was used on home looms to make a rough cloth. Rocky Mount was in the path of Sherman’s march and the McCullough cotton mill was burned and never rebuilt. For six days Sherman’s troops used the site as a base from which to ravage the countryside.

The Great Falls were not harnessed until this century when hydroelectric plants and dams were erected along the Catawba river. The first dam, built by

Southern Power Company, later owned by Duke Power, was built at India Hook near Rock Hill in 1904. Two years later, James B. Duke, Dr. Gill Wylie and William States Lee dedicated a dam at Rocky Mount. The Great Falls of the Catawba were finally subdued--along with the old dream that some day upcountrymen could navigate without obstacle to Charleston.

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.

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 all the places on the Catawba where fish might be trapped there was no spot more famed than the celebrated Rocky Mount Fishery above Great Falls. The site was at Little Island, a flat rock about 40 feet square. There was a dispute over ownership of Little Island in 1794 as to whether James Massey or James Trantham had title to the land. 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 Gilson Foote descendant, A. Edward Foote of Alabama, has chronicled his colorful ancestor's life in a book he titled Chotankers. In a chapter he called "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 says that, "By the early 1800s when Gilson bought the fishery, the cost of building a trap had increased to \$10.00 and a typical fishery, such as the one at Rocky Mount, required laborers, two of them white to supervise slave workers, six 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 on into this century 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 10-14 pounds.

On the first of May there was for many years a huge picnic on the banks of the river in which all of the fishery operators joined to cook great mountains of the freshly caught fish. While some of the visitors to the river bank brought their own 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 their own specialty.

According to the historian L. M. Ford, the "shadfest" on the first of May at Rocky Mount also featured gambling, wrestling, fist-fights, and horse racing. By

the 1870s over-fishing (or over-netting) had considerably reduced the amount of fish available. Soon, the building of commercial power dams ended a colorful era in our history.