

CATAWBA FORT LOCATED IN FORT MILL

The Catawba Fort was located approximately three-fourths of a mile southwest of the town of Fort Mill on the west side of Brickyard Road south of the old Spratt's Family Cemetery. Although the fort was never completed, it has much historical and political significance as the structure/place in which Fort Mill derives the "Fort" part of its name.

During the French and Indian War (1754-1763), the Catawba Nation became allies with the British Colonial Government. At this time the Catawba Nation was neither in North Carolina or South Carolina as the boundary line between North and South Carolina had only been surveyed from the Atlantic Ocean as far as Crooked Creek, a tributary of the Pee Dee River in modern Marlboro County, SC. The territory west of that point was still disputed between North and South Carolina. The Catawba 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 (Chief of the Catawbas) and a group of his warriors journeyed to Salisbury, North Carolina 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.

History tells us the colony of North Carolina agreed to build a fort for the protection of the Catawba Nation from raiding Shawnees and other hostile tribes. Construction of the fort began in December 1756 when the North Carolina government supposedly purchased 640 acres of land from the Catawbas for the site of the fort. In the spring of 1757, work began on an elevated ridge just west of the Nation Ford Road. Colonial militia Captain Hugh Waddell was to supervise the project who had previously overseen the construction of Fort Dobbs, another frontier fort situated on Fourth Creek of the Yadkin River near modern Statesville, North Carolina. At this time most of the Catawbas lived in a collection of small towns or villages (Nassaw - Weyapee, Charraw Town, Noostee Town, Sucah Town and Weyane or Kings Town) all located in the present township of Fort Mill. These towns being within a two-mile radius of each other were connected by foot paths and trails. These Catawba Towns were located on the northeast side of the Catawba River along the Great Trading Path near the Nation Ford. As the war between the French and the British for control of North America escalated, the Native American allies of both the Cherokee and Catawba Nations were inevitably drawn into the conflict. The large and powerful Cherokee tribe sided with the French until 1759, while the Catawbas by this time were greatly reduced in population from European diseases, allied themselves with the British and the colonial governments of both North and South Carolina.

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. Captain 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 Captain Waddell was forced to stop work on the fort before it was ever completed.

In 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. Governor Lyttleton wrote Governor Dobbs informing him of the news, and in August 1757 Governor Dobbs

ordered Captain Waddell to cease all work on the fort. Having wasted four months of labor and almost £1000 in expenses, Governor 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 Native Americans, 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 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 encroachment 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, North Carolina. Despite many 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. Governor 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 Catawba 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 King 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, King 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 Native American trader from Camden South Carolina, to supervise the construction of a new Catawba fort located on the east side of the Catawba River and north of the mouth of Line Creek (now Twelve Mile Creek) near the present town of Van Wyck in Lancaster County. In the spring of 1761, Samuel Wylie and his crew erected a wooden stockade, much smaller than Captain Waddell's original design. 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 new structure.

Today nothing remains to mark the sites of either of the old Catawba Forts. However, the name “Fort” of Fort Mill was derived from the partially constructed “Catawba Indian Fort” which was started in 1756 by the colony of North Carolina. Subsequently, the name “Mill” of Fort Mill was derived from “Webb’s Mill” a colonial grist mill established by Theodoric Webb and Isaac Garrison located near Steele Creek, which operated from the 1770’s to 1880’s. Therefore, the town of Fort Mill gets its name from both historical occurrences.

In May 2021 to escape possible destruction due to major construction in the area, the two cornerstones of the Catawba Fort and the stone marker commemorating the structure, was relocated from their original locations southwest of Fort Mill on the Brick Yard Road to the grounds of the Fort Mill History Museum.

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