

Originally printed June 10, 1988

PETER HARRIS, CATAWBA INDIAN

In the old Spratt family burial ground in Fort Mill there is a tombstone that reads, "The Body of Peter Harris A Catawba Indian by His Request Was Buried Here 1823. Age 70 years. Left an Orphan He was Raised by Thomas Spratt, Senr. Like All His Tribe, He was Ever Friendly to the Americans, and For His Services in Our War of Independence Received a Pension From The State."

Peter Harris led a remarkable life. He was orphaned in 1759 at the age of 3 years, both parents dying in one of the major smallpox epidemics that reduced the Catawba population to only a small fraction of its original numbers.

Thomas Spratt, an early settler who was nicknamed "Kanawha" by the whites and called "Cainhoy" by the Catawbas, came to the area about 1761, when Peter Harris was 5 years of age. According to Spratt's grandson, Leonidas D. Spratt, "my grandfather found him and raised him in the family."

When the American Revolution touched South Carolina, Peter Harris joined the Third South Carolina Regiment commanded by Colonel William Thompson. It is believed that Thomas Spratt arranged the enlistment. Harris was wounded at the Battle of Stono.

After his recovery from his wound, Peter Harris joined Thomas Sumter's forces in the company of Capt. Thomas Drennan of York County. Harris was undoubtedly at the famous encampment at Clems Branch when Sumter was elected general.

In 1871, Leonidas Spratt recollected what his family told him about Peter Harris going to England sometime about 1783. Spratt wrote, "Some three white men, whose names I forget [Adam Carouth was one], took Peter and two other Catawbas to Europe for a show. After making some money out of them by taking them to London and Ireland and defrauding them as usual and leaving them. On their way home the other two jumped in the sea and Peter alone came back to his old hunting grounds."

It is not known how long Harris spent on the tour but a musical, "The Catawba Travellers," was written about the English experiences of Peter Harris and his fellow Catawbas and had its first performance at London's Sadler's Wells theater about 1795.

Certainly, Peter Harris was back in America by 1794 because that year he was granted a 200-acre state bounty of land on Fishing Creek in Chester County for his Revolutionary War services.

Under the terms of an act of Congress in 1818, Harris qualified for a federal pension of \$8 a month. Five years later he applied to the state of South Carolina for a pension. The eloquent petition was written for Harris by Senator Crafts of Charleston District. It has been reprinted many times since.

Peter Harris's petition: " I'm one of the lingering embers of an almost extinguished race, Our graves will soon be our only habitations, I am one of the few stalks; that still remain in the field, where the tempest of the revolution passed, I fought against the British for your sake, The British have Disappeared,

and you are free, Yet from me the British took nothing, nor have I gained anything by their defeat. I pursued the deer for my subsistence, the deer are disappearing, & I must starve God ordained me for the forest, and my ambition is the shade, but the strength of my arm decays, and my feet fail in the chase, the hand which fought for your liberties is now open for your relief. In my Youth I bled in battle, that you might be independent, let not my heart in my old age, bleed, for the want of your Commiseration."

In response, the state of South Carolina awarded Peter Harris a pension of \$60 a year for his Revolutionary War services.

According to Leonidas Spratt, Peter Harris came to Leonidas' father, James Spratt, and "told him he was going to die, and wished to be buried at the side of old Cainhoy....My father promised to fulfil his wish. Peter then took his bed, and in about two weeks after died."

In a death bed confession, Peter Harris told James Spratt that he had only one regret. He said he had killed a British soldier who laid aside his gun to get a drink of water at a spring. Harris said that it was the act of "a coward, rather than of a brave man, in which category he had always hoped his fellow-man would place him."