

# Trading Ford



Ten Thousand Years  
of American History  
in Piedmont  
North Carolina

Rowan and Davidson Counties



### *Introduction*

In October, 1929 the North Carolina Historical Commission and Citizens of Davidson County, N. C. erected the monument featured on the cover. The bronze plaque reads:

**TRADING FORD**  
**GENERAL NATHANAEL GREENE**  
IN HIS MASTERLY RETREAT FROM THE BRITISH ARMY  
UNDER LORD CORNWALLIS, CROSSED THE YADKIN AT  
TRADING FORD, ONE-HALF MILE SOUTHEAST OF THIS  
SPOT, FEBRUARY 2-3, 1781. A SUDDEN RISE IN THE RIVER  
PREVENTED THE PASSAGE OF THE BRITISH AND PERMITTED  
THE AMERICAN ARMY TO ESCAPE AND PREPARE FOR THE  
BATTLE OF GUILFORD COURT HOUSE

This monument is part of a 1.1 acre site which also includes a portion of the historic road bed over which Greene's army passed leaving the Trading Ford in February 1781. It was intended to have been a park, but instead was neglected and fell into disrepair. In many ways, it is symbolic of the entire Trading Ford area. In November 2009 the Churchland Lions Club and Trading Ford Historic District Preservation Association restored the Monument. We hope this will be the beginning of a positive future for this historic area.

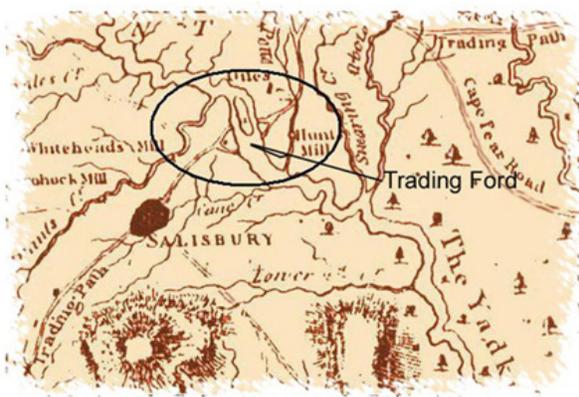
## *The Trading Ford Historic Area*

Within an area along a four-mile section of the Yadkin River, between present-day Salisbury and Lexington, North Carolina, and the lands adjacent to it, lies a concentration of historic features and sites reflecting over 400 years of habitation, colonization, transportation, and military use. Recovered artifacts indicate that Native Americans lived on this land ten thousand years ago. Archaeologists have only superficially looked for the evidences of their lives. One partial excavation, done in 1946 about four miles down-river, found evidence of a village of the Uwharrie Culture dating between 1300 and 1500 AD. In 1938 Joffre Lanning Coe excavated seven test squares in the area of the Sapona village described in 1701 by John Lawson and found "a major site." Other sites remain unfound or unexamined.



Pottery shard from Sapona Town site  
(Town Creek Indiana Mound, Coe)

Our earliest written record of the area comes from the diaries of the Spaniard Juan Pardo's expeditions in 1567 and 1568. He and his men, who may have been the first Europeans the Indians had ever seen, are thought to have visited the area twice, and built the largest of their forts there. Pedro Menendez de Aviles, governor of La Florida, the sprawling Spanish colonial territory, was so impressed with the descriptions of Guatari he intended to make it the site of his personal estate, a 5,500-square-mile domain promised him by the Crown. The fate of the men who stayed there is unknown, but the fort was short-lived. The Spaniards disappeared from the area, leaving the location of Fort Santiago a mystery that intrigues and eludes contemporary historians. The Guatari also disappeared, perhaps leaving a remembrance in the name of a series of bluffs along the river bank, the Heights of Gowerie.



Detail from Collet 1770 Map of North Carolina  
(Cummings)

Following the Indian paths, explorer John Lederer visited the area in 1670, as did several other early explorers. John Needham is believed to have been murdered at the Trading Ford by his companion Indian John in 1667. The Indian path crossed the Yadkin River at the point early twentieth century local historian William Kizziah called "the old Trading Ford (before 1670)", noting the location as that used by Lederer. It was this prominent river crossing that led travelers through this area. In 1701 John Lawson visited the Trading Ford during

his "Journey of a Thousand Miles", describing the Sapona Indian village that was present at the time on the northern bank. Lawson's words paint a still recognizable picture of this ancient land:

"Nor could all Europe afford a pleasanter Stream, .... These Indians live in a clear field, about a mile square, which they would have sold me .... One side of the river is hemmed in with mountainy ground, the other side proving as rich a soil to the eye of a knowing person with us, as any this western world can afford."

Indian paths began a slow transformation into a trading path. The Trading Ford became part of the route used by Europeans who traded with the Indians. It stretched from near Fort Henry (Petersburg), Virginia, southwestward to the Catawba and Waxhaw Indian nations beyond present-day Charlotte, North Carolina.

As the eighteenth century progressed, European settlement reached the backcountry of North Carolina. The Jersey Settlement, north of the Trading Ford in present Davidson County, recorded several families there in 1745. By 1753, there were enough people living in the Yadkin valley to warrant the formation of Rowan County, which encompassed a far larger area than it does today. Six miles southwest of the Trading Ford, on the Trading Path, the town of Salisbury was granted a charter in 1755.

While the earlier "old Trading Ford" path (also called the Island Ford) over the Big Island in the Yadkin River continued in use, by 1755 colonists had established a new route just downriver from the island. Here the river could be forded on foot or horseback when waters were low. When the river was swollen, a ferry carried travelers safely across. Numerous fords and ferries were established along the Yadkin; however only the Trading Ford and the Shallow Ford, forty miles north, could accommodate heavily-loaded wagons. Traveling west in 1755, North Carolina's Governor Arthur Dobbs wrote of the Trading Ford:

"[The] Yadkin ... is a large, beautiful river where there is a ferry. It is nearly 300 yards over, it was at this time fordable, scarce coming to the horses' bellies. At six miles distant I arrived in Salisbury, the county seat of Rowan. The town is just laid out, the courthouse built, and seven or eight log houses erected."



The fledgling town of Salisbury grew rapidly as settlers traveled south from Pennsylvania on the "Great Road", which initially crossed the Yadkin River at the Shallow Ford, then passed through Salisbury. The roads continued to evolve. As a road was opened from the Moravian towns (Winston-Salem) south to cross the Yadkin in the Trading Ford area, later appellations of the "Great Road" came to be applied to that route.

By the fall of 1780 the American colonies were embroiled in the throes of birth as an independent nation, and the War for Independence had moved into North Carolina. With Lord Cornwallis' British Army in Charlotte and Colonel Patrick Ferguson ranging throughout the western North and South Carolina countryside threatening the populace, Piedmont North Carolina's peace and security were shattered. Many fled north to Virginia. Camped at the Yadkin Ford, about a mile upriver from the Trading Ford, U.S. General Jethro Sumner planned earthwork fortifications to defend the ford. Whether these planned fortifications were built remains to be determined, as does the location of the two camps in the area.



Nathanael Greene, by Charles Willson Peale (*Independence National Historical Park Collection*)

In February 1781 the war moved to the banks of the Yadkin. Nathanael Greene, General of the American Southern Army, was leading Cornwallis' British forces across North Carolina, away from their base of supply in Charleston, S. C. On February 2nd, Greene and General Daniel Morgan reached Salisbury, the military headquarters of the Salisbury District, which included most of western North Carolina. They began moving the supplies stored in Salisbury, their own troops, the prisoners taken at Cowpens, and fleeing civilians to and across the Trading Ford. For two days they ferried men and supplies across the river, with 1,800 men reaching the safety of the far shore. Left behind were 100 Virginia riflemen, a small party of N. C. cavalry, and a few wagons south of the Ford. The vanguard of the British army, under Banastre "Bloody" Tarleton and General Charles O'Hara, moved toward them just as dusk descended on February 3rd. The U.S. troops surprised and fired several rounds at the British, then abandoned their wagons and crossed the Yadkin two miles down. The Americans lost 2, while the British lost 10 or 12 killed and wounded. By the time the British reached the river, it was too high to ford, and all the boats were with the US army on the far shore.

The next morning Lord Cornwallis' main army, a total of 2,100, arrived at the Trading Ford. The artillery moved to the top of a nearby bluff and shelled the opposite bank, where Green, unruffled, tended to correspondence. Greene left the Yadkin that evening. Cornwallis, unable to pursue, stayed in Salisbury until the 6th, when he headed north toward the crossing at the Shallow Ford.

This event in the Revolutionary War was important more for what didn't happen than for what did. Greene had planned to reunite his forces in Salisbury and face Cornwallis there. However, the rapid pace of the pursuing British had foiled his plan. An engagement with less than his full complement could have been disastrous, especially if the Americans had been caught with their backs to the River, or with a force fragmented while the crossing was occurring. Greene's successful crossing of the Yadkin afforded him time to reach Virginia where he was able to resupply his men and face Cornwallis in the Battle of Guilford Courthouse the following month.

The Trading Ford basin didn't lack men of vision and ingenuity. In 1814 Rowan county petitioned the state for a bridge. Lewis Beard employed Ithiel Town, a native of Connecticut, to design and build a bridge upriver in 1818. This bridge greatly reduced the use of nearby fords and ferries. The Beard bridge is thought to have been the first bridge across the Yadkin. It rested on five stone pillars, and was of wood construction with a protective overhead cover. Town later patented the design and licensed its use throughout the nation. The Beard bridge soon connected Salisbury with the town of Lexington, founded in 1828. The bridge fell into disrepair after the Civil War, and foot, horse, and wagon traffic returned to the Trading Ford and other crossings along the river. However, as railroads became the newest transportation mode, the North Carolina Railroad (which ran between Charlotte and Goldsboro) built a bridge over the Yadkin in 1855.



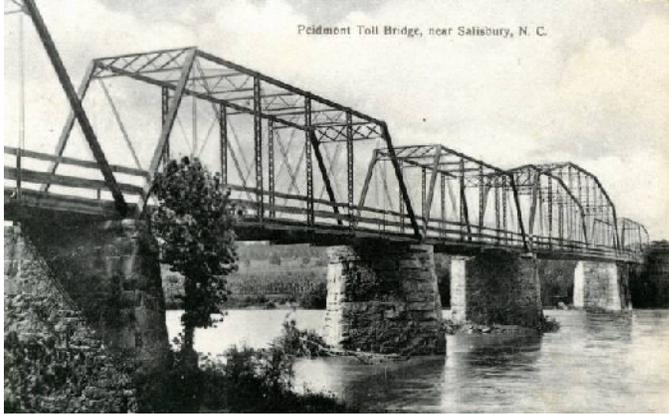
Robert Knox Sneden's 1864 watercolor of a prison train heading to Salisbury (*Eye of the Storm*, Bryan & Lankford)



When the War between the States began, North Carolina was governed by John W. Ellis, born north of the Trading Ford on lands first purchased by his grandfather in 1758. Governor Ellis was not inclined to leave the union, but also could not with clear conscience send North Carolina troops to fight against the south. When this was demanded of him, he sided with those who favored secession. He died in office in 1861, and was buried in the family cemetery on the banks of the river where he had grown up. His body was later moved to the Old English Cemetery in Salisbury, but the graves of many of his immediate family still remain there, as does a footstone bearing his initials "J.W.E."

The defense of the railroad bridge prompted the building of Camp Yadkin (also called Fort York) on the northern bank of the Yadkin in 1864. This fort was a series of earthwork rifle trenches and artillery batteries on a high hill overlooking the river. On April 12, 1865, General George Stoneman's Union troops marched south from the Shallow Ford, dispersed Confederate forces at Grant's Creek, occupied Salisbury, and burned the Confederate prison. They marched to the Yadkin River, intent upon destroying the railroad bridge, and set up artillery positions on a hill on the southern bank. They fired across the river all afternoon, but the 1000-1200 men under General Zebulon York defending the Fort and the river passes prevailed, and the Union troops withdrew after dark, leaving the bridge undamaged. Three days after Lee surrendered at Appomattox, York's troops at Camp Yadkin won the last Confederate victory in North Carolina.





1899 Piedmont Toll Bridge

In 1899, upon the pillars of the original 1818 Beard Bridge, the Piedmont Toll Bridge was erected. It was used until 1922, when the "free bridge", the Wil-Cox Bridge (now a pedestrian bridge closed to vehicles) was built by the state. The stone pillars which bore the early Beard and toll bridge spans still stand amid the yellowish-red waters of the Yadkin.

In the early 1900s, the Trading Ford, and nearby St. John's Mill (built before the Civil War, burned in 1913), were popular picnic sites and buggy ride destinations, informally filling the role of community cultural resources. However, in the 1920s, things began to change in the Trading Ford area. The free Wil-Cox Bridge ended the use of fords and ferries. High Rock dam was built downriver, sometimes flooding adjacent low lands near the Trading Ford. A power plant (now Duke Energy) was built on the southern bank of the Trading Ford, industrializing that segment of the landscape and restricting public access. In 1979, the North Carolina Railroad built a hump yard on the northern bank, through the Native American lands described by John Lawson in 1701.

### *Preservation Ups and Downs*

When we began to pay attention to this rich historic area at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it had been ignored for decades by both developers and historians. In its entirety, it possessed enormous potential as a preserved historic area and tourism destination. All too sadly, some of it has since been lost to modern development. Instead of widening I-85 where it previously was, NCDOT built an entirely new 8-lane highway and bridges across the river. At the same time, they realigned nearby local roads and replaced one National Register eligible bridge. Duke Energy built a new additional power plant (later imploding part of the original plant) on their property along the river. And an ill-fated racetrack bulldozed sensitive areas, spilled a million gallons of sludge into a nearby creek, and left the demolished ruins of the Yadkin Finishing Company for the future to deal with.

Over the course of its existence, the Trading Ford Historic District Preservation Association has made gains in having the historic area recognized at the local, state, and national level.

- ◆ Successfully nominated the "Trading Ford District" to North Carolina's Study List (indicating probable eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places), approved by the National Register Advisory Committee, in 2003.
- ◆ As a stakeholder, successfully advocated for the inclusion of cultural landscapes along the Yadkin River in Alcoa's "National Register of Historic Places Eligibility Study" conducted by Thomason and Associates (2004) as part of Alcoa Power Generating, Inc.'s (APGI) relicensing process. This ground-breaking study

recognized the Trading Ford area as “the most significant location in the High Rock Reservoir basin” and recommended an eligible historic district there, and also recognized other significant historic places in the project area which otherwise would have been overlooked.

- ◆ Succeeded in a determination of eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places approved by NCDOT and the NC State Historic Preservation Office of the “Yadkin River Crossings Historic District” in 2005. This eligible historic district included: the Beard Bridge/Piedmont Toll Bridge site; Fort York/Camp Yadkin Civil War site; the Wil-Cox Bridge; the 1953 Hwy 29/70 Bridge; the two NC Railroad Bridges; a 0.8 mile section of the Trading Path; and the Big Island.
- ◆ Inclusion of the Trading Ford as a contributing site in the “Race to the Dan” recognized in the National Park Services’ “Report to Congress on the Historic Preservation of Revolutionary War and War of 1812 Sites in the United States” released in 2008. The “Race to the Dan” and its contributing sites were given highest national significance.
- ◆ Recognition by the Civil War Preservation Trust of the Civil War Battle at the Yadkin River Bridge as one of the nation’s 25 most endangered battlefields in 2008 and 2009.
- ◆ Saved the Trading Ford Monument from demolition by NCDOT, and, along with the Churchland Lions Club, restored the Monument in 2009. Successfully nominated the “Trading Ford Road and Monument Park” to North Carolina’s Study List in 2010.

There have begun two partial successes, partial frustrations. NCDOT gifted the Wil-Cox Bridge and \$2.5 million for maintenance to Davidson County upon its agreement to accept ownership and preservation of the bridge as a pedestrian walkway. Davidson County has presented plans for the bridge and improvements at its Davidson County end. After abandoning plans for a regional preservation effort, the LandTrust for Central North Carolina sold at a discount to Davidson County approximately 13 key acres of the Fort York battle site, otherwise paid for by a Clean Water Trust grant and donations from Rowan County citizens. Davidson County has also presented plans for this site, which may endanger its historic integrity. Davidson County has fallen far short in working as a partner with other interested parties in the surrounding area.

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It is, or was, the extraordinary concentration of historic sites within a small area which gave the Trading Ford area its importance. These historic sites existed for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Some have been lost. Some still have a chance at preservation. Let us not lose them in this new century. It is our heritage. It cannot be replaced.

*"Here is your country. Do not let anyone take it or its glory away from you. Do not let selfish men or greedy interests skin your country of its beauty, its riches, or its romance. The World and the Future and your very children shall judge you according to [the way] you deal with this Sacred Trust."*

-- President Theodore Roosevelt



for further information, contact—

Trading Ford Historic District Preservation Association  
 400 Lantz Avenue  
 Salisbury, NC 28144

Phone: (704) 633-3125

Email: [preservation@trading-ford.org](mailto:preservation@trading-ford.org)

On the web: [www.trading-ford.org](http://www.trading-ford.org)

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