

Early Exploration of the Santee ~

It was the year 1700 when, John Lawson, an English historian and explorer, made a trip from Charles Town, by canoe, up the Atlantic coast to the mouth of the Santee and up the river. Lawson arrived at (what later became) Lenud's Ferry on January 2, 1701, and there he was joined by an Indian guide, who, by pre-arrangement, had paddled his canoe up to that point to meet him. Here also, he became acquainted with Captain Mac, an Indian Chief, head of the Santee tribe, who lived in the vicinity. Whether this contact with Captain Mac was a coincidence or whether the Chief expected the explorer's arrival is not known, but the Indian appeared friendly and extended a cordial invitation to Lawson to spend the following night with him at his village about seven miles distance in the direction Lawson intended to travel. Being impressed with the sincerity of the invitation, Lawson accepted with alacrity; to be honored by such a personage as the Chief of the Santee tribe was no small distinction.

Promptly on the following morning, Lawson dressed in his best raiment and proceeded by canoe, with the assistance of his SeeWee guide, up the Santee swamp in which, because of storms in the upcountry, the water had risen thirty-six feet. This extended navigation from the river proper through the swamp to the high lands. He traveled by water to a point up a ravine and to a landing known later as Jaudon's Gulley, now known as Dave's Bottom, and situated on the plantation of the present-day S.B. Gordon. From this point, he had to travel by foot along an Indian trail towards the encampment across Wee Tee Branch (north side of Santee River, in what became Williamsburg County) for a distance of about five miles.

While trudging along this trail for a distance of three miles to Wee Tee Branch, Lawson's mind was evidently occupied with the various problems of conducting himself with the grace and dignity expected of a diplomat, representing William and Mary, King and Queen of England, Ireland, and France, and guardians of the Faith, to another, a Chief of the Vassals and Subjects of the great and powerful tribe of the Santee's. His mind being fully absorbed with these weighty problems, he then arrived at Wee Tee Branch, the crossing of which was by means of a foot log. Because of the overflow, this log was submerged, and, as everyone knows who is familiar with the Santee, these submerged logs are very treacherous, as the deposit of silt suspended in the water makes them slippery as ice. Without exercising extra caution, Lawson advanced upon the foot log to about midway of the stream, when, in the twinkling of an eye, the whole universe seemed to have reversed itself, and he

found himself in a nosedive towards the bottom. After floundering around for some time in the muddy stream, he finally got up on his feet, but having lost faith in his ability to re-establish his equilibrium upon the slippery log, gained the opposite bank by wading the remaining distance.

Cold and wet, and covered with a coating of yellow mud, Lawson reached the western side of Wee Tee Branch, with two miles yet to go. To add to his embarrassment and discomfort, he was met there by Captain Mac and his military staff, who escorted him, with all pomp and politeness, to the Indian village where the braves, squaws, and children were assembled, ready to honor the distinguished guest. The Chief, however, seemed to have been equal to the occasion, and courteously ignored Lawson's bedraggled condition, and as soon as they arrived at the village, ordered the stands be prepared for the bonfires provided for the evening's entertainment, and had them lighted at once, giving his guest a means to warm himself and dry out his soggy clothing. Lawson gradually thawed and dried himself while watching the graceful figures of the Indian braves and maidens as they mingled in the Snake, Crow, Buffalo, and Ghost dances. After an elaborate dinner and supper of venison, hominy, and pies made from nuts, berries, and wild honey, there were more dances and other forms of entertainment. It was not until the early hours of the morning that Lawson retired to the wigwam reserved for him to get a few hours of sleep. The next day, he bade farewell to the Chief and staff, returned to his canoe, and continued on his travels of exploration up the Santee River.

The site of this Indian village, located on what was then the plantation of W.C. Garner (it is unknown who owner is now), was strategically situated from a military point of view. On the South and within sight of the village was Wee Tee Lake, a part of Santee Swamp; on the other sides, it was protected from surprise attacks by a flat drain of dense trees and undergrowth, with but only one opening for ingress or egress. At the foot of the elevation, towards the lake, was a spring which was convenient and ample for the needs of the inhabitants. (Not sure if the spring is still there today, but) when this writing was done, it was still pure and sparkling and extending an invitation to the tired and thirsty fisherman or sportsman to rest and partake thereof.

Within a stone's throw of the site of the village is a tumulus, which today is the largest and most distinct mound of this type within the bounds of Williamsburg County. Judging from its proportions, it must have been used as a burying place for the dead for many years. This tumulus was evidently the last resting place for the

members of this tribe of Santee Indians, and its location aptly fits the ideal of the Indian's belief in their 'future happy hunting grounds.' It is within sight of Wee Tee Lake, a stream (that was) teeming with numerous species of the choicest fish and surrounded by a forest, which even today is (or may be) a mecca for sportsmen seeking game.

It was here that the funeral procession from the village, accompanied by their dirges and tomtom, halted, and the usual ceremony commenced. What an eerie and melancholy scene this must have been when the ceremonial rites were enacted at this mound. The braves squatted froglike in a circle, while sandwiched between them were the squaws standing aloft, in their hands were flaring pine torches. These they moved with many evolutions, accompanying each movement with a fearful cry, which at intervals was chorused by the chant of the assembled group and echoed by the owls perched upon branches of the surrounding oaks. The adult corpse was placed in a standing position, together with bow and arrows and cooking utensils, and covered completely with earth. Children were placed in an earthenware vessel and covered in the same manner. There they were supposed to rest and await the coming of the Resurrection morn, thus proving that the primitive Red Man held to a belief in the immortality of the soul.

The opportunities offered to European immigrants in this undeveloped country was a great boon to these oppressed and over-populated people, but to the native Red Man, their coming was a calamity. As they arrived, they brought with them the various diseases common in their native countries, but unknown among the Indians. Smallpox seems to have been the most fatal scourge. Not knowing the preventatives nor the treatment, this disease spread among the various tribes and Indians died like flies, with the result that these tribes, once numerous, were greatly reduced in numbers. In addition to this, the Indians were further decimated by intertribal wars, instigated by the Spaniards on the one side, against the English and French on the other.

So reduced were these tribes, that in the census of 1700, there were only 106 Winyahs left, 57 SeeWees, and 127 Santees and Congarees. From this it is obvious that the Whites, as they arrived at (what became) Lenud's Ferry, and in antlike fashion, began running over each other, seeking sites along the Santee Indian trail, met with little opposition from the Red Man. They rushed up the trail now known as the Santee River road (north side of the Santee) and selected sites for their

permanent homes, while occasionally passing by, unmolested, the few Indian families they encountered.

There is no record to the effect that the few Red Men remaining in this area resisted this intrusion to the extent of becoming belligerent. On the contrary, they lived ‘in remarkable friendship,’ doing each other no wrong or injustice. The only instance of conflict was when the noise from the White Man’s water-mill frightened their game.

As the number of these immigrants seeking home sites increased, the Indians kept retreating westward until they went beyond the confines of this section and merged with the Congaree’s and other tribes at the head of the Santee River in the upper part of the state. This seems to mark “minis” to the history of the Santee Indian’s occupation of the lands along the Santee, in what is now known as Williamsburg County. However, in about the year 1715, at the end of the Yemessee War, a tribe of Cape Fear Indians who had participated in the conflict, crossed this area on their return journey and settled at Indiantown (east of Kingstree). After spending some years in this area, at the head of Black Mingo Swamp, they retraced their steps across the Santee River and re-settled in Berkeley County. There they stayed, and over the years, mixed with other races.”

“Lo! The poor Indian, whose untutor’d mind,
Sees God in the clouds and hears Him in the wind.”

Editor’s Note: This history story is mostly about a particular area in the lower part of Williamsburg County, as you can tell, and was written many years ago by a cousin. I particularly wanted to include it because of its history of Lawson’s early trip up the Santee and his encounters with the Indian people; a history I know very little about . . . hope you enjoy. I sure did.

“Life Along the Santee in Williamsburg County, S.C.” by P.G. Gourdin

Edited by Keith Gourdin