

3 farmers came to rescue

■ In drought of 1845, men used crops to keep neighbors from starving.

We are suffering through a drought that seems to be approaching the 1986 drought in severity — the worst suffered by this area in 100 years.

As bad as recent droughts have been, however, they are not comparable to the one suffered by the people of this area in 1845.

In July 1845 the newspapers began printing accounts of the drought and "partial famine" in Upstate South Carolina.

Corn was drying up; mills stopped grinding for lack of water; the cattle were suffering; mules and horses were gaunt; and cotton was blossoming at a height of 3 or 4 inches. No rain occurred from May until Aug. 6, and then, it was too late for the crops.

For an almost totally agricultural society, the lack of rainfall was a disaster. State or federal assistance for the victims of a drought had not been conceived of in 1845. Local charity was limited to those few people who had stored grain in more abundant years.

There are accounts of at least three prosperous farmers in this area whose generosity and concern for their neighbors were such that their praises were sung for generations. The three men are Robert McCaw and John Springs of York County, and Frederick Davie of Chester County.

Robert McCaw, a highly educated heir to a large estate, had practiced his philanthropy unobtrusively prior to the drought. When the famine hit York District, McCaw's "granaries of 8,000 bushels of corn were thrown open to the multitude."

McCaw was held in such high esteem that he was elected several terms to the legislature, twice as a senator and was lieutenant governor of South Carolina.

In 1909, A.S. White of Fort Mill furnished a number of anecdotes about John Springs to the Yorkville Enquirer. One of White's anecdotes dealt with the 1845 drought: "I remember well corn mostly



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tasseled out about knee-high, with one little stem of a tassel and no silk. Several years before '45 had been fine seasons, and crops abundant. Mr. Springs had made large surplus crops of corn, as if forewarned by pharaoh's dream; had built new cribs, and stored it away, until when calamity came he had four large houses full of corn.

"In the spring of 1846 people were going from all parts of the state to the mountains of North Carolina after corn. It was known far and wide about his store of corn, and people of the low country would come with their wagons and plenty of money and offer to pay price for it. But no, they got enough for their immediate needs and some to take on with them at the fixed price of \$1 a bushel. He told them they had horses, wagons and money and could go on to the mountains after corn, but he had neighbors all around who had no horses and no money, who would be obliged to starve if he let them have all his corn."

John Springs' homestead, built in 1806, today is the headquarters building of Leroy Springs & Co on U.S. 21, north of Fort Mill. Around that homestead in 1845 were hundreds of acres producing mainly cotton, but also providing most of the foodstuffs needed for the numerous workers and livestock.

When each of John Springs' five children married, he gave them plantations. The year after the great drought, Sophia Springs, the youngest daughter, married William Myers, a Charlotte lawyer for whom the residential area Myers Park is named.

Sophia Spring's wedding gift was 1,126 acres, 23 slaves, furniture, 6 horses, a yoke of oxen, 36 hogs, corn, fodder, pork, etc. Gifts to each child were carefully recorded in a "Day Book" that Springs kept for more than 40 years.

In similar fashion to John Springs, Frederick Davie, a son of the famed Gen. William Davie, Revolutionary hero and founder of the University of North Carolina, generously distributed his corn among the needy in that terrible summer of 1845. Frederick Davie lived near Landsford, on the road between Fort Lawn and Harmony. He was one of the wealthiest and most influential S.C. residents.

In 1920, T.M. Allen told the story of Frederick Davie and the 1845 drought to the Yorkville Enquirer in this way:

"People flocked to him from scores of miles around to buy corn . . . To all who came to him for bread, that bread was freely given. If they had money he sold them corn at a fair price. If they had none it was all the same. The story is that there was an attempt on the part of some to try speculate in Davie's corn . . . Upon being advised of their procedure Davie promptly cut off their supply. Thus this man kept hundreds of his fellows from starving to death . . . In the history books of South Carolina there is no photograph and mention of (Frederick) William Davie, one of the saviors of South Carolina in 1845. His descendants live in Texas."

Precise records were not kept on the number of farmers who could not pay off their mortgages and who lost titles to their land. However, it is recorded that there was a larger than usual migration of South Carolinians to the West in 1845.

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