

## Fort Mill and the Red Shirts

If we bring up the topic of "hard times," almost everyone will immediately think of the 1930s and the Great Depression. However, in South Carolina there was a different time that was statistically much worse. That was the Reconstruction era which stretched from the end of the Civil War in 1865 and 1876 when Gen. Wade Hampton was elected governor.

Any proof needed for the claim of most extreme poverty can be easily found in the *Yorkville Enquirer*, where the York County sheriff posted long lists of farms to be auctioned off for failure of the owners to pay their taxes. Farms of a 100 acres and more were put on the block because the owner could not pay taxes that totaled less than \$5. One farm of 77 acres was on the block for non-payment of 50 cents in taxes.

J. R. Haile of Fort Mill reminisced in 1925 about those days. Haile blamed the "Black and Tan" legislature composed of native white "Scalaways" and "Carpetbaggers" from the North along with ex-slaves.

Confederate veterans were barred from voting and women across the U.S. were still denied suffrage. Some protesters joined the Ku Klux Klan. A second form of protest came through the Tax Payers' Conventions (there were two, the first in 1871 and the second in 1874).

Fraud by high state officials and their favoring of three Scalawag investors on the "Blue Ridge bonds" resulted in South Carolina acquiring a state debt of more than \$12 million.

The legislature appropriated \$300,000 for schools and teacher pay. A year later the teachers' pay certificates had little value. The state asylum got not one penny for operation for six months.

There was an active group of Democrats who could not vote but vowed to take back the state and establish white supremacy. Haile wrote that from the ocean to the mountains ("Horry to Oconee") "Hurrah for Hampton and white supremacy" became the rallying point. In this atmosphere York County put forward the name of Gen. Wade Hampton for governor, the first county to do so.

The state government under the control of Radical Republicans sensed that they had a full-blown rebellion in the making and called on Washington to send federal troops. Fort Mill's share of occupying troops was 18 men under a lieutenant. They were housed in the old Fort Mill Academy which was in disrepair.

To its surprise, the Fort Mill community found the federal squad was quite friendly and supportive of the white supremacy banner. But the federal presence also encouraged about a 100 men from the black community - under the leadership of Jim Byers - to organize. Loyal blacks informed the Main Street merchants of Byers's plans.

When Byers's men marched to a speaker's stand near the depot, they were followed by Democrats waving their flag. The federal troops did nothing and the blacks, realizing they lacked the support they were counting on, fled to the fields. From that point on, the "Red Shirts" of Fort Mill were in control.

Capt. J. W. Marshall formed a Red Shirt cavalry which numbered around 250 men of all ages and included a dozen black Democrats.

Nov. 7, 1876 was election day. There were around 500 votes and the Democrats won by a margin of 106 votes. The ballot box had been successfully "stuffed" considering there were far fewer than 500 eligible voters in the township.

Wade Hampton was elected governor and a deal was made with Washington to remove the federal troops. As for the debt, the state remained crippled. It is said that it was 1940 before South Carolina was financially as well off as it had been in 1860.