

NISBET BOTTOMS

A CATAWBA INDIAN TREASURE TROVE

AUTHOR'S POSITION

This paper was written to defend the Nisbet Bottoms and its vast cultural and historical treasures. The author has no political agenda whatsoever. The paper is drawn from thirty years of contact with the Catawba Indians concerning cultural and historical issues. During this long period, Nisbet Bottoms has often been the cause of concern. The place is crucial to understanding Catawba history and culture. Without these Bottoms, there would be no Catawba Nation. To date I have not heard one word from anyone in the current administration about a plan as to what will be done should the sewer line become a reality. Since the powers have chosen to remain silent on this issue, I am duty bound to speak out as a recognized national authority on Catawba history and culture.¹

BACKGROUND

At the Treaty of Pine Tree Hill (1760)², the Catawba seemed too willing to abandon their ancient ceremonial center at that place. Beginning in 1521,³ Spanish adventurers looked toward a legendary place they expected to be a great El Dorado located in the country's interior. It was fabled to be rich in gold, silver and pearls. The Spanish eagerly sought information, and in 1540 Hernando de Soto finally entered the much sought after place. It was hardly a city, but it was an important ceremonial center called Cofitachique. He entered the place on May 1, 1540, warmly

¹ This paper is a direct outgrowth of "The Alert," Thomas J. Blumer with Monty Branham, Catawba, Master Potter; Marcus Sanders, Catawba, Master Potter; Jack Canty, Catawba; E. Fred Sanders, Catawba, former Assistant Chief; Jackie Bagley, Catawba, Archaeologist; Bill Harris, Catawba, Wood-carver. "The Alert" was hastily written to merely do as the title claims, alert the academic community of both Carolinas as to a serious historical, cultural and environmental problem faced by the contemporary Catawba potters. These people number about 85 adults, 200 people who support their pottery making, and about 35 children who are learning this ancient art. "The Alert" was immediately put up on the South Carolina Traditional Art Network (SCTAN) on September 28, 2000. The result was two personal attacks on me. The first was written by Beckee Garris who is secretary/treasurer for the Catawba Cultural Preservation Project (CCPP). It appeared on SCTAN on October 4, 2000. The second was written by Wenonah Haire who is the executive director of the CCPP. It appeared on SCTAN on October 5, 2000. Today, "The Alert" is available on the Internet on the Catawba People Page which may be reached at www.Catawba-people.com

² Douglas Summers Brown, *The Catawba Indians: The People of the River* (University of South Carolina Press, 1966), p.

³ John Anthony Caruso, *The Southern Frontier* (Bobs-Merrill, 1963), at 20.

welcomed by the Lady of Cofitachique.⁴ Disappointed in all but the great quantities of pearls found there, de Soto moved on to what he thought might be greener pastures. He dissipated his energies fighting people later came to be called the Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw and Choctaw.⁵

Cofitachique was visited next Juan Pardo who set out from Santa Elena. The year was 1569. Not far north of Charlotte, Pardo met a group of powerful Indian lords who identified themselves as the “Cataba.”⁶ Once the Catawba entered the pages of history, they stayed and have remained in a key position as Native Americans in South Carolina. No one really knows the Catawba position in relation to Cofitachique but they were important and eventually became full heirs to the Cofitachique Chiefdom.⁷ By 1760 they were in possession of Cofitachique by then called Pine Tree Hill (today called Camden).

By the mid 18th century the Catawba too had declined in power. Threatened by being engulfed by a wave of English settlers, the Catawba Nation sought to establish a final solution to their shrinking land base. They were led in this effort by King Hagler.

In 1760 King Hagler had little difficulty convincing his people to abandon Pine Tree Hill. In the process the Nation ceded a two million acre tract, far less than the 55,000 square miles claimed a century earlier.⁸ The key to the Nation’s willingness to leave Pine Tree Hill rested in the spiritual importance of the place to which they were going. It was declared emphatically that the Waxhaw Old Fields was where the Catawbas ancestors were buried. It was a far more important place than was Pine Tree Hill. The Nisbet Bottoms, the sight of the Catawba clay holes, is located at the heart of the Waxhaw Old Fields. The geographical fact is key to the very reason why the Nisbet Bottoms must be protected from desecration at all costs.

VILLAGE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES LOCATED IN NISBET BOTTOMS

On March 13, 1840, representatives of the South Carolina Legislature gathered at Nation Ford to await the arrival of the Catawba Indians. A barbecue was prepared and a barrel was placed in the middle of the field. It was full of whiskey and cups were attached to its rim. The fear remained

⁴ Caruso, at 41.

⁵ John R. Swanton, *Final Report of the United States De Soto Expedition Commission* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985 reprint). See, Garcilaso de la Vega, *The Florida of the Inca* (University of Texas Press, 1951) for a wonderful account of de Soto’s contacts with the Southern Indians. This book is the first great American classic and it was written by a member of the Inca royal family who turned to de Soto’s surviving men for information.

⁶ Charles Hudson, *The Juan Pardo Expeditions* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), at 264.

⁷ Steven G. Baker, *The Working Draft of The Historic Catawba Peoples: Exploratory Perspectives in Ethnohistory and Archaeology* (Prepared for Duke Power Company, 1975). Baker spends much time in linking the Catawba men who met Juan Pardo to the political constellation centered at Cofitachiqu. Baker’s work takes us closer to understanding the Catawba position in the chiefdom.

⁸ Charles Hudson, *The Catawba Nation* (The University of Georgia Press, 1970), map at 10.

that the Indians would change their minds and refuse to sign.⁹ Once the treaty was signed,¹⁰ the Catawba who had come from living among the Cherokee rushed home to tend their farm plots. The rest of the Indians, with the exception of a few who either were not interested or planned to move to North Carolina prepared to abandon their homes in King's Bottoms, now Nisbet Bottoms. These structures soon returned to the earth, but archaeologists have the technology to examine them.

We do not know the number of dwellings abandoned in March of 1840. According to a census done in 1849 when South Carolina was actively trying to get all the Catawba to settle on the reservation, the tribe totaled 110 individuals: men, women, and children.¹¹ It is impossible to know how many lived in Nisbet Bottoms in 1840 and how many dwellings were located there. A conservative estimate might be approximately 30 families. These people possibly occupied 25 or 30 dwellings. At the time the Indians were often away from home doing day labor on neighboring farms for months at a time, but it seems most likely that all of them maintained some kind of home in the Bottoms. This life pattern was followed until recent times.¹²

Before any work is done in Nisbet Bottoms, the settlement must be located and archaeologists must have time to salvage the treasures remaining beneath the ground's surface. This accounts for the village abandoned in 1840 only.

In 1760 when the Catawba removed from Pine Tree Hill to the Waxhaw Old Fields (King's Bottoms, now Nisbet Bottoms) they occupied a number of villages. According to maps, these were located up and down the east side of the Catawba River in the Old Fields. It will take some work but archaeologists can begin to gather the necessary maps needed to pinpoint the village sites by turning to Brown's People of the River.¹³ Some of this work has already been done by the Catawba Nation's archeologist, Rita Kenion. Each site, once located will take years to examine.

Since the Waxhaw Old Fields were designated by both Indians and white settlers alike as "old" and as the burial place of our ancestors by the Catawba, Nisbet Bottoms most likely contains the

⁹Letter from John Joel Culp to Ward Shepard, April 7, 1941, Record Group 75. Bureau of Indian Affairs File No. 12492-1930-001, Catawba Indians, Part III. National Archives, Washington, D.C. J. J. Culp was told of the events at Nation Ford by his grandmother Martha Mary Kee Culp who either was a witness herself or had this information from her elders.

¹⁰For the text of the Treaty of Nation Ford, see Brown at 306.

¹¹ List of Names of Catawba Indians Residing in North Carolina, Haywood County, Cherokee Nation; in Chester District; in York District in Their Old Homes; in Greenville District (September 29, 1849). Indian Affairs, 1831-1859. Governor's Correspondence, Massey to Governor Seabrook, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia.

¹² The Catawba Memory Book Project conducted by this author from 1980 to 1993 includes numerous references to a pattern of temporary returns to the reservation, the custom of combining households when under economic stress, swapping houses for a gun or an automobile but always returning to the reservation when public work ran out. Over 60 elders interviewed.

¹³ Brown's maps following page 32.

remains of villages occupied by the Catawba before 1760. Since the Indians practiced primitive farming methods which quickly exhausted the soil, villages were moved from time to time to allow the Indians to live closer to their fields. Nisbet Bottoms probably experienced a long period of occupation and abandonment. Since linguists now claim the Catawba are aboriginal to the area, the remains in Nisbet Bottoms probably go back in time to the Woodland Period.¹⁴

In brief, Nisbet Bottoms is most likely home to one of the most important concentrated and historically important archaeological sites in South Carolina. To destroy this record would do irreparable harm to both South Carolina and Catawba Nation history. While this paper is concentrating on Nisbet Bottoms, the historical importance of the Catawba River Bottoms does not stop at the property line between the Nisbet land and the bottoms of other landowners along the river. The entire area threatened by the sewer line proposed by the Catawba Executive Committee must be protected for its historical and cultural value.

BURIALS

When the Treaty of Pine Tree Hill was signed in 1760,¹⁵ the Catawba Nation removed from Pine Tree Hill (modern Camden) to the Waxhaw Old Fields. Several villages were occupied in the Old Fields on the east bank of the Catawba River. The last of these villages survived in Nesbit Bottoms until the Treaty of 1840 was signed on March 3, 1840. Half of the tribe had already moved to the Cherokee Nation. The other half abandoned Nisbet Bottoms and began the journey to the Cherokee Nation.

Along with the village site, discussed above in “Village Archaeological Sites Located in Nisbet Bottoms,” the Indians maintained a large burial ground. We have no idea how large this cemetery is, but is most likely dates from before the 1760 Treaty. In addition, certain notables were buried beneath their homes according to ancient custom. It is probable that burials are scattered wherever the Indians happened to be living at the time. House sites were often moved so that a family would be close to their garden fields.¹⁶

The Indians always buried their loved ones with gifts for them to take to the spirit world. King Hagler’s grave was immense because of all the gifts he had received during his life as ruler. His grave was reportedly looted by white men who lived in the Nation. The Indians then moved

¹⁴ Conversations with linguists Frank Siebert (deceased); Pamela Huddle; Barbara Heinemann (Winthrop University); Claudia Priest (official Catawba Nation linguist); and Blair Rudes (University of North Carolina at Charlotte) between 1990 and the present.

¹⁵ The text of this important Treaty has been lost. Between 1979 and 1993, the Native American Rights Fund made several attempts to locate it in the United States and Great Britain. All these efforts failed. Fortunately several contemporary commentators provide us with the rough outline of the Treaty.

¹⁶ Frank G. Speck, “Catawba Religious Beliefs, Mortuary Customs, and Dances,” *Primitive Man*, vol. XII (April 1939), p. 21.

Hagler's body to another location, possibly Nisbet Bottoms.¹⁷ Several tribal elders reportedly know of the location of Hagler's grave.¹⁸

The list of Catawba notables who are certainly buried in the cemetery at Nisbet Bottoms is a long one. Some names of easy recognition are provided here: King Frow; General New River; General Jacob Ayers; General William Harris; Sallie New River; all of the many Revolutionary War veterans; John Nettles; War Captain James Bullen of French and Indian War fame; and War Captain Pine Tree George whose grave was looted in this century. Through the efforts of Catawba tribal member Roger Trimnal; Wenonah Haire, executive director of the CCPP; Catawba Archivist Anne Evans and her Catawba assistant Billie Anne McKeller; and this author, some of the treasures found in Pine Tree George's grave were returned to the Nation in 1997.

SPIRITUAL IMPORTANCE OF NISBET BOTTOMS

Early one evening in the middle of the 19th century Chief Allen Harris and his wife Rhoda stood outside their reservation home. It was just after sunset. As they savored the calm of the moment, they suddenly heard Indians drumming and singing across the river in the bottoms. The sound came from where the old Indians used to live, where they had a village.¹⁹ Chief Harris and his wife Rhoda heard the spirits of the ancient Indians. The Catawba Indian who told this tale was a very strict Christian, a Baptist by faith. She normally would not talk of the old religion, but she believed in this occurrence so totally that she preserved it in an interview with Speck. Susannah Harris Owl, however, was not alone in hearing the drums and the singing. Such mysterious music is still heard by the Catawba today, particularly on the full moon and when the river is covered by heavy fog.

The Catawba are a deeply spiritual people in Native American beliefs even though they have been exposed to Christianity ever since a Spanish priest by the name of Sebastian Montero established a Catholic mission among the Catawba in 1568. This missionary effort lasted for six years. Father Montero reportedly made great advances in teaching the Indians to pray. Many of them became conversant in Spanish during this period.²⁰ The Catholics were followed in the 18th century by the Baptists and Presbyterians.²¹ The Mormons came in around 1882. The first convert baptized into the Mormon faith was Robert Lee Harris in 1884.²²

In spite of a long and often controversial exposure to Christianity, the old Catawba religion remains just beneath the surface in a number of beliefs the Indians have always refused to

¹⁷ Brown, pp. 246-248.

¹⁸ The late Hazel (Foxy) Ayers was one such person.

¹⁹ Frank G. Speck, *Catawba Texts* (AMS Press, 1969), at 91.

²⁰ Michael V. Gannon, *The Cross in the Sand* (University of Florida Press, 1965), at 31.

²¹ Brown, at 271. The most noteworthy of these efforts was in the early 19th century. A Reverend John Rooker from both the Hopewell Baptist Church and the Sugar Creek Baptist Church established a school for the Indians.

²² Id. at 340.

abandon. For instance, most traditional Catawba put grave goods in the coffin of the deceased. Potters take pottery with them and they often designate what pottery they wish to take to the next life. Other gifts include sage and eagle feathers among other things. It is no wonder the Nisbet Bottoms are thought of in special terms and held sacred. The old Indians dug clay there.

There is a new hitch to the importance of the Nisbet Bottoms to the spiritual life of the Catawba Indians. The Catawba were originally part of the Southern Ceremonial Complex that was followed from North Carolina to Texas. During the last century or more the Complex has suffered in the wake of a desire to assimilate to the white man's ways. It survives, however, and today is followed best among the Creek, Seminole, Yuchi and to a lesser extent among the Cherokee, Choctaw and Chickasaw.²³ The Complex with its large number of ceremonies from the planting of the corn in the spring to the November stick ball games which mark the closing of the stomp grounds, is enjoying a revival across the South. Richard Bailey a western Catawba has stomp danced with the Cherokee in Oklahoma for ten years. He has witnessed this revival in his area. Recently a Cherokee group in Houston, Texas, dedicated what is called a "Practice Stomp Ground." It is called the Shakey Hollow Stomp Ground.²⁴ The Cherokee at the Qualla Boundary are also stomp dancing more than ever,²⁵ and the Lumbee have revived the stomp dance. One Lumbee group is reported to have the sacred fire once again.²⁶

There is a movement among young Catawba traditionalists to return the Sacred Fire to Catawba. A Creek medicine man has agreed to call the fire up from its last resting place in Nisbet Bottoms. He is willing and capable of performing this possibly dangerous rite for the Catawba. In preparation, some of the Catawba are attending stomp dances with the Lumbee. To these young people touching the Nisbet Bottoms would be a grave desecration.

CLAY HOLES

When I first visited the clay holes it was part of a tour of the Nisbet Bottoms. My host was landowner William Oliver Nisbet. As we stood and looked out over a large flat field covered by a rich soybean crop, he talked freely about his experiences with the Catawba potters. He had no idea why the Indians insisted upon digging clay on his land. He declared, "This same clay is found all up and down the river."²⁷ I truly did not know the answer to Nisbet's wonderment in 1976. It would take me a long time to discover why the Catawba are so attached to that land. All of the potters interviewed during the course of the Memory Book Project spoke of the special nature of the clay found in Nisbet Bottoms. They knew the same clay was to be found in numerous other

²³ James H. Howard, *Southeastern Ceremonial Complex and Its Interpretation*, *Missouri Archaeological Society Memoirs* (No. 6, 1968).

²⁴ Telephone conversation and eMail of October 8, 2000, from Richard Bailey.

²⁵ Conversation with Mary Wachacha of the Indian Health Service.

²⁶ Telephone conversation with Monty Branham, September 2000.

²⁷ Interview with William Oliver Nisbet, March 1, 1977.

places but insisted this clay was their clay, the clay the old Indians dug.²⁸ In their minds, though clay could be had in many places and they knew of several alternative sources, clay from the Nisbet Bottoms was preferred, not only for its quality but for its special nature.

Mrs. Frances Wade's fears expressed in 1977 became a reality in 1990. In that year, the clay holes became a key issue in the settlement of the Catawba land suit against the United States and South Carolina. Landowner William Oliver Nisbet closed the holes for the first time in history.²⁹ Well meaning people who were friends of the Catawba took clay samples from their land and presented it to the Indians. McKissick Museum and the South Carolina Arts Commission attempted to solve the problem. Folk Art Coordinator at McKissick, Doug DeNatale, led the effort from Columbia.³⁰ Eventually McKissick Museum funded a small project to pay men to dig for new clay and test it.³¹ The efforts of the Catawba Cultural Preservation Project were led by the official tribal archaeologist Rita Kenion.³² Earl Robbins finally found a deposit on the Lancaster side of the river that suited the very particular potters. It met their physical needs for clay. It was excellent clay, but it was not their ancestral clay. It did not meet their spiritual needs. Later it was discovered that Nisbet's loyalty to the Indians won out on occasion and some of the potters gained access to the clay holes in spite of the restriction.³³

²⁸ A large number of potters were interviewed as part of this effort. The primary elders at the time who expressed this feeling about the clay holes included Lula Blue Beck, Sallie Brown Beck, Arzada Brown Sanders, Georgia Harris Harris, Nola Harris Campbell, and Sallie Harris Wade. During pottery making demonstrations held at Winthrop College in April 1977, a student asked fledgling potter Louise Beck Bryson if she would sell him some clay. Shocked at the request, Louise Bryson declared sincerely: "Oh no, we can't sell that clay. It's against tribal law. It's sacred."

²⁹ So crucial are the clay holes to the Catawba tradition that concerns over the loss of this ancient resource began to be expressed to me in 1977. Interview with Frances Canty Wade, April 20, 1977.

³⁰ Assistance came from McKissick Museum in early July 1990. It was, however, explained to DeNatale by me and by staff at the Catawba Cultural Preservation Project that an alternative source would not satisfy the potters, telephone conversation, July 19, 1990.

³¹ Telephone conversation with Mrs. Frances Canty Wade, March 15, 1991.

³² Peter M. Judge, "Catawbans in need of new pottery clay," *The Herald* (September 3, 1990), pp. 1 & 10.

³³ Those potters who were fortunate enough to enter the clay holes on occasion between 1990 and 1993 included Dessa Harris Talley; Wesley Harris; Sara Lee and Foxx Ayers; and Earl Robbins. Conversation with Assistant Chief Fred Sanders during the 1991 Day of the Catawba Festival (November 30, 1991). Once this news was out, those potters who knew they could not expect a favor from Nisbet looked for alternatives. Mrs. Nola Harris Campbell, who was part of the original dispute and had signed an affidavit, went and asked Walter Harris if he could go to Nisbet and see if he could gain access to the Nisbet Bottoms. In 1992 there was a rumor that a group of potters led by Mrs. Helen Canty Beck were contemplating a suit since select potters were allowed into the Bottoms (telephone conversation with Assistant Chief E. Fred Sanders, January 6, 1992).

The day the clay holes became available to the potters again after the 1993 Settlement. Once the potters returned to Nisbet Bottoms, they were content. They were building pots again with the same clay the old Indians used. This clay cannot be substituted. It comes from the Waxhaw Old Fields where the Catawbas' ancestors are buried.

It is interesting to note that the potters often refer to Nisbet Bottoms clay as "the gold." Gold is a pure metal and the clay is pure and their most important resource. Gold is also significant as an economic factor. In the words of Master Catawba Potter Brian Sanders, "That clay puts food on my table."

CATAWBA TRACK RECORD ON SAVING CULTURAL RESOURCES

In late 1997 the Catawba Nation published "Catawba Indian Nation Land Use Ordinance." This author has no information concerning this document beyond what appears in it and some tribal events which followed the Ordinance. These happenings as reported were in clear violation of the Ordinance. Questions arise immediately from the Authority and Jurisdiction statement in article 2, section 200. It reads:

Authority and Jurisdiction. This ordinance is adopted pursuant to the authority granted to the Catawba Indian Nation by the United States Government.

It seems odd that section 200 does not make reference to the authority of the General Council which is the tribe's ultimate governing body.³⁴ The Ordinance may not be a legal one. In any case, it is a tribal publication which claims to have authority; and, as such, it contains some interesting statements for those who oppose the Wastewater Treatment Project proposed by the tribe's Executive Committee.

The Ordinance is a guide for the development and use of reservation land. Most of its sections are concerned with such subjects as enforcement, land assignments, development, development standards, signs, and one special provision concerns junk vehicles.

The Planning Board is elected by the General Council, and this author has no knowledge of any such election or recent General Council meetings which addressed the issue of a Board.³⁵

³⁴ Constitution and By-Laws of the Catawba Nation of South Carolina (August 30, 1975), Article III - Governing Body reads in its section 1: "The governing body of the Catawba Nation of South Carolina shall be the General Council which shall be composed of all qualified voters of the Catawba Nation."

³⁵ This question was posed to a number of General Council members and it came to naught. These people were asked about all General Council meetings, and not one person recalled the Ordinance being brought up before the General Council.

Its article 6, under Development Districts and Maps, states in section 600.5 that the Ordinance will “protect cultural and historic resources found on the reservation. Examples of such resources include burial grounds, archaeological sites and historic structures.”

The Ordinance here provides reservation citizens who might live in the shadow of a huge sewage treatment plant with an interesting perspective. The Executive Committee has not enforced this section of the law. Soon after the Ordinance went into effect, after November 11, 1997, the Executive Committee allowed for the demolition of the oldest structure on the reservation. This building was on the allotment of the Osborne family. Before the Osbornes took possession, Roy and Edna Brown lived there. It had been constructed of logs in the late 19th century by Sampson and Susannah Harris Owl. One wonders if the Executive Committee would treat the treasures of Nisbet Bottoms in the same manner and display a similar disregard for cultural and historical treasures.

Article 7, section 710, of the Ordinance states that “no building or structure shall be permitted within fifty (50) feet of a burial ground, cemetery, archaeological site, historic building or any other historic or cultural resource unless approved by the Cultural Preservation Project.” Where was the executive director of the Project when the bulldozers crushed this priceless bit of 19th century Catawba history? The CCPP has a mandate to protect historical structures such as the Owl family home.

It must be agreed that the Ordinance would not apply to Nisbet Bottoms, but how can the Executive Committee expect to dig a ditch thirty feet deep through the Bottoms and not do tremendous damage to the profusion of historic, religious sites that exist there. The answer is that such cannot be done. It seems certain that the Executive Committee, if given a chance, will treat Nisbet Bottoms as they treated the Sampson and Susannah Harris Owl homestead. The damage to history will be far greater when it is visited on Nisbet Bottoms.

A second document from this period is the “Catawba Indian Nation Ecosystem Protection Management Plan, 1997.” A careful reading of the Plan is even more disturbing than the Ordinance discussed above. This is probably due to the fact that most of the Committee members who worked on the Plan were caring tribal members who took their work seriously.³⁶ The group was supplemented by members from academe, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, the USDA Natural Resource Conservation of York County, and two unidentified biologists. The participation of diligent tribal members and a group of outsiders seemingly brings a degree of legitimacy to the document. Once it came into use, however, the situation changed. Although two members of the Executive Committee were on the Committee, they apparently did not see the Plan as a serious tribal document. The Plan was immediately violated by the Executive Committee and other high tribal administrators.

³⁶ Those who served on the Committee included: Dean Canty, Lewis George, Larry Long, Keith Brown, Todd Osborne, Loretta Harris, Jean Usher, Jackie Bagley, *Buck George*, Michele Garcia, Pat Blue, Dwayne Rogers, Teresa Harris, John George, Dewey Adams and *Carson Blue*. Executive Committee members on this Committee are in italics.

Section 2.3.4 is concerned with cultural preservation. It reads: “medicinal plants, cane breaks, clay holes, spring, and archaeology sensitive such as historical home sites.”

One thinks immediately that not even two tribally generated documents written just before the event could save the Sampson and Susannah Harris Owl home place from the bulldozer. The clay holes and other treasures located in Nisbet Bottoms would not stand a chance under the policies of the current tribal government.

There is more. In 1999, a large cane break stood not far from the Long House. It was approximately 200 yards long and perhaps 20 to 30 yards wide. On a regular basis, tribal artisans who made river cane flutes and blow guns visited this site to cut cane. In 1999 it appears that someone from the tribal government permitted this valuable stand of river cane to be poisoned, from all appearances Roundup was used.³⁷ One week the cane was healthy and the next the entire stand was dead. Apparently, this event went unnoticed except by those who used the cane.

One likes to think that no archaeological sites have been desecrated on the reservation. However, such an act would be much harder to detect than the demolition of an architectural treasure such as the Owl home or a healthy cane break that suddenly died from some unknown cause. From all appearance the Archaeological Department has been diligent, but how much surveillance can this small Department provide when dishonesty is rampant. Today the acting tribal archeologist does not communicate with the outside world so it is impossible to ascertain what is being done to protect such sites. To date, no comment has been made by this department concerning the sewer line proposal.

Another section of the Plan is of interest:

The tribe has adopted a 1000' buffer zone along the Catawba River. Buffer strips consisting of native trees and shrubs should be established and/or maintained along the banks of the Catawba River and tributaries of the Catawba Indian Nation tribal lands. The buffer strips shall be undisturbed except as needed to provide access to the river, for highway or utility rights-of-way, for hiking trails, or for appropriate natural resource management. Buffer strip activities should be conducted in a manner to limit the impact on native vegetation and trees.

The poisoned cane break, “a native South Carolina plant” necessary to the production of flutes and blowguns, was about 30 feet from the river bank, and situated well within the buffer zone.³⁸

The Plan continues in its section 4: “All flood plain [river bottom] areas should be designated as conservation zones and used as open space . Development should be limited to passive recreational facilities and/or green ways.

The cane break was in the flood plain.

³⁷ Telephone conversation, Brian Sanders, October 8, 2000.

³⁸ *Id.*

A question comes to mind. If the Catawba Nation under its current administration is to be permitted to run a huge sewer line through what remains of the Waxhaw Old Fields, will the Executive Committee rewrite the “Catawba Indian Nation Ecosystem Protection Management Plan, 1997;” or will the Executive simply forget the document exists? this has clearly been done in the past on a small scale. The precedent exists, and one might assume the Executive Committee will follow a pattern already well established.

CONCLUSION

The priceless treasures hidden beneath the surface at Nisbet Bottoms are endangered. The history of the Catawba Nation and a chapter of South Carolina’s history will be forever lost to future generations should the sewer project become a reality. These treasures include village sites, a cemetery or cemeteries of unknown size containing the remains of Catawba war heroes and the clay holes which are crucial to the production of Catawba pottery. Without these clay holes, the Catawba tradition, now thought to have originated in the Woodland Period, circa 2,400 B.C. will become extinct. People who care in South Carolina and elsewhere cannot let this happen.

Thomas J. Blumer, Ph.D.
former Senior Editor, Law Library of Congress
former expert consultant in Catawba history for the
Native American Rights Fund
former Official Tribal Historian, Catawba Indian Nation
current Magistrate, Virginia Supreme Court