

CATAWBA BRIDGE  
By Louise Pettus

On March 13, 1897, a group of disgruntled York County citizens from Fort Mill township descended on the courthouse in York where the county commissioners were meeting.

Seventy petitioners led by Samuel E. White, whose name led the list, were "praying for the establishment of a bridge at or near Harris' ferry." Harris' Ferry crossed the Catawba River just south of where Sugar Creek empties into the river.

The first speaker for the Fort Mill cause was Rev. J.H. Thornwell, the Unity Presbyterian Church minister. His description of the disadvantages under which Fort Mill folk labored in getting across the river was described by the Yorkville Enquirer as "an eloquent and forceful speech."

Thornwell described Fort Mill as "cut off--cut off from Lancaster, cut off from North Carolina and cut off from York County of which it is part." When the water was high it was impossible to get across the river except in one place and that by foot, walking on a narrow plank that ran alongside the railroad track.

The commissioners were told by Thornwell that Fort Mill citizens dreaded having to make a trip to York. If they travelled by horse and carriage it was nearly impossible to go to York and return to Fort Mill in the same day. It was not possible to travel by rail directly and, if one tried to go to York from Fort Mill by rail, it took three days time and it cost something like \$10. The railway schedules caused a person to consume one day getting to York, arriving after all business offices and stores had closed. The second day one could accomplish one's business, but it took all of the next to get back home.

Four Fort Mill residents, J. W. Ardrey, J. M. Spratt, Fred Nims, and C. T. Crook, arrived after the noon hour. They explained that they were late because it was not possible to cross except at one ferry. They had to cross at Neely's Ferry to Rock Hill because the water was too high at the other ferries. This meant that they had covered 28 miles in order to get from Fort Mill to York.

The Fort Mill speakers pointed out that they paid one-tenth of the county taxes but received practically no county service. They said they had helped pay for the bonds that built the narrow-gauge railway line that served Yorkville but that they had gained nothing from it. Now, they felt that, since the new state constitution had given the counties the responsibility of maintaining roads, ferries, and bridges, it was an obligation of York County to build a bridge across the Catawba River.

The Fort Mill group had hired an engineer from Atlanta, George H. Crafts, to survey the various possible sites for a bridge. Crafts' letter to John McKee Spratt, the secretary of the Fort Mill committee, was read. Crafts said he had examined various sites from Caruthers island to Harris Ferry and could build substantial steel bridges with piers and wooden approaches. At Carothers, the bridge would cost \$9,000, at Harris quarry the cost would be \$11,000, and at Dinkins ferry it would be \$15,000. In every case, Crafts proposed a one-way bridge.

After Fort Mill citizens had had their say, others were invited to speak. Mayor J. E. Lowery of Yorkville supported the Fort Mill proposal. Major A. H. White and W. A. Fewell of Rock Hill read petitions from citizens of Ebenezer and Rock Hill endorsing the Fort Mill proposal.

David E. Finley, Esq. presented his opinion to the commissioners. He stated that the commissioners had the authority to build the bridge and tax the people for it and that they could do so over a number of years. He added that he hoped that the commissioners would see fit to build the bridge.

At the end of the long day, the York County commissioners took up the matter. J.S. Brice moved that the petition be granted and was seconded by Mr. Riddle of Bethel. A vote was taken. Three were in favor, four opposed and one abstained. Fort Mill would have to wait for a bridge over the Catawba River.

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