History of Old Fort

The history of the "old fort" began with the continuing threat of hostilities between the Cherokee Indians and the first Europeans to encroach on Cherokee lands. From 1700 to 1800, many violent conflicts would erupt along the boundaries of present day McDowell County, especially in the northern and western portions.

Prior to 1750, only explorers, traders and trappers ventured into this wilderness at the foot of the Blue Ridge. Few Cherokee villages remained, though the tribe continued to claim the area as hunting territory. First contact between the Native Americans and the white settlers had been for the most part amiable. Trade patterns developed, with both groups benefiting. However, as more white families began to push toward the mountains, taking more and more of the desirable land for homesteads and farms, the Cherokee resentment began to increase.

When the struggle for control of North America erupted into the French and Indian War, both the English and the French contended for the support of the Cherokee Nation. Because of their already growing hostility toward the English settlers, most Cherokees allied themselves with the French. It was during this period that the few intrepid pioneers, who had already established themselves in present day McDowell County, began to construct forts for protection against the Cherokee. Perhaps two of the more than one dozen McDowell County forts were constructed during this time period; Cathey's Fort near present day Woodlawn, and McDowell's Fort near Pleasant Gardens.

The twenty-year span between the advent of the French and Indian War (or the Cherokee Wars, as this conflict is often called) and the American Revolution was fraught with continued hostilities between Indian and settler. By the spring of 1776, while the increasing number of local settlers considered their break from England's rule, the Cherokee were turning up the heat on the frontier. - The British government forbade settlement beyond the Blue Ridge, primarily because they feared losing control of the independent minded Ulster Scot settlers. All land north and west of the mountains was designated as Cherokee territory. Encouraged by the Crown to continue attacks, the Cherokee believed as they were told, that their land would eventually be returned to them. Several forays into the area left settlers dead in Montford Cove, Turkey Cove, Crooked Creek and Nebo. A string of forts began to spring up throughout the territory, some hastily constructed; some mere fortifications of dwelling houses. Davidson’s Fort was built by the Militia to defend the settlers from the Cherokee in 1776.

The town of Catawba Vale was founded on 25 January, 1872, one year later on February 21, 1873 the words Catawba Vale were replaced with Old Fort. The once proud fort that gave this town its name is believed to have stood until 1916 when the flood removed the last vestiges of the fort.
Andrews Geyser. The geyser, built in 1879, was man-made and positioned next to Mill Creek. It was a popular tourist attraction, particularly eye-catching for railroad passengers ascending the nine miles of track and tunnels that peaked at the top of Swannanoa Gap. In 1903, the Round Knob Hotel burned. The geyser was relocated, restored and named for Alexander Boyd Andrews, Vice President of the Western North Carolina Railroad. Today, the geyser is part of a public park maintained by the town of Old Fort. Picnic tables are on site in addition to a N.C. Civil War Trail marker. One of the last skirmishes of the Civil War took place at the base of Swannanoa Gap.

Old Fort Arrowhead. July 27th 1930 at 2:30 in the afternoon, thousands came to see the unveiling of the marker to commemorate the founding of the town of Old Fort. On the lawn of D.H. Gosorn, the master of ceremonies, D.T. Roughton, president of the Old Fort Memorial Association and thousands of visitors watched Marie Nesbitt unveil the marker.

Maj. Wilson Monument. The seemingly impossible feat of running a railroad across the Blue Ridge at this point after the flood of 1916 was accomplished by native talent. Major J. W. Wilson was the engineer and guiding genius Maj Wilson monument In May 2004 the monument was removed from its place along the railroad tracks to a more prominent place at the renovated depot at Old Fort.

Dam#1 Catawba Falls In 1923 Colonel Daniel W. Adams was a conservationist who lived in Old Fort from 1914 until his death in 1957. Prior to his army enlistment in 1917 he was employed by the U.S. Forest Service, which he joined in 1909. In 1911 he invented and constructed the first forest fire tower in the world, which was erected in the Arkansas Ouacita National Forest. In 1912 and 1913 he was engaged in purchasing land for the U.S. Government as part of Pisgah National Forest and Shenandoah National Park. Milestones in the busy and civic life of Colonel Adams included spearheading the establishment of a water system for Old Fort and building of a power plant at Catawba Falls. He also opened feldspar and mica mines in Mitchell County and helped establish the Daniel Boone National Forest. His efforts in the conservation program were a major contribution in the establishment of National Parks and Forest in the south eastern United States. On August 31 1989 Daniel W. Adams sells the land containing the Catawba Falls to the Trust for Public Land Inc.

Power Building Dam #1 In 1925 The power building for Dam#1 was built on the Catawba River on the south side. The masons that built it left their names on the front of the building which can still be seen today.

Mountain Gateway Museum, a building constructed of river rock that sits near the center of town and along Mill Creek. Inside, a 14-minute video in a small screening room reveals the story of the town’s rich history. The museum is actually the old community center, built in 1937 as a WPA project. On one level, visitors will find tools and other household items used by the pioneers. The second level offers a view of what the inside of a log cabin looked like in the frontier days. On the grounds, you will find two log cabins that have been moved to the property, believed to have been the site of the original fort. To celebrate its history, each April the town throws a big party called Pioneer Day with re-enactors, music and food.

Thomas Wolfe. Readers of Thomas Wolfe, need to make a stop at the Old Fort Cemetery on Cemetery Road, just off Main Street, where you will find one of the Wolfe’s angel statues. Wolfe’s father lost a marble angel (imported from the famous Carrara Marble Works in Italy) to an Old Fort resident in a poker game. The angel now peers down on the grave of an Old Fort resident. This angel may be the one that Wolfe placed in American literature.

Old Fort’s 7 Wonders

Old Fort Chamber of Commerce
PO Box 1447
Old Fort, NC 28762
Phone: 828-668-7223
Email: chamber@oldfortchamber.com