

Railroad tracks determined the fate of Fort Mill

The town grew up around a depot that owed its life to a steep hill

Before there was a Fort Mill, which grew up around a CC&A Railroad depot in 1851, there was a settlement about 2 miles northeast of what is now Fort Mill. The settlement was known as Little York.

It was near Sugar Creek and had homes, a store, a school, the first building of Unity Presbyterian Church, a mail-relay station and the inevitable saloon.

The church, constructed of logs, burned and a second church was built on land leased by Martha Elliott White, at the site of the Old Unity cemetery in Fort Mill.

In 1819 Parmenia Rodgers placed an ad in the Camden Gazette offering 100 acres of "excellent land" for sale. Rodgers said the land was well-adapted for corn or cotton and was less than a half mile of his "mercantile establishment which is a very public place indeed in consequence of mills, machines, bridges, post office, stores, etc."

What's more, "there is almost a continual concourse of persons passing and repassing." He stated terms would be announced at a public auction Feb. 8.

Rodgers' ad did not mention

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the land was leased from the Catawba Indians and that the buyer would not get the title but would pay an annual rent. Nor were the names of three other men who had claims on the land - Charles Elms, John P. Phifer and Samuel Caldwell - mentioned in the ad.

Nine days before the scheduled auction, the lease was sold to James Davis. On the other side of Sugar Creek, at the confluence of Sugar and McAlpine creeks, was Harrisburg, a similar settlement in upper Lancaster County. As early as 1808 there was a post office called Cairo on the spot, but in 1812 the name was changed to Harrisburg when Dr. Cunningham Harris was made postmaster.

Harrisburg boasted an academy, a gristmill, a store and a few houses. Many old York plats show the road to Harrisburg, as well as the large mill pond with fish trap.

In 1809 the S.C. legislature granted three men, James Harris, James Hutchison and Cunningham Harris, full authority to build "dams, locks, canals ..." and clear out Sugar Creek from Harrisburg to the Catawba River. It didn't happen, most

likely because the area was subject to flooding.

Some time around 1812 James Clark, a Camden merchant, built a store at Harrisburg that became "Osborn and Clark" in 1822 and in 1828 was changed to "Campbell and Clark." Campbell was Capt. Peter Campbell, who later taught at Ebenezer Academy.

Over time, Harrisburg's population dwindled and the community slowly vanished in much the same fashion as Little York.

Something of the same pattern occurred at Belair, a community in the Indian Land Township of Lancaster County. In 1808 Fowler Williams opened an Academy at Belair. In 1813 Williams became the postmaster of "Bell Air."

By 1835 there was a thriving village with three streets marked off in lots. The village founder was apparently David Hagins.

By 1853 Belair had no fewer than nine families, two stores, Mount Ararat Methodist Church, an inn that served as a stagecoach stop and a jail (with 2 burglars incarcerated).

In the late 1840s there had been talk of building a railroad from Lancaster to Charlotte that would have passed through Belair. It is said the engineers dropped the plan when they encountered a very steep hill on the N.C.-S.C. boundary line and began to look for an easier route.

It is interesting to speculate: Had the rail tracks been laid east of the Catawba, today there

might be no Fort Mill.

Instead, we would have the great metropolis of Belair.

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