

Thomas "Kanawah" Spratt and how he came to befriend the Catawbas

By Louise Pettus Fort Mill Times

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While "weak in body," Thomas Sprot of Anson County, N.C., wrote his will on Jan. 15, 1751, and left property to his five daughters and "to my only son Thomas, plantation on Twelve Mile Creek."

Twelve Mile Creek begins Mecklenburg County, N.C., and flowed into the Catawba River, forming the southern boundary of the Catawba Indian Land in what is now Lancaster County.

To his daughter Martha, he left a "plantation on Sugar Creek...." It has been speculated that, somehow, Thomas Sprot (or Spratt) Jr. (1731-1807) must have exchanged his inherited acreage for that of his sister Martha. Other writers say that Thomas "Kanawha" Spratt was on his way to settle in either Abbeville or Fairforest (near present-day Spartanburg) when the Catawba Indians persuaded him to settle among them.

There is not a great deal of agreement among the various legends related to Kanawha Spratt's arrival in the Fort Mill district (the date of arrival varies from 1755 to 1765). Some say the Indians offered him all of the land he wanted but Kanawha's grandson, Thomas Dryden Spratt, wrote that the first survey of the land showed 4,700 acres in 1787.

But, T.D. Spratt added, Kanawha had given away or disposed of some land prior that to that - some for "no more than a song." Spratt's Catawba Indian lease, dated Dec. 15, 1787, was for 4,535 acres and there was a second lease in the name of his daughter, Mary Spratt, for 640 acres.

The nickname "Kanawha" was given to Spratt by the Catawbas. Spratt fought with the Indians on several occasions and it is said that on an expedition in the area of present-day West Virginia Spratt displayed such courage that the Indians named him for the nearby river. That's the same way the Catawba chief earned the name "New River."

The Catawbas were greatly attached to Spratt. Thomas D. Spratt gave evidence of that in a tale about Spratt participating in the signing of the famed Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence on May 20, 1775. Spratt was to be a signer but "instead of dipping into an ink well, he dipped into a gallon jug." Spratt was placed in the county jail and when some Catawba Indian friends heard of it, they "got on their horses, rode up to the jail, ripped off two or three planks and took Kanawha out, put him on his horse, then they raced their steeds around and around the court house several times - yelling and whooping - after which the Catawbas and Kanawah headed their horses back down Nation Ford Road for their homes in what is now Fort Mill."

Thomas D. Spratt also tells of a dispute that Kanawha had with old Samuel Knox, the first leaseholder of Catawba land, over "the prior right to the tract of land called the Mulberry fields on Catawba River below Neely's Ferry now owned by Stanhope Harris, the controversy terminated in a fight between the two. I have heard that they rolled over one another downhill from a spring on the premises some 50 or more yards. Some of Knox's descendants tell me that he got the better of the fight, but my memory serves me to the effect that it was a drawn battle."

Thomas Spratt was one of the first agents for the Catawba Indians. He witnessed their leases and protected them against the unscrupulous

The legends have it that he adopted several Indian children. Maurice Moore says that the Catawba queen, Sally New River, grew up in his household, but that is surely wrong. She was married by the time Spratt arrived. But Spratt did adopt Peter Harris, an Indian whose parents died in a smallpox epidemic. Peter Harris is buried in the Spratt graveyard on Brickyard Road in Fort Mill, not far from Spratt's grave.

Spratt came to the Catawba Indian Land with his wife Elizabeth Bigger. Their children were Mary Spratt; Martha Spratt, who married Isaac Garrison; Elizabeth, who married Hugh White; Jane, who married

Thomas McNeal; Anne; James, who married Margaret McRee; Susannah, who married Joseph McCorkle; and Rachel, who married Arthur Erwin.

While some Spratt descendants went west with other immigrants seeking better cotton lands in the pre-Civil War period, a large number of descendants (including John M. Spratt, U.S. Congressman) still live in York County.

Louise Pettus is a renowned local historian. "Fort Mill History" is sponsored each month by the Fort Mill Downtown Association. Check them out on the Web at www.fortmilledowntown.com.