

PETTUS

CHAINGANGS IN YORK, CHESTER & LANCASTER COUNTIES

Part Two

When the state of South Carolina provided for chaingangs in the new Constitution of 1895, it left each county free to implement the law however it saw fit except for stating that the final authority was in the hands of the county commissioners. (The county commissioners were appointed by the governor from each township in the county.)

In 1897 the county commissioner from Fort Mill township was Thomas G. Culp. Culp was chosen by the County Board of Commissioners to be the first superintendent of the chaingang with the specific assignment of building a stockade to house the prisoners.

The commissioners also announced that the first community in the county to furnish the lumber to build the stockade would be the first to get the labor of the convicts. The first stockade was built on the Kings Mountain Road within 3 or 4 miles of Yorkville. The stockade had a canvas top (we suppose that Yorkville came up short on the lumber but still promised more than any other community).

Inside the stockade, a chain ran down the center aisle. Cots were arranged so that the prisoners could be chained to the center aisle chain at night. Sgt. J. Bratton Mendenhall, an experienced penitentiary guard, was hired for \$30 a month.

In 1900, T. G. Culp reported that the average number of chaingang members in York County for the year was 28. The maximum number used was 38 and the minimum was 16. The total cost of operating the chaingang for the year was \$3,546.54. Culp also announced that he was trying to get a contest among the townships to see which township could haul enough rock to next attract the chaingang labor.

In 1901 the chaingang was moved to one of the county's worse roads (described as "wretched") near Edgemoor about 5 miles south of Rock Hill. Over 5,000 wagon loads of rock were hauled and dumped over a two-mile stretch from Waters' hill to Taylor's Creek. The next wretched hill to be worked on was Robinson hill about 3 miles east of Yorkville.

Meantime, Dr. T. A. Crawford, who had served as physician to the convicts who build the main building (now Tillman Hall) on the Winthrop campus, was campaigning for the city of Rock Hill to buy a rock crusher of its own. The town council was not inclined to put out that much money but promised to pay one-third of the cost if Dr. Crawford would raise two-thirds. Dr. Crawford raised the money and a rock crusher, much superior to the one owned by the county, was purchased.

The rock crusher worked so well that soon the town had more crushed rock than it had convicts to spread it. Rock Hill passed a vagrancy law which stated that any able-bodied man who was not working could be sentenced to the chaingang for road work.

One would think that Rock Hill's law would have been challenged as unconstitutional but there is no record of such. In fact, the same year the General Assembly passed a law allowing any city, town or village to operate chaingangs for the purpose of working the streets and public roads. If a county did not have a chaingang (some didn't), the sentenced able-bodied men could be placed on a chaingang of a nearby county.

The living conditions of the chaingang members fostered disease. The worst was smallpox. York County required that every chaingang have a "pest tent" reserved for those who might get smallpox. When the prisoner died, the tent was to be burned. With no explanation for a change of policy, a year later the commission decided that instead of tents they would build a stout log house for smallpox cases.

All of the counties with chaingangs also had farms on which the prisoners raised corn and vegetables and hogs. In York County the chaingang also worked the county home's farm. York's county home mostly cared for elderly needy people who had no relatives. In 1902 the county home was actually 8 ancient cabins. Providing firewood for eight separate buildings was more expensive than heating one communal building. The chaingang was given the task of erecting one building large enough to accommodate 20 people.

The sight of shackled men in striped suits working along country roads was common until the 1960s. As late as 1939 in Lancaster County the WPA built concrete barracks for the chaingang.

The Lancaster News said the new barracks was a great improvement over the old system of hauling prisoners about from place to place in steel cages pulled by mules. The prisoners had slept in the cages at night and often spent weeks, even months, living on the side of the roads. On Sundays local church choirs would often visit the camps and sing their songs to the chaingang.