

THE OLD CATAWBA FORTS

Michael C. Scoggins

Culture & Heritage Museums, York County, SC, August 2005

At the time that the French and Indian War began in North America in 1754, most of the Catawba Indian Nation lived in collection of small towns clustered around Sugar Creek, a branch of the Catawba River, in present-day York and Lancaster Counties. Their chief, King Hagler, lived in the “King’s Town” on Hagler’s Branch of Sugar Creek, located just north of the present city of Fort Mill. As the war between the French and the British for control of North America escalated, the Indian allies of both nations were inevitably drawn into the conflict. The large and powerful Cherokee tribe sided with the French, while the Catawbas, by this time greatly reduced in population from European diseases, allied themselves with the British and the colonial governments of North and South Carolina.

During this period, the boundary line between North and South Carolina had only been surveyed from the Atlantic Ocean as far as Crooked Creek, a tributary the Peedee River in modern Marlboro County, SC. The territory west of that point was still disputed between North and South Carolina. South Carolina assigned the area to Craven County, while North Carolina claimed it as part of Anson County. The Catawba Indian lands fell within the disputed territory, and thus the Catawbas were courted by the governments of both colonies as allies against the Cherokees and French.

Although the Catawbas had always looked primarily to the South Carolina government in Charleston for trade and protection, they also maintained friendly relations with both Virginia and North Carolina. In May 1756, King Hagler and a group of his warriors journeyed to Salisbury and petitioned the North Carolina government for ammunition and “a fort for securing our old men, women and children when we turn out to fight the Enemy....” The North Carolina Assembly approved the shipment of 100 pounds of gunpowder and 400 pounds of lead to the Catawba Nation, and appropriated £4000 for the construction of a fort to protect the Catawbas. North Carolina Governor Arthur Dobbs assigned two companies of provincial soldiers to garrison the Catawba fort and Fort Dobbs, another frontier fort situated on Fourth Creek of the Yadkin River near modern Statesville.

In December 1756 the North Carolina government purchased 640 acres of land from the Catawbas for the site of the fort, and appointed a colonial militia captain named Hugh Waddell, who had previously overseen the construction of Fort Dobbs, to supervise the project. In the spring of 1757 work began on an elevated ridge just west of the Nation Ford Road and some three-fourths of a mile southwest of the present town of Fort Mill.

All available information indicates that Captain Waddell planned the Catawba fort to be a duplicate of Fort Dobbs, which was laid out as an oblong square with extended corners or “bastions” to provide overlapping fields of fire for the garrison. The walls of Fort Dobbs were fifty-three feet long by forty feet wide, and were composed of oak logs twenty-four feet in height, ranging from sixteen inches in diameter at the base to six inches in diameter at the top. Within these walls were three floors from which up to one hundred soldiers could fire their muskets in any direction.

Waddell's men began construction of the Catawba fort by digging a well seventy feet deep to provide water for the garrison. They then excavated a deep ditch in the shape of the fort's perimeter in which they would place the logs for the base of the walls. Whether the walls were ever finished or not is unclear, because Waddell was forced to stop work on the fort before it was ever completed.

In the late summer of 1757 a delegation of Catawbas visited Charleston and informed South Carolina Governor William Lyttleton that they no longer wished North Carolina to build them a fort, but wanted South Carolina to build one instead. Lyttleton wrote Governor Dobbs informing him of the news, and in August 1757 Dobbs ordered Waddell to cease all work on the fort. Having wasted four months of labor and almost £1000 in expenses, Dobbs was furious at what he perceived to be a slap in the face by the Catawbas. He wrote the Board of Trade in England complaining of connivance between the South Carolinians and the Indians, and concluded that "paying too much respect [to the Catawbas] and making them presents has made them haughty...." However, Thomas Barker of the North Carolina Assembly was apparently better informed. "Soon after the Fort had been begun," he wrote, "we learned that the Indians, from what reasons we cannot discover, were much displeased; and rather esteemed what we had done as an Inroad of their Possessions...."

The real cause of the Catawbas' displeasure appears to have been rooted in North Carolina's continuing claims that the entire area of present York County, including the Catawba lands, was part of Anson County. In spite of protests from South Carolina, throughout the 1750s the North Carolina government issued hundreds of land grants to settlers in the immediate vicinity of the Catawba Nation. Dobbs himself was noticeably unsympathetic toward the question of the Indians' land rights, and the Catawbas became increasingly upset that recipients of Anson County land grants were running surveys through their towns and desecrating their burial places.

In April 1759 King Hagler and a delegation of headmen, warriors, women and children arrived in Charleston and presented Governor Lyttleton with a formal request for South Carolina to build them a fort. In October 1760 the Commons House of Assembly, at the urging of Lieutenant Governor William Bull, appropriated £700 for the construction of a new fort and £1000 for clothing and subsistence for Hagler and his people. By this time South Carolina was engaged in a bloody war with the Cherokees, and the government greatly desired the Catawbas' aid in putting down the Cherokee revolt. Although the Catawba population had been much reduced by smallpox, Hagler agreed to aid the colony. Between March and June 1761, an expedition of British regulars, South Carolina provincials and Catawba warriors fought several pitched battles with the Cherokees and laid waste to their towns and fields, and in the end the Cherokees were forced to sue for peace.

Meanwhile the South Carolina government commissioned Samuel Wylie, a surveyor and Indian trader from Camden, to supervise construction of the new Catawba fort. In the spring of 1761 Wylie and his crew erected a wooden stockade, much smaller than Waddell's original design, on the west side of Line Creek (now Twelve Mile Creek) near the present town of Van Wyck in Lancaster County. By this time, however, the threat from the Cherokees was over, and it appears that neither the Catawbas nor the provincial troops ever made use of the structure. Nothing now remains to mark the site of either of the old Catawba forts but a few traces in the earth. However, their memory

lingers on in the city of Fort Mill, which takes its name from Captain Hugh Waddell's original fort and from Webb's Mill, a colonial grist mill established by Theodoric Webb and Isaac Garrison on Steele Creek in the 1770s.