

THE STORY OF REEDY RIVER

HENRY BACON MCKOY¹

Reedy River starts just above Travelers Rest and a little south of Renfrew. In that area are two small bits of swampy ground, six hundred feet apart, which are covered with several inches of water, deep enough to slosh over into your shoes if you wade into it. Each swamp drains into a small stream and the two unite at a wooden bridge near Renfrew - there is the genesis of the famous Reedy River. The new-born "river" goes on through Travelers Rest and then by Furman University where the "mountain river laves its feet."² It enters Greenville near Cedar Lane Road and begins its fight with railway bridges and tracks, flowing rather sluggishly to River Street, which was named in it's honor. At Main Street, this insignificant stream really becomes a thing of note. Its waters glide through a trough of smooth granite, levels out for a moment, and then plunges over a precipice, dashing itself into smithereens at the bottom where the fragments are hungrily gathered together into a passive stream that it bubbles and foams before going under bridges on Cleveland and McDaniel, and into Cleveland Park.

It then crosses scores of roads and bridges, and passes places of note and interest, such as Fork Shoals, Conestee, halted here with dams and mills.³ Reedy formerly combined with Saluda River below the old town of Waterloo.⁴ Now it changes it's name at Waterloo, as it adds to the waters of Lake Greenwood, and becomes a nonentity.

The City of Greenville owes it's very existence to Reedy River.

¹I had hoped to make a complete study of Reedy River, to explore each creek and branch that entered it, and to name and describe them. I had hoped to add something new, something original, about Greenville's Reedy River. This result of my study is far from complete and I have found nothing new. What has been accomplished is the assembling of many facts, some known and some not so well known, from the sources available to me. Each has interested me and I hope that this assembled material will be read and enjoyed by some who, otherwise, would have never come into contact with it.

²Furman University *Alma Mater* by Edwin McNeill Poteat.

³Robert Mills, *Atlas of the State of South Carolina*, facsimile edition with and introduction by Francis Marion Nelson (Columbia: Bostic and Thornley, 1938 [originally published, 1825]). See George Salmon's Greenville District Map of 1820.

⁴*Ibid.*

The famous Richard Pearis came to this section in 1776,³ and because of Reedy River and its falls, located here, and erected a mill to grind corn. Near the site of Pearis's mill Vardry McBee later erected a mill. This was constructed of stone, and remained in operation for many years, but was later abandoned. The mill building was torn down and the stones removed to construct the Gassaway Mansion, used for two decades after World War II by the Greenville Museum of Art.⁴ It was certainly the presence of the Reedy River that caused Vardry McBee, after a visit here, to return, purchase land which included the town of Pleasantburg⁵ (now Greenville), South Carolina, and construct a mill operated by water power. McBee not only sold lots but also granted lands to stimulate the construction of churches and the organization of educational institutions. In short, Reedy River, over the years, has left its mark upon all and everything that touched or associated with it. Churches, streets, factories, and businesses have been named for it. Reedy River has contributed to the health, wealth, and welfare of the section through which it flows and has given of its waters and powers freely, for over two hundred years.

Tradition claims that more than two centuries ago, the first white settler, left iron pots filled with gold along Reedy River.⁶ Pearis reportedly was prosperous and he operated a grist mill and a saw mill, near where the falls are located in the city today. Today a new bank stands just over the river, from the probable site of his old grist mill. There was no bank in the vicinity then, and although Pearis was friendly with the Indians, he lived in a dangerous period, and was always subject to attack. As a trader he was forced to keep funds on hand to buy goods. The country then abounded in thieves, and since he was a Tory, the patriots of the Revolutionary period would have liked nothing better

³Stephen Stanley Crittenden, *The Greenville Century Book* (Greenville, South Carolina: Greenville News, 1903), p. 12.

⁴James McDowell Richardson, *History of Greenville County, Narrative and Biographical* (Atlanta: A. H. Causton, 1930), p. 62. The Greenville Museum of Art, reorganized as the Greenville County Museum, moved to new quarters on Heritage Green in the 1970's.

⁵Crittenden, *Century Book*, p. 17.

⁶Greenville News, June 22, 1928.

than to deprive him of his gold. So it is natural to suppose that he would put (bury) his gold in a 'river bank'.

Reedy River is certainly the source of much gold that is to be found in Greenville. In it's buildings, it's educational institutions, it's industry, it's history. It is said that "all is not gold that glitters." It is equally true that, "All gold does not glitter." Maybe you will look and find gold in and on our river.

The Peoples National Bank* recently erected a sign, on the river near the site of the old mill, which reads, "Dig Up \$500." I own a collection of old maps of our state, and I have noticed all show Reedy River. I have searched the maps in the Greenville Library and the library at Furman University. They all show Reedy River, pointing out that it was a thing of note as soon as this section was mapped. On H. S. Tanner's Map of 1827, Reedy River is shown starting above Greenville, running through two districts and entering Saluda River just above Swanney's Ferry.¹⁰ On a map titled "A New Map of South Carolina," Reedy River is shown starting just west of Paris Mountain and flowing by the town of Greenville. On the river is noted Carruth's Armory at Raeburns Creek.¹¹ A map by George Salmon, dated 1820, which was used by Robert Mills in his famous *Atlas*, shows Reedy River formed by two sources. It also notes McBee Mills and Reedy River Falls, along with a number of other mills, before it enters Saluda. There were scores of mills operated by water power below Greenville, which were named and located on old maps.¹²

The Greenville County Library used to be located in the old Park School building adjoining Springwood Cemetery on Main Street. On a block of Winnsboro Granite that stood near the side entrance, was carved this inscription: "Thank God for Water." To this stone at one time was attached a drinking fountain, used by the students of old Park School. Our Librarian at

*This bank was absorbed into the Bankers Trust of South Carolina since the reading of this paper. Ed.

¹⁰H. S. Tanner, *Map of 1827*.

¹¹This map is undated.

¹²Mills, *Atlas*, Greenville District map.

the time, Charles Stowe, stated that he was a student of this school when this fountain was presented by Henry C. Markley.¹³ I remembered seeing a spring in the City Park. With the words "Thank God For Water," written over it. I asked a score of people for information concerning it, but found none who knew. I had asked the wrong people. How tragic it is that facts once recognized by all, fade out in time, to be forgotten by some, then doubted by most, and finally denied. That is why it is important that you and I record what we remember and know.

At the south end of the City Park, within a hundred feet of the cemetery fence, and just beyond where there used to be two small fish and duck ponds, there is a spring, fed from the side of the hill that backs up against the cemetery. This spring was covered with an arch of cut stone. The stone work extended about fifteen feet on each side making a wall. This wall is now only about eighteen to twenty-four inches high. When I first saw it, it was six feet high, and there were stone steps on either side that led down to the spring. The water flowed then into a granite basin, and from it to a small stream that went into the fish pond. The spring is still there bubbling out of the ground, the arch of stone is still there with the words "Thank God For Water" carved on it. It is hard to locate as the old depression has been nearly filled up. The water from this spring flows on down to Academy Creek which goes through the McPherson Park, then to Richland Creek and finally to Reedy River.

Springwood Cemetery was originally the garden of Chancellor Waddy Thompson who lived nearby. His mother-in-law, Elizabeth Blackburn Williams, loved the garden, and at her request was buried there, being the first and only grave. She died on June 12, 1812. The site was wooded, and it is assumed that it was called Springwood, because of the magnificent spring, which was in the lower section of the garden. Hence the name Springwood Cemetery. A bronze plaque was erected by the Greenville City Water Company in 1939 in a small garden

¹³Greenville News, February 9, 1964. When the Park School/Greenville Library building was demolished, Charles Thomas moved the granite block to the grounds of Christ Church.

that lay between the now-destroyed old City Hall and the old Masonic Temple. On this plaque are the words "Thank God For Water." This monument has now been moved to a location adjoining Springwood Cemetery near the Confederate monument.

Reedy River Falls, of old, was prominent in Greenville life: (First) for it's usefulness, (Second) for it's beauty, and then it was noted for a place for romance. Benjamin Franklin Perry states that as soon as a visitor had signed his name to the register at the old Mansion House,¹⁴ he was escorted down Main Street to the River and there shown the falls, which were noted, bragged about and thought of as a veritable Niagara.¹⁵ In both summer and winter, young men and women of the village, walked to the falls, admired it's beauty, and carved their names on the trees and rocks in the vicinity.

To the romantic (and what young man or woman isn't romantic at some period?) the beauty of the falls and the water sang a song of love that was hard to resist. And who would want to? Young women went to Falls and also visited the old mill where they requested the miller to weigh them on the flour scales. Many were the guitars that were strummed in the vicinity, and many were the songs and poems that were written in it's honor. Some of these have come down to us, as they were published in the local *Mountaineer*, one hundred twenty years ago. Let me cite a few. Here is one in Scotch dialect that is supposed to be humorous - called "The Leaping of the Linn":

Upon a summer's afternoon
When frae the western sky
The gentle evening sun aboon
Blinks with her witching eye,
My friend and I went down to view
The pretty Leaping Linn,
That tumbles o'er a rock or two,
The Reedy River in.
Ful sweet the hour.

¹⁴See Crittenden, *Century Book*, p. 54, for place of the Mansion House in nineteenth century society and business.

¹⁵Perry, *Works*.

As arm in arm in thought we stood,
Upon a rocky ledge, said I,
"My friend it were not good,
To stand to near the edge."
But whilies I spac, there came adown
A carriage span and new,
With three wild lassies, frae the town,
To see the river too.

Ful sweet their power.

These my friend, then quickly spied,
As down the bank they came.
Bu ah' the woe. Twas the other side,
The stream twixt us and them.
And roaring loud the waters fell
Like dark Avernus flood,
That makes this side the stream a hell,
And that side blest and good

Ful dark the hour.

Awhile he trembling eyed the Linn,
Like any sheeted ghaist.
Ahalf enclined to venture in,
And yet afraid almaist.
The sonsie hizzies with their e'e'en,
Still tempted him that way,
Saw that death rolled dark between
But wur than death to stay.

Ful sad the hour.

But ah! He found too strong their charms
He could no brook delay,
And twisting from my friendly arms,
He quickly sprang away.
And where the raging torrent swept,
His shadow frae mine e'en.
He boldly in a chasm lept,
Frae daylight and frae me

Ful fearful hour.

Ah! Then how dreadful the hour
I trembling held my breath
And thought, that no earthly power,
Could rescue him frae death.
I blamed him, muttering "mad-capp dolt."
Had you to my advice been harkit
And no been so wild a colt,
Frae me thou had no partit.

Ful sad the hour.

Awhile I stood in blank despair
 Then turned to gang away,
 When lo! My friend once more appear
 One more to light of day.
 From rock to rock, the falls below,
 He rused, haf-stepped and leap
 Whiles I looked on where he wad go
 And cheered him with my whoop
 Ful glad the hour.

At last with one more desperate bound,
 The further bank he made
 And there the mill where corn is ground,
 And ladies sometimes weighed.
 Then go my lad, and sure for this
 You should be dearly loved.
 And in the mill you'll meet with miss
 And you'll be mealy-mouthed.
 Ful sweet the hour!"

THE STARS OF REEDY RIVER

Oh, the bard of Green Erin, may sing as he will
 Of the love luring lips of his nation.
 I sing of a subject, more exquisite still,
 Tis a maid, the flower of creation.
 She's lovely, she's charming, she's sweet, she is devine.
 Pray, what other charm may I give her?
 She is an attendant on Venus's shrine.
 The mild star that lights Reedy River.

O, often she looks o'er the brink of the stream,
 And sees her rare figure reflected.
 She gives with rapture, until vanities dream,
 Makes this damsel most sweetly affected.
 Now, had she but lived in the fabulous days,
 Narsissus had loved her forever,
 For he above all was conceited with praise.
 Like the bright star that lights Reedy River.

Each Sabbath she shines in her glory at church
 Much praise for devotion is due her.
 And often she bends like a sappling of birch
 As if each lecture went through her.
 After meeting is over, how stately she walks!
 Her lovers bow, twitter and quiver,
 Every heart yearns for, and every tongue talks,
 Of the bright star that lights Reedy River.

¹Greenville Mountaineer, August 3, 1834.

Mild radiat of beauty, sweet daughter of love!
The light of perfection's around thee!
Thou surely were made for the regions above,
For we untestial have found thee
How pleased would I be to call thee mine own,
We'd live and love sweetly forever -
But NO. Come to think, I am better alone,
Fair star that illuminates the River.

And there is also that famous poem "Reedy River Falls," by Mrs. Stephen S. Crittenden, the grandmother of our own Mr. John Arrington, Jr.¹⁷

A hundred years ago there were few bath tubs in Greenville, and no swimming pools. The boys of Greenville both bathed and learned to swim in Reedy River. There was a swimming hole about fifty yards above the Main Street foot bridge and here, from the first warm days of spring, throughout the summer, one could hear the happy yells of boys, which echoed down to the foot-bridge. There was no such thing as bathing suits to be had, and the reeds and bushes only partially hid the view of the swimmers. Charles A. David tells us, that even in the winter, when ladies passed over the bridge, through habit, they turned their heads in the other direction, to avoid even the thought of the boys in swimming.¹⁸

Historians record the fact of several "Baptismal Pools" in Reedy River, which were used by both the old Reedy River Baptist Church and the First Baptist Church in Greenville. Old Dr. Richard Furman is said to have often baptized from eight to twenty on a warm Sunday afternoon in this sacred section of the River.

The present Main Street Bridge was erected in 1910,¹⁹ and is remarkable in that it has served for over sixty years and is still adequate. It replaced the old Gower Bridge, which some of you will remember. My wife tells of this steel bridge which was only about sixteen feet above the River normally. It could not support the weight of street cars which then ran alongside a few feet

¹⁷Crittenden, *Century Book*, p. 15

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁹Bronze plaque at North End of the bridge.

above the water, and were flooded out at the slightest rise in the River.²⁰ My wife also tells of the circus elephants having to walk through the River, not being allowed to go over the bridge, because it would not bear their weight.

Since Highway 276 from Greenville to Columbia was completed, I have noted with interest the name of a road crossing over it near Simpsonville called "Standing Spring Road." For months I wondered what a Standing Spring was, and envisioned a spring spouting up high enough to drink from while standing. Not asking the right people, I failed to find it's meaning. Recently I left the main road and drove into Simpsonville, where I learned that by going in the other direction I would come to "The Standing Spring Baptist Church." This I did, and found the church and the spring, and a bulletin explaining it's meaning. This spring was known and used even before the Revolution. There are a number of Revolutionary War heroes buried in the cemetery here. The spring consists of a small pool of water with no apparent outlet. Although the water may be seen bubbling up, it never overflows, as there is an underground outlet. The water seems to be standing, and so it is called. This water also flows on down into Reedy River.

Reedy River Falls, history, industry, romance, mills, churches, poetry, Baptismal pools, swimming holes, flour mills, textile plants, gold, floods. Each word opens up a new vista. Take your choice. But note this river's influence. It has affected you and your life here, whether you realize it or not. For me it has been good.

Thank God for Water, and for Reedy River.

²⁰Henry Baron McKoy, *The Story of Reedy River* (Greenville, S. C., 1969), see photograph on page 38.