

A BREIF HISTORY OF STANLY COUNTY

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, less than 200 years ago, the area between the Rocky and Yadkin Rivers, now Stanly County, was a part of North Carolina's backcountry—as was most of the state. The rolling hills of the Yadkin River Valley contained only a spattering of farms. The region's early isolation and poverty encouraged neighboring families to work together. Popular gatherings, such as corn huskings, wheat threshings, and barn and house raisings, were held along the county's emerging trading paths. These events provided a foundation for people in the community to unite into congregations, business ventures, and eventually villages.

In 1840 the residents of Montgomery County, west of the Yadkin River, petitioned the North Carolina State legislature in Raleigh to divide the western portion of Montgomery from the east and form a new county. The western citizenry charged that the County's government on the eastern shore of the Yadkin was disconnected from them. They also cited the difficulty they faced in crossing the Yadkin River each time they needed to go to court. Allegedly, the final straw for the citizens of western Montgomery occurred in 1840, when the courthouse was set on fire in a ruse to help a horse thief evade trial. The name "Stanly" was chosen to honor John Stanly, a fiery and popular Federalist politician from eastern North Carolina. Stanly's name was chosen as much to honor the statesman as it was to curry favor with the state's legislature, located more than 100 miles east of Stanly County.

When Stanly County was formed in 1841, a group of citizens—all farmers—gathered around an old wooden table at George Smith's general store and post office—a rough-hewn log building that sat just off the Market Road—a deep rutted dirt highway linking Raleigh and Charlotte. There, Stanly County's founding fathers drew up a grid of streets, placing the proposed courthouse at the intersection of the Market Road and the Turnpike Road, which connected Fayetteville and Salisbury. The initiative and plans for village were impressive, but for sixteen years, the city remained wooded and unincorporated.

Just prior to the Civil War in 1857, traffic on the once sleepy rural roads through Stanly County had increased enough for the citizens of the county to petition the State for incorporation. Besides being the center of the county's government, travelers found the intersection near the courthouse, composed of two inns and three saloons, to be a convenient stop on their way to the markets in the east and west. The town was named Albemarle—an eastern appellation, like the County's namesake—wisely chosen by the local citizenry to flatter the State's legislature.

Advances in transportation and industry were beginning to reshape the landscape of Stanly County prior to the Civil War. However, the deprivations caused by the war destroyed the local economy. More than a quarter of the County's population vanished—lost to disease or migration. More than a quarter century would pass before prosperity reappeared in Stanly County.

With the coming of the railroad in 1890 Stanly County's economic opportunities blossomed. By the turn of the century three textile manufacturing plants would open. The area would attract a major lumber company and hosted the largest stone-works in the south. By the First World War the great Yadkin River was dammed for electric power and a major aluminum smelting plant was constructed at Badin. By the 1970s, however, Stanly County's economic engine began to slow down as the nation entered an economic depression. The textile plants closed, the lumber and stone-works were abandoned, and the aluminum plant was dismantled. Still, as the 21st century dawns, Stanly County is once again reinventing itself—becoming an integral part of the Charlotte-Metrolina area.

Much has changed since the county's founding more than 150 years ago. The deep ruts of the backwoods Market Road are now paved and dotted with homes. The old inns and saloons have given way to modern hotels and family eateries, and agriculture has given way to industry. Despite the changes, however, Stanly County has retained much of its pastoral beauty and its towns' a Mayberry atmosphere. Like the men and women that gathered at Smith's Store more than a century and half ago, Stanly County's citizens still come together to work building a stronger community with initiative, know-how, and perseverance.
