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James H. Carlisle

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Some Facts About the Catawba Falls—How Nearly We Missed Having the West Point of the United States at Rocky Mount.

In 1802 John Drayton, then Governor of South Carolina, published a small work, now rather scarce, "A view of South Carolina as respects her natural and civil concerns." In the first chapter, under one of the heads, "Cascades," he thus describes the Catawba Falls, at the southeastern corner of Chester county.

"For quantity of water and grandeur of appearance, perhaps the Catawba Falls are the most interesting of any in this State. They are situated a little above the Rocky Mount, and the approach to them is over the hills which line the sides of the river. On either side the rocks are piled up in a wall of many feet high, and hills rising above them in sharp, conical summits, nod over the rupture below. Now the Catawba is arrested in its course, and from a width of one hundred and eighty yards this river is forced by the hills and rocks on either side to shoot down 'the gulph' in a channel of only sixty-five yards wide. Collecting its waters, impetuous and noisy, it thunders down the falls, tumbling over massy rocks and foaming from shore to shore, wheeling its large whirlpools and glancing from rock to rock with maddening fury, not ceasing its troubled waves until it has leaped over twenty falls in the distance of two and a half miles, and has precipitated from its height a depth of ninety feet. Here, below Rocky Mount, it begins to subside and spreads over a channel three hundred and eighteen yards wide; but is not composed. For miles below, rocks are scattered in its way, at times irritating its waters and provoking the rapidity of its stream. Dr. David Ramsey
(1803) and Robert Mills (1826) give similar descriptions of these falls, which are connected with an almost forgotten page of our history.

A committee of the House of Representatives of the Third Congress, "to whom so much of the President's speech as relates to arms and military stores, magazines and arsenals" was referred, made their report March 5, 1794. They offered the following resolution: "Resolved, that the President of the United States be authorized to direct two arsenals and magazines, to be erected in proper situations, to accommodate the Southern and Middle States, and that a sum not exceeding fifty-nine thousand dollars be provided for that purpose."

December 12, 1795, Timothy Pickering, secretary of war, reported on the measures which have been pursued to obtain proper sites for arsenals. He says: "It having been determined to erect one arsenal on the Potomac and another in South Carolina, the latter in a situation to and from which water transportation would be afforded, and the former in the vicinity of a number of iron works, the necessary orders were given in the year 1794 for exploring both countries." The engineer employed for the purpose in South Carolina made a report, which was received early in the last summer. He had explored that part of the country to which his attention had been directed by the Executive. He also examined another. The latter, independent of its being in a more healthful situation, was deemed by him to possess some other advantages over the former."

The engineer alluded to was most probably "Colonel John Christian Senf, engineer to the State, "who at that time was digging
the Santee Canal (1792-1800). The second place referred to was probably Rocky Mount; the first place is not known.

February 2, 1802, Thomas Jefferson, President, sent in a short message, in which, he says, "Besides the permanent magazines established at Springfield, West Point, Harper's Ferry, it is thought one should be established in some point convenient for the States of North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia; such a point will probably be found near the border of the Carolinas, and some small provision by the Legislature preparatory to the establishment will be necessary for the present year."

In January, 1803, Eli Whitney, "inventor of the cotton-gin," was selected to assist Colonel Senf in choosing the site for the arsenal near Rocky Mount. Whitney was at that time pressing his claims before the North Carolina Legislature. For expenses from Raleigh to Rocky Mount, and for professional services while there, he received the very moderate fee of fifty dollars. Colonel Senf, with the rank of "superintendent of the arsenal at Rocky Mount," received sixty dollars, "for making a plan of the arsenal at Rocky Mount, and report thereon, including his traveling expenses."

During that year (1803) four thousand dollars were paid "on account of expenditures in erecting the arsenal, magazines, etc, at Rocky Mount, S. C." During the year 1802-4 the total amount expended at Rocky Mount was fourteen thousand four hundred and forty-eight dollars, being four times the amount spent on the "arsenal and magazine at West Point" during those years. Of this sum, three thousand one hundred and thirty-eight dollars were for the purchase (through "Thomas Sumpter") of a "tract of land in South Carolina..."
for an arsenal."

General Henry Dearborn, secretary of war under Jefferson, visited Rocky Mount and laid the corner-stone of the main building. Robert Mills (Statistics of S. C.,) states this fact, but does not give the exact date—which must have been in 1803. The spot was known as Mount Dearborn for many years.

In 1808 a committee of Congress reported on a "system of great canals along the Atlantic coast." In our State, they say, "The Santee, or Catawba, is said to be occasionally navigable for more than three hundred miles, as high as Morgantown, in North Carolina. Two companies have been incorporated by that State, and the State of South Carolina, for the purpose of improving its navigation. The Lower Falls are above Camden, and not far from the arsenal of the United States at Mount Rock." (If a later Congress, at any time, has made appropriations, confusing geography and names, it is only history repeating itself, perhaps.)

In 1808 "The Catawba and Wateree Companies" asked Congress for help. A committee of Congress reported that the canals would be of vast importance and utility to the inhabitants of North and South Carolina, and Tennessee, and that the armory and arsenal of the United States, established at Rocky Mount, would also be considerably benefitted; yet, "in view of the present condition of finances, and critical situation of our country in relation to foreign Governments, it would be unadvisable to apply any public money."

In the Journal of Bishop Francis Asbury (1809) he speaks of preaching near William Heath's, on Fishing Creek, when, "to my surprise a number of United States officers came up. I invited them in. These gentlemen are attached to an establishment at
In the Annals of Congress, under the date of December 26, 1815, the "committee on military affairs" reported a bill "establishing three additional military academies—one within the District of Columbia, one at Mount Dearborn, in South Carolina, and one in the vicinity of Newport, Kentucky." "The bill was read twice and committed." A few days later, in "committee of the whole," Mr. Campbell (probably a misprint, meaning Col. J. J. Chappell, of South Carolina,) "proposed to change the location of the Southern Academy from Mount Dearborn to Columbia, on account of the superior advantages of that place over Mount Dearborn and the eligibility of its situation for such an institution." The House refused by a large majority. Mr. Pickens, of North Carolina, "was in favor of a more upland site than either of those mentioned, and gave a decided preference of the two to Mount Dearborn over Columbia. He proposed a point in Buncombe county." Asheville was soon put in nomination against Mount Dearborn, but was negatived by a large vote. The committee, after a long debate, in which Mr. Calhoun, and Mr. Clay, Speaker of the House, joined, (both advocating three academies,) agreed to strike out three and insert one. A year later, February, 1817, the whole matter was indefinitely postponed.

These references show that for several years an "arsenal and magazine" (in one place the word "armory" is used) were kept up near Rocky Mount. In the original paper, ordering the selection of a place, estimates were given for the following buildings:

"A brick building, three stories high, one hundred and seventy-five feet long and forty-two feet wide, would contain
twenty thousand muskets, artillery, and carriages in proportion, together with all the light appendages thereof. An arched brick magazine, capable of containing two thousand five hundred barrels of powder. Brick barracks, and workshop for one hundred armorers, for the necessary guard."

It does not appear how far this plan was carried out. Mills, writing in 1826, some time after the enterprise was abandoned, says:

"The United States establishment, near Rocky Mount, commands attention also, though now abandoned and in ruins. This circumstance only tends to make it more interesting to the traveler. The buildings erected here were handsome and extensive. The magazine (a conical brick building) has entirely tumbled down. The arsenal is a substantial building, erected close to the canal, constructed by the State, and is the only building of the whole that promises to be really useful. The barracks surround a square, fronted by the officers' quarters, a large brick edifice, the whole erected on a promontory projecting into the river.********Nature furnishes few spots more variously romantic than this, a noble river rendered more interesting by the rocks which impede its course, the islands scattered in the stream, the surrounding hills covered with woods, and towering above it, all induce a wish that the project of a military establishment here had succeeded and that this fairy spot had been the abode of refined society."

The references and quotations in this article have all been verified, so that this short sketch of the Rocky Mount Establishment" is believed to be correct. It is incomplete, as it is prepared without access to sources which would give other items as
well as the time and cause of abandonment.

The local tradition is that Rocky Mount came within one vote of being the West Point of the United States. This may not be so, still those so inclined may speculate as to the effect on our history if a great "national military academy," with all the attendant patronage and influence, had been established on the banks of the Catawba, like that on the Hudson.

In the Grunkelville, which the printers of Mills's Statistics give as one name of Rocky Mount, some readers may not see the design to honor the name of Grimke, by calling the place Grimkeville. Unfortunately, several attempts made to perpetuate names truly worthy have been failures—as Grimkeville, Draytonville, Pinckneyville, Chatham (original name of Cheraw,) Granby, Etc.

B. J. Lossing in 1849 visited Rocky Mount with pen and pencil in hand. He gives several sketches and rather full accounts of the Revolutionary incidents connected with the place. He says:

"Here yet remains the foundation of a projected United States military establishment, to be called Mount Dearborn, which was abandoned." Since Lossing's visit another army has crossed the Catawba at that historic point.

Before the late war a cotton factory stood on the banks of the canal, owned by Mr. Daniel McCullough; the spot still bearing the old name, Mount Dearborn. Mr. McCullough is yet living, one of an unusual group of half a dozen men, all over eighty years of age, near Rocky Mount. They might give some interesting items from their early recollections about the United States establishment.

Robert Mills has a paragraph that should not be overlooked.
"Here (Rocky Mount) repose the ashes of one whose memory should be cherished by Carolinians, for his devotion to their cause in the Revolution, and his subsequent efforts to serve them in his professional capacity. Colonel Senf, the engineer, both of the Catawba Company and of the Santee Canal. He sleeps, in what was his garden, at Rocky Mount, but no obituary stone records his name. A few trees (which he planted in a spot that he had cut in the fashion of a falling garden) shade his grave. Colonel Senf was a military engineer of considerable talent." (Statistics, P. 53)

The two great works of the German engineer, in our State, are now little known. The bed of the Santee Canal is dry, and the very ruins of his arsenal and magazine on Mount Dearborn have perished. If the proposed railroad from Camden to Rocky Mount if built, the silence of the hills around his lonely grave will be disturbed by the scream of the engine—a power he little dreamed of in his day. Let a station, or at least a locomotive, bear his name. Let a stone be placed under those trees to mark the spot where rests, away from kindred and home, the foreigner who helped us in our day of weakness and trial.

May the old Mount never again echo the sound of a hostile gun, or the tread of an army!

Spartanburg, S. C. —Jas. H. Carlisle,