

Ferries carry rich history of river crossings

These all-day, all-night operations were tightly controlled by state

Pioneer families came to this area in the early 1750s. The first settlements were widely scattered. The Catawba Indians were friendly but there were marauding tribes from elsewhere to fear. It was important to keep in touch with other settlements, and not just for protection. They needed to trade goods and to exchange information.

Today, we don't think of the Catawba River as an obstacle. Our forefathers did. It took a full century after the first settlers arrived for the first railroad to cross the river. It took another two-thirds of a century before there was a single bridge across the river. The first bridge lasted four years be-

fore a flood swept it down the river. And it was another decade before the first permanent bridge was built. There are still people alive who can remember when the only way to cross the river was to swim it, ford it at a low spot, row a boat across, get on a ferry or take a train across.

Until the 1920s, more people used public ferries than any other method of crossing. All of the known ferries in the colonial period were rope ferries. A pole with a pulley was upriver from the ferry boat. Ropes attached to the pulley and the ferry boat shifted the boat into or away from the forces of the flowing water as the ferryman steered with a wheel attached to the ferry.

After the Revolutionary War,

the first S.C. constitution required that every ferry in the state obtain a franchise. The franchises were issued for a 14-year period.

The franchise provided rules for operation. The law stated that two able-bodied persons must keep the ferry going during the day and at night. If the ferryman caused the passenger to be delayed in his travels then the penalty was to pay the passenger 40 shillings for each hour of delay.

Not all travelers had to pay. The law made exception for heads of state, members of the General Assembly, all ministers of the gospel, all people going to church, anyone going or returning from militia muster, troops of the Continental Army and Indians. Even though the ferryman didn't get paid for carrying these travelers, he would be fined if he refused.

Not only that, there were rate schedules. Cheapest rates were for cattle and sheep. Next cheap-

est were persons on foot. At the top of the scale were horse-drawn carriages with each rider tallied. These were the luxury vehicles of the day. Almost as much were loaded wagons of goods.

While the state controlled the ferries (because they often carried goods between counties since many counties had rivers as boundary lines), the counties had control of the roads within the county. Major roads led to the ferries.

By the 1820s, the major commercial towns of this area were Camden (for people headed to Columbia and Charleston) and Charlotte (for those headed north). There were two ways to get from Camden to Charlotte.

One could take a straight (and shorter) route by using the National Road (now U.S. 521) through Lancasterville. Or, cross the Catawba on a ferry to Chester and take the road to Yorkville, and cross on a second ferry at the

present Buster Boyd Bridge and on to Charlotte.

Even though they had to pay fees to cross on two ferries, people favored the longer Chester-Yorkville route because it was much easier for wagons to negotiate. It is estimated that by the 1820s, 4,000 loaded wagons a year crossed the river at Mason's ferry east of Yorkville.

To keep up the roads, there were other regulations. The grand juries of the counties determined those and the sheriff was charged with enforcing them. The usual thing was to pick large landowners alongside the routes and require them to recruit the neighborhood labor to keep up the roads. Any man who refused to work on the roads, or to furnish a substitute laborer, was subject to a stiff fine.

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