

Banks set up school in Fort Mill Banks and Academy streets named in his honor

The story of the Banks family in this area is an interesting one. The first to come was John Marjoriebanks (in the second generation the name was shortened to Banks). John came without his family from Thornhill, Scotland right after the Revolutionary War and died in Chester County not long after.

The Marjoriebanks family in Scotland received no word of John Marjoriebank's fate. His son Samuel came to America to search for him. While in Chester Samuel fell in love with a Chester girl, Elizabeth Robinson. The newlyweds were to sail back to Scotland but Elizabeth is said to have taken one look at the Atlantic Ocean and refused to go.

The couple found land in Fairfield County and raised 10 children. The ninth child was William Banks, an ambitious lad who worked his way through a series of schools before graduating second in his class from Franklin College (later the University of Georgia) in 1837.

In 1841 William Banks became the pastor of Catholic Presbyterian Church near Chester. His record was impressive. Over a 30-year span, Banks baptized more than 1100, performed more than 300 marriages, brought 11 young men into the ministry, and, despite constant migrations to the West, received more than 700 members into the church.

When the Civil War came, William Banks, in his late 40s, enlisted and served for three years as chaplain of the Fourth Regiment of the S.C. Cavalry. When the war was over his health was ruined and his property, including a treasured library, was lost. Banks asked for a release from Catholic and, despite his congregation's objections, moved to Williamsburg County to pastor three old churches. His health got worse and in 1872 he returned to take charge of Old Waxhaw and Six Mile in Lancaster County, Unity Presbyterian in Fort Mill, and Providence in Mecklenburg County, N.C.

Banks also taught at the Wolfsville Academy on the Providence to Waxhaw road. While at the Academy he founded a small church at Marvin, N.C., which is named Banks Presbyterian in his honor. In March 1875, the Rev. Banks preached a sermon at Providence in the morning and then mounted a horse to ride in the rain to Fort Mill's Unity church. The activity was too much. He died March 17, 1875 and is buried in Fort Mill's Unity cemetery. On his tombstone are the words, "An Israelite indeed, in whom was no guile."

Banks and his wife, Mary Elvira Harrington of Sumter County, had two children. The daughter, Harriet, married Dr. Joseph B. Mack, a Presbyterian minister. The son, Alexander Robinson Banks, also a Confederate veteran and Davidson College graduate, became the leading educator of his time.

Sometime in the years 1869-'71, A.R. Banks got in trouble with Union troops over his Ku Klux Klan activities. He fled to Pleasant Ridge, Ala., and married there. When his father died, Alexander returned to Fort Mill and founded the Catawba Male Academy, an excellent preparatory school that sent many graduates to West Point and Annapolis. Boarding students came from across the South. Streets in Fort Mill leading to the academy were named Banks Street and Academy Street.

Banks stayed at the Fort Mill Academy until 1888, when he left at the invitation of the Rev. James Spratt White to become Rock Hill's first superintendent of schools. In 1892 Banks accepted the position of principal of the Presbyterian High School in Rock Hill. The high school was established the year before by the First Presbyterian Church of Rock Hill and the Bethel Presbytery with the intention of providing a classical education for boys. There was a nearby dormitory later called Catawba Hall.

The Presbyterian High School building still survives as a portion of the Withers-WTS building on the Winthrop University campus. Where Catawba Hall stood until 1968 is now a parking lot on the Eden Terrace side of the building.

The school turned out to be a financial burden. The property was taken over by Davidson College. Banks went on to York as superintendent and from 1904 to 1910 taught at Lancaster. He also taught at Kershaw, Blythewood, Congaree, Anderson, Hyatt Park, Bethune and, last, Ridgeway. He died at Ridgeway in 1920.