IF FORT MILL HAD A FOUNDER
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There is no tradition of a "founding father" of Fort Mill but, if the town should ever find itself in need of one, the best candidate for that title would be William Elliott White. The reason is simple. White was one of the supporters of the Charlotte, Columbia and Augusta (CC&A) Railroad and White's land housed the depot, which was built in 1852. A depot stimulated a demand for business lots nearby, and White owned the land now called downtown Fort Mill.

The first business house actually preceded the depot. It was built by White in January of 1851 and was rented to Barnhardt, Coltharp and Co. For many years this building was known as "White's Old Store." The second store was operated by a cousin, John D. White. Unfortunately for John White, he made the mistake of moving to Texas, where he was murdered by "highwaymen" some time before the Civil War. Between the construction of the first two stores, there was a home built by Owen Matthews. After John White's store, the fourth building was another residence. It was built by Dr. Benjamin Morris Cobb. He wasn't the first doctor in the area, but he was the first to live in the village. Next was another store, this one called Morrow and Potts. In 1854 that store had the distinction of being the first building in town to burn down.

By the time the Civil War broke out, there were additional stores and homes, all of the land being sold to newcomers by William Elliott White. The land for the village was only a small part of White's total acreage. The Agricultural Census of 1850 showed that White owned 3,026 acres, of which only 750 acres were in crops. The origin of his landholding stretched back to his grandfather, William Elliott. Elliott was one of the first settlers to lease land from the Catawba Indians, along with Thomas "Kanawha" Spratt, the Erwins, and the Barnetts (Elliott married Mary Barnett, granddaughter of Thomas Spratt).

That was in the mid 1760's, right after the end of the French and Indian War. William Elliott's daughter Martha married Capt. Joseph White and they had one child, William Elliott White, born in 1803. Captain White died the following year. Martha Elliott White died in 1819 at the age of 44, leaving her son, still a minor, an estate valued at more than $23,000. The estate included 697 acres in two tracts leased from the Catawba Indians.

One of the plats showed the Old Unity cemetery and land that it is undoubtedly where William Elliott White built the depot and the downtown Fort Mill buildings. Before he was 21 years old, White also inherited one-third of the estate of his uncle, Samuel Elliott. On his uncle's leased land, White built a fine home in 1831, now a Fort Mill landmark known as the White Homestead. At the White Homestead in the spring of 1865, William Elliott White hosted Jefferson Davis and the members of the Confederate cabinet on their flight from Richmond, VA.

William Elliott White and his wife Sarah Robinson Wilson had nine children— five sons and four daughters. The best known of the children was Samuel Elliott White, who founded Fort Mill Manufacturing Co., the first mill of the Springs Industries textile empire. White and his wife moved to Charlotte in 1857. Mrs. White died there in 1864 and in 1866 White was buried beside her in Elmwood Cemetery in downtown Charlotte.