

# Catawba River ferries provided vital transportation link for S.C. travelers

One of the earliest childhood memories of Mrs. Addie Rodgers Griffin, 90, of Indian Land is crossing the Catawba River on a ferry. She was with her parents and grandmother in a buggy.



**Nearby history**

**LOUISE PETTUS**

Also on the ferry, in front of the buggy, was a wagon loaded with wood pulled by mules. Something scared the mules pulling the wagon and they plunged over the edge of the ferry into

the river as the frightened child watched. The mules were pulled under by the heavy load and drowned. Her father, by holding tightly to the reins, was able to maintain control of his horse and buggy.

In 1910, Mrs. W.B. Meredith witnessed horses running off the end of the ferry and the ferryman leaping into the river after them. That time the horses were rescued.

These were unusual events. Most of the time the ferries were safe enough. If the water was high, the ferryman simply refused to cross the river. In times of floods the ferry itself might be sunk.

In 1928 William Newton Ashe, owner of the Ashe Brick Co. at Van Wyck, built a ferryboat to get his brick trucks across the river. For about 10 years it was entirely privately run. Then it became a part of the York County road system. About 1941 the State of South Carolina took over the operation of the ferry.

The S. C. Highway Department hired a Catawba Indian, Early Bearly Morgan Brown, to run the ferry. At that time Brown was working in a Rock Hill cotton mill. Previously, he and his wife made pottery at a park in New Philadelphia, Ohio, for about six years. Brown was to work as a ferryman for the next 28 years.

Early Brown lived on the York County side of the river, in a house close by the ferry landing so that he could hear the auto horns of people who wanted to cross. It took six minutes for him to pole the ferry from one side to the other. The ferry's capacity was three vehicles. Before the state took over, there was a fee of 35 cents for a car and 25 cents for a buggy. The ferry was free as long as the state operated it but the road was not blacktopped until 1955.

At busy times cars were lined up on both sides of the river. By the late 1950s the average was 15-20 cars a day. A very busy day would see more. Certain customers liked to take over the poling task and allow Early Brown a chance to eat a meal.

In May 1956 Bowater Southern Paper Corp. announced it was building a huge plant nearby. The state began plans to construct a bridge that would replace the ferry. The increased traffic led them to install a motor on the ferry. The motor reduced the crossing time from six minutes to four minutes. At least once the motor stalled and left two autos and 20 passengers stranded for an hour.

In 1957 a tornado slammed the ferry to the bottom. It was refloated but on the first trip the cables caught the leg of Philip George, the assistant operator, and mangled it. In March 1958 the ferryboat lodged against the bank and the motor was damaged.

Finally, a bridge was built and given the name the Ashe-Bradford Bridge to honor W.N. Ashe, the brick company head who died in 1932, and W.R. Bradford of Fort Mill, editor of the Fort Mill Times, longtime member of the House of Representatives and friend of the Catawbans. Bradford died in 1957.

The Ashe-Bradford Bridge on S.C. 5 cost \$661,000 to build and was dedicated by Gov. Ernest F. "Fritz" Hollings on Oct. 9, 1959.

The ferry at Van Wyck, the last state-operated ferry in South Carolina, was given to the Historical Committees of York and Lancaster

counties by the state Highway Department. There was much talk at the time about making the site a tourist attraction, building a general store and providing a place for the Indians to display and sell their pottery, but nothing ever came of it.

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