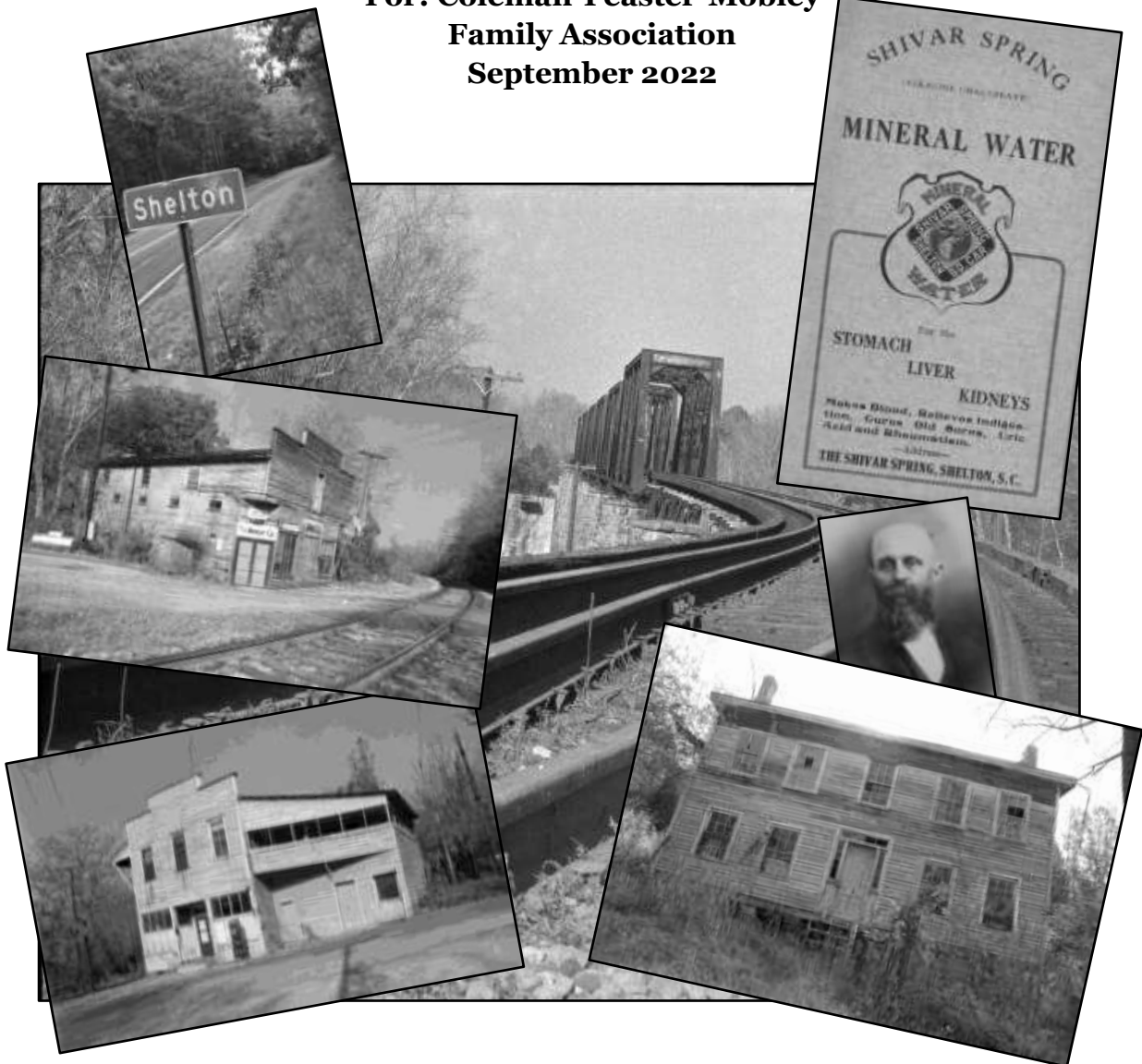


Ghost Town of Shelton

By: R. Chicone, Jr.,
For: Coleman-Feaster-Mobley
Family Association
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I have heard about this old town since I was a kid in the 1970s. I have a foggy memory of my dad taking me down there for a look at some vine-covered, dilapidated buildings and a walk on the old train trestle crossing the Broad River. There wasn't much left of Shelton back then, and there's even less today, some half-buried foundations, rusty pieces of machinery, and of course the memories. The ruins of Shelton lie waiting at the end of a dead-end country road, to meet those few pilgrims that wonder down hoping to find a spiritual connection to the past, or maybe just a good place to fish.

Why are we fascinated with these places our ancestors built that now lie languishing and forgotten? I think it's because a town is a place where society manifests its most important ideal, the ability to form a community and work together. It's a place of commerce, comradery, order, pride, news and travel. It's a place forged from blood, sweat and hope, where culture thrives and ideas flourish. It's a place that's integral to the survival and prosperity of a people. Forgive me if I'm being a bit grandiose describing a forgotten whistle-stop depot in the middle of nowhere, but on some level, Shelton does embody these qualities. It was the heart of a community, but the little hamlet by the trestle eventually withered along with the cotton fields that fathered it. However, for those of us who have heard stories of Shelton or actually knew the place back then, this ghost town arouses within us a sentimentality for by-gone days. There is a nostalgia for the old buildings that have crumbled, for the people who are now gone, and the hopes and dreams that were once held within its streets, streets now clothed only in the foliage of an encroaching forest.



Photo: A photo of Shelton in the 1950s looking northeast at J.R. Shelton Store (center), The Wright Co. (left), and the passenger depot (right). Courtesy of Fairfield County Genealogical Society.

Birth of a Town

One thing to understand about Shelton is that its foundation was built, both literally and figuratively, on the railroad, specifically the Spartanburg and Union Railroad. This 5ft-gauge railroad was completed in 1859. It started at what is today another ghost town on the east bank of the Broad River, Alston, where an existing railroad connected Columbia to Greenville. From Alston, this new line ran north and crossed the river near Shelton's Ferry, then made a beeline to Carlisle, Union and Spartanburg. An April 1856 newspaper article in the Carolina Spartan reads "...there is now a Depot erected at Shelton, and every requisite accommodation for receiving and discharging freight." The establishment of this freight depot 166 years ago was the real beginning of the town of Shelton.



Photo: A Locomotive circa 1855. This one, called “The General,” was in service in the Atlanta area. Courtesy of *Kennesaw.com*.

This was a big deal for surrounding communities like Feasterville, Wolling, Clayton, Blair and Herbert. The South Carolina Piedmont with its vast rolling hills and rich soils was an agricultural powerhouse producing oats, wheat and corn, but especially in regard to short staple cotton. Before the depot at Shelton, cotton was hauled to Columbia or Winnsboro by wagon. John Albert Feaster Coleman, grandson of John and Drucilla Feaster who built Feasterville Academy, wrote in his 1851 diary: “Started to Columbia [Monday]. Arrived there by noon on Tuesday. Sold cotton to R. Catchcart at...5 & 55/100. Left for home on Wednesday...Got home on Thursday evening.” It was time consuming and costly to get cotton to market.

Antebellum Shelton

The Southern economy was blossoming in the 1850s with lots of raw land to cultivate, advancing technology, and new railroads. However, a significant portion of the workforce that allowed for this prosperity was of course the product of forced labor from enslaved black Americans. Enslaved people provided the South with skilled, reliable and economical labor, as well as a legacy of inhumanity. The cultivation of cotton in the Shelton area and throughout the Southern Piedmont seems to have been based both on planters and on yeomen farmers (who perhaps aspired to be planters). These farms were not the large and wealthy plantations of the South Carolina Lowcountry. Farming the land was dictated by a cultural ethos that involved taking pride in well-managed fields, composting, and controlling erosion. Jennie Isabel Coleman, daughter of John Albert Feaster Coleman, was interviewed for the 1930s *Federal Writers Project*. She had this to say about farming practices in the mid-1800s: “Our neighborhood has always had something peculiar or distinctive about it - a little different from the other portions of Fairfield County.” It was “noted for its conservation and responsiveness to any progressive movement.” She describes how they made “the most of their fertilizers in the nature of compost,” how gullies were filled and erosion arrested, and that “all idle hours were devoted to the assembling of material for compost making.” John Albert Feaster Coleman’s 1848-1851 diary is published in *Princes of Cotton* by Stephen Berry. Berry provides a marvelous description of John, and by extension many of the young white farmers of the Shelton community: “He is literally walking in his father’s footsteps, down the same straight furrows through the same fields...If he is curious where the footsteps lead, he can look farther down the row and see his grandfather, eighty-four and still hoeing, tracing out his son’s and his grandson’s future.” “...Coleman bears the weight not of expectation but of inevitability. He will till the land until he’s buried under it...In a tradition as old as farming he sees his profession as somehow more noble, more moral than others.”

According to Walter Edgar in his book *South Carolina a History*: “By 1860...all districts except Lancaster were linked by rail to Columbia or Charleston.” And, “In 1855 there were 164,619 more bales of cotton shipped by rail to Charleston than just five years earlier.” Edgar states that “in the decade before the Civil War, South Carolina ranked third in the country for average per capita wealth.” But how large and busy was Shelton at that time is hard to say. In 1861 Narcissa Feaster of Feasterville gives us a passing glimpse of rail travel from Shelton. “We arose very early to go to the depot, were just in time. Stopped at Alston, I wrote to Bro. John while waiting three hours, arrived at Col. [Columbia] one o’clock.” A later entry reads, “Left Col. 7 ½ o’clock, met Mr. Knotts and Dr. Westmoreland on the Greenville Cars, arrived at Shelton about 12.” Four years later, on February 16th, 1865, Narcissa pens an ominous text, “Julia and Jakie came up from Columbia today. Gen’l Sherman was within seven miles of the City when they left.”

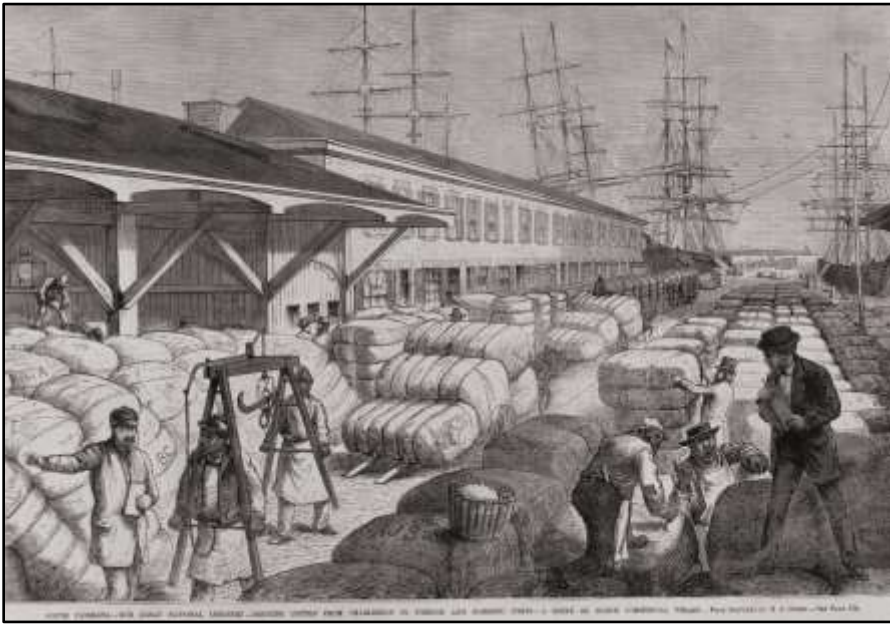


Photo: North Commercial wharf Charleston, S.C. with cotton bales for shipping to foreign and domestic ports via sailing ships. 1878. Shutterstock 290633.

The Ruin of War and Rebirth of the South

The War arrived at Shelton shortly thereafter with the advance of Union Major Gen. Judson Kilpatrick's Cavalry Division. Columbia had been burned to the ground at this point and Gen. Sherman and the Union army's Right Wing were headed for Winnsboro and points east. Kilpatrick was part of Sherman's Left Wing, which did not enter Columbia but came north

through Lexington County and crossed the Broad River at Alston. Groups of Union "foragers" preceded the main force and spread out across the countryside looting and burning buildings and homes. This excessive, willful destruction to civilian property, and abuse of local residents, was Sherman's unofficial strategy for breaking the South. "The whole army is burning with an insatiable desire to wreak violence on South Carolina. I almost tremble for her fate" wrote Sherman as he prepared his army to enter South Carolina. However, this type of warfare was not officially condoned by the Union and fortunately for the Shelton community the Left Wing of Sherman's advance commanded by general John W. Geary, kept a little tighter leash on their foragers and prevented the total destruction that was visited upon Columbia. But the desolation was severe, as attested to 45 years after the event by Sarah Lyles Feaster of Blair: "...several large residences, a score of cotton gins and one of the best flour mills in the up country were burned...Hundreds of horses were carried off...Nearly all the provisions were destroyed." Feasterville native George Washington Coleman described returning home from a Union prisoner of war camp: "...arrived at my home on the 4th July 1865. I find here the stable, cribs, Gin house, screw & 62 bales of cotton...all burned up & a gin house on a lower place burned. I found my old Mother & her grand daughter Sarah Edith Coleman that she raised from infancy."

Photo: Ruins of Columbia, SC from the steps of the State House looking north, Feb. 1865. Credit: George Bernard, US Army.



Edgar compares the agricultural statistics from 1870 to those a decade earlier saying, "they tell a grim tale." More than 1.5 million acres of land were fallow and sixty percent of the value of livestock had disappeared, as had the animals themselves. Barns, fences and outbuildings had been

destroyed along with houses. But Shelton rose from the ashes of the Civil War as the South recovered, and it eventually became a larger, busier hub of commerce and transportation. Those determined souls that stuck around after the war (both White and Black) found a way to re-ignite the fire box in the locomotive of South Carolina agriculture and pour on the steam. Cotton came back stronger than ever but it wasn't a smooth ride. According to Edgar, "Increased cotton production, the abandoning of food crops, and abuse of the land all led to troubles..." But though various agricultural reforms, development of larger cotton mills, and more rail connections the economy was roaring down the tracks by 1890, and Shelton was literally on a main line. George Washington Coleman documents the everyday life of a family farmer in his 1890 diary. "...nice day, ginned 6 bales, got out over 3000 lbs...I finished paying for Kleinbeck farm [his farm], it contains 26 acres & cost me \$1,300...I have made cotton enough on it in 2 years to pay for it & all expenses."

The Healing Springs of Shelton

Of equal importance to the cotton economy in any narrative of Shelton would be its famous mineral springs. These springs have always been revered locally for the excellent taste of the water and the healing properties the water was said to possess. As evidence, one of the local springs was a favorite spot for Narcissa who in 1861

wrote in her diary. "Mollie and I went to the spring. The water is splendid." I can honestly say that the water from the spring at nearby Feasterville is quite "splendid," in fact it's the best I have ever tasted, and if you look closely, you can always see a crayfish or two at the bottom.

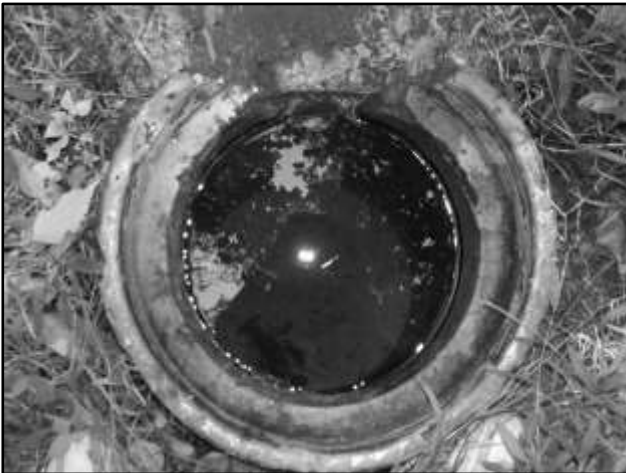
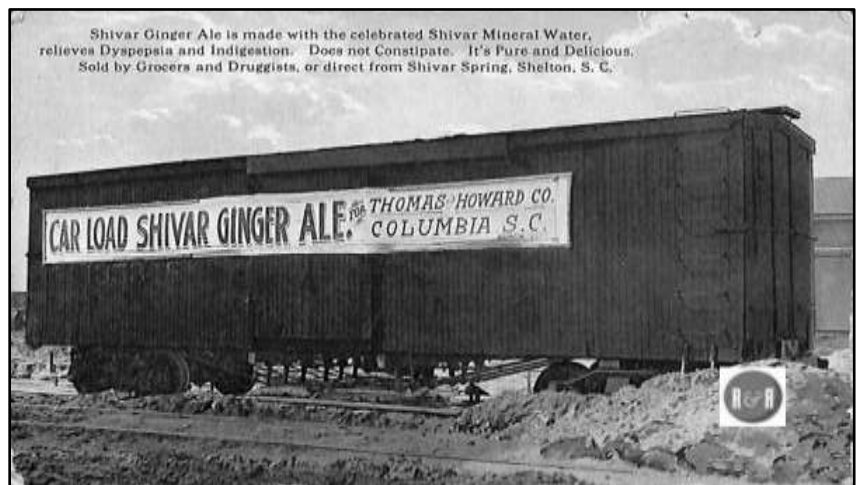


Photo: The Old Spring at Feasterville, 2014. Credit: R. Chicone, Jr.

Mr. N. F. Shivar took things a step further 1907 and really put Shelton on the map by bottling the water commercially. It started two years earlier when Shivar spent some time in Shelton recuperating from an illness, and while there became enamored with the widow Ida Newbill and her

natural spring. They married and started the Shivar Springs Bottling Company producing mineral water and later ginger ale. A total of four springs were eventually involved, with the water being pumped into large cisterns near Shelton. The cisterns can still be seen.



Photos: Left - Old cistern at Shelton. Credit: SC Picture Project. Right - Shivar rail car. Credit: The Tucker Collection-2017 from Roots and Recall.

Apparently, Shivar was great at marketing because he furnished the South Carolina House of Representatives free mineral water in 1909. To which they responded with a resolution: "Resolved by the House...that its thanks be, and the same are hereby tendered 'The Shivar Spring,' of Shelton...for the excellent quality of water furnished its members..." Of course, the Resolution was reprinted prominently in Shivar's promotional pamphlet which is available through the Fairfield County Genealogical Society.

The Heyday of Shelton

The South fought a bloody war to preserve their way of life, a way of life that was built in so many ways on the institution of slavery. With defeat came the heavy burden of change, adaptation, and innovation. White Southerners were forced to discard traditional ways that were no longer tenable but clung even more tightly to other traditions that defined them as Southerners. The "New South" modeled its economy largely on a Northern industrial model and the mill towns of the South were born. The little town of Shelton was chugging right along in the 1920s having come through WWI and the Spanish Flu pandemic. "The freight trains pass here with 50 to 80 cars...the same on Sundays as any other day," says George Washington Coleman who was still keeping a diary and living in Shelton in the 1920s. He continues, "The Ry [railroad] trains are busie coming and going...The trains are passing regular, passenger & freight." Not just cotton, lumber was also being produced, as George observes; "Some lumber being hauled in & is being loaded on the cars here & all of it is framing. No planks; it not used for out side work." W. D. McDonnald, reporter for The State newspaper, describes Shelton as having been a "thriving little town with numerous stores, a locally-owned bank and an active freight depot. Farmers from far and near came here to sell their cotton and to browse in the tall, frameboard mercantile stores which sold everything from needles to hay rakes."



Photo: J. R. Shelton's store taken in 1969 by E. Andrieski. Curtesy of The Walker History Center.

Henrietta Rosson Morton grew up around Shelton and lived in the J. R. Shelton Store. She was the granddaughter of Sarah Isabelle "Belle" Coleman who it is said was an uncommon beauty. She married J. R. "Judge" Shelton sometime after her first husband was shot in a case of mistaken identity at a speakeasy in Columbia. She helped Judge run the Store, and in my mind, Belle may have actually run the whole town. Henrietta says of her grandmother that sometimes when things

got too quiet for her liking, she would go out in the street and set off a pack of firecrackers. I guess it could get a little boring at times around there and she wasn't having it. Mable (Coleman) Hewitt visited Shelton as a kid and remembers the upstairs of the Store being very open and spacious inside, and that Belle kept terraced flower and vegetable gardens on the hill out back. She remembers seeing the river jump its banks and flood the adjacent fields saying, "they would be out there pulling ears of corn out of the water."

Belle's father, George Washington Coleman, lived with her and Judge at the Shelton store in his later years. So, in case you were wondering what happened in Shelton on, say, May 30th, 1925, I'll let George tell you. "In the store things seemed a little dull this AM, hope will pick up this PM, & so, a big crowd comes in late & they clean up two ice cream churns." A few days later he says, "Saturday is a fine day, the crowd gets in late but they sure get here & all seem hungry for cream & when I left... was about all eat up." Yes, it seems there was a lot of ice

cream consumed in Shelton. There were few freezers around then, but Shelton may have had one. The ice cream was made on site using churns. The cream most likely came from local dairies and was made from fresh, raw milk which, unlike today's milk, would have been loaded with nutrition and flavor. But here is, as Paul Harvey used to say, "the rest of the story." Ice cream, as well as soda, skyrocketed in popularity in the 1920s due to prohibition. It was a great alternative to having a "drink." Many breweries actually turned to making ice cream to stay "afloat." I guess you could say that, Shelton had a local "family-friendly" saloon.

Judge, along with owning a store, was also the local mail carrier for 30 years and a registered magistrate (thus the nickname). Judge was obviously a busy man, but that did not preclude him from George's judgment when Judge failed to properly maintain a water pipe from the well to the store. George and Belle had convinced him to install the well and pipe for good purpose. It mostly had to do with Jane Yongue who also lived and worked at the Shelton Store. Jane cooked, cleaned, and did many things necessary to the good operation of the establishment. One of those things was carrying water by hand from the spring that was up the hill and some distance from the store. According to Henrietta, George was not at all happy with Jane having to haul water everyday (she was around 70 years old). So, he had made it a personal priority to "encourage" Judge to install the well and pipe. Later George pens his disappointment after finding some leaks, "I walk up the waterpipe line & find two leaks; now it seems that Shelton has lost the interest he should have in it, but he is a peculiar man, has a lot of time to play checkers."

As for other stores in Shelton there was the Wolling Store and The Wright Company. George's observations would lead us to believe that The Wright store focused on having more goods and trading in cotton whereas the Shelton store may have been more of a community hub, occasionally serving food, taking in boarders and selling produce as well as goods. The stores would work together to avoid unnecessary competition, says Henrietta. The post office was also in the Wright store, and there was a combination cafe and barbershop to the north of Shelton's store but south of the steam engine water tower. George says, "I am around here [Shelton store] & in the Will Wright & Scott store. They sure have a fine stock of goods, away ahead of Judge Shelton...A lot of cotton on the platform 24 bales now, selling at 21 1/2. A lot of seed sold to \$1.80 per hundred. Wright & Co buying most all of the seed & cotton." William Brooks Wright was about 12 years younger than George, and his son Grady was married to George's granddaughter Mae Allen.



Photo: The Wright Co. in 1969 by E. Andrieski. Courtesy of The Walker History Center.

Mae's granddaughter, Betsy Shedd White, remembers Shelton when she was a child, saying, "We would ride down to the Store and fill a tiny brown paper bag with penny candy...all we could fit into the bag...and enjoy it for the entire weekend! I remember finding old bottles of ointments and oils in the pharmacy years later after Shelton was fading into a ghost town."

Photo: Winnsboro Cotton Mill in 1930. Credit: Sergeant Studios and The Walker History Center.

The *National Register of Historic Places* for Fairfield County offers us some important insight into what was happening with the stores in Fairfield saying: “The country store took on increasing importance in the county as farmers and tenants alike became more dependent on operating credit and began to view the store as a community center.”

For They Have “Sewn” The Wind...

In 1901 *The News and Herald* published this anecdote: “A merchant and preacher were talking about the cotton situation: ‘Cotton,



you know,’ said the merchant, ‘is the staple article with us. Every thing else is measured in cotton.’ ‘So it is,’ said the preacher; ‘but I consider it absolute folly that this should be the condition of things. Why don’t the farmers raise something else than cotton.’ ‘Just for the same reason,’ replied the merchant, ‘that you preachers continue to preach long sermons. They have got into the habit and can’t get out of it.’” Yes, pretty much the whole economy was based on cotton. The South was producing it and processing it in local textile mills. According to Historian David Koistinen, “...most New England manufacturers were driven out of business by lower-cost competitors in the American South. Southerners founded, managed, and financed a heavy majority of the textile companies in their region.”

But why is Shelton a ghost town today instead of a small town with a few ghosts? Why did it fade away? The passing of Shelton is not a unique or isolated event. It followed the course of many other farming communities in the Southern Piedmont. Some would have you believe the failure was over-reliance on cotton to the exclusion of food crops. Some would say it was competition from cheaper Asian cotton and manufacturing. Some would blame it on the boll weevil or droughts destroying the cotton crop. Some would say it was the fault of the banks, encouraging an overreliance on credit and borrowing. And, others would point to unsustainable farming practices. As with most disasters, there is rarely a single cause, and all of these things, and probably other factors, played some part in Shelton’s demise.

We can get some sense from George that things were not well in 1925 as he mentions many times how dry it is, including this entry: “The water is verry low in the Broad River, hardly enough for Ry use. I never in my life saw such a dry time & now I will soon be 81 years old. I have heard my Father say was extremely dry in 1845.” In another foretelling he notes the failure of the Bank of Shelton, “There’s to be a meeting to adjust the claims of the broken Bank at Shelton, SC. The meeting is be called at 11 o’clock. I go & I think from what I hear the depositors will have a bad showing.” According to Edgar, “In small towns, merchants, bankers, and ginners found themselves with uncollectible debts and fewer customers. When cotton and tobacco were high, credit was easy and people overextended themselves...The president of the Bank of Laurens [a nearby town] was concerned that ‘Nobody seems to have any money to spend or to pay debts.’”

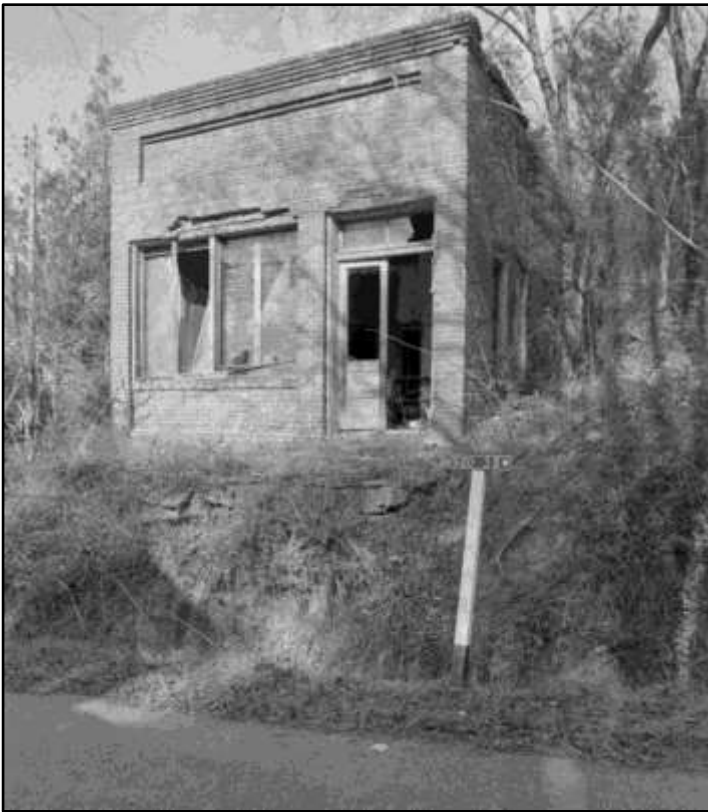


Photo: The Bank of Shelton in 1969 by E. Andrieski, The State. Curtesy of The Walker History Center.

I remember, when my grandfather, Feaster Shields Coleman, was finished using a hand tool he would clean it, sharpen it, oil it and put in back on its hook in the shed. It was a habit of respect that he applied to all facets of his life; take care of the things that take care of you. I believe the folks of the Shelton community, where he was raised, also had this philosophy. They took pride in their work, took care of their homes and care about one another. George makes mention on June 25, 1925 of another resident of Shelton, Burel Suber, saying, “he pumped here [for] so long then moved to Va. - Roanoke, died yest ... his body was brought from Va & caried over the river into Newberry Co & buried; he was the pump man for the Southern Ry for years here at this place...” While agriculture was the main occupation in the area, many of Shelton’s denizens were railroad workers, or supported railroad workers. Two of George’s own sons were Engineers and Yardmen in Florida. But in Shelton “departures”

were increasing and “timetables” were getting short. From what I can surmise, cotton was a king that demanded high tribute throughout the years. And when its kingdom of worn-out, gullied fields and silt-filled rivers, of broken sharecroppers, second-class factory workers, rowdy mill towns and false promises, finally collapsed; a battered land and a solemn economy took a deep breath and exhaled.

Edgar asserts that “The collapse of cotton and tobacco prices in 1920 was the result of overproduction and the loss of overseas markets. Then a series of droughts and boll weevils hammered the cotton crop.” But that’s only a part of the story. “By 1930, after nearly a decade of difficulties,” says Edgar, “South Carolina agriculture was about to go under... One-third of the state’s farms were mortgaged...The farming of marginal lands and improper farming methods caused major erosion problems.” The *Historic Register* for Fairfield County states, “By 1940 almost ninety percent of the county’s total acreage had been adversely affected by erosion.” According to the US Forest Service, “The period of greatest erosive land use in the South Carolina piedmont was from 1860 to 1920. By this time much of the land in the area was too eroded and depleted to sustain continued cotton production even with the use of fertilizer.”



Photo: Farm of George Smith, near Switzer, SC, 1935. Courtesy of South Caroliniana Library.

The Forest Service goes on to say, “Soil stripped from the uplands filled streams with sediment, raised water tables, and turned once fertile bottom lands into swamps.” By 1920, cotton production “was declining as eroded lands were taken out of production.” The boll weevil accelerated this trend, and abandoned fields often continued to erode for years. Need more evidence of the environmental disaster that befell Shelton and other communities? Soil scientist, Stanley Trimble, wrote in 1975, “The Southern Piedmont is one of the most severely eroded agricultural areas in the Nation...it has been stripped of much of the topsoil, many areas have suffered erosion deep into the subsoil, and some areas have been gullied so badly as to render the land unsuitable for agriculture. In areas of extremely severe erosion, streams may now be flowing 10 to 20 ft above their original beds.”

Those times have passed now. Today, Shelton, Feasterville, Blair, Salem Crossroads, and the surrounds have been known mostly for timber and hunting. The Sumter National Forest bought up much of the degraded land, as did private timber operations and hunt clubs. In 1963, Whitetail Deer were even re-introduced by US Fish and Wildlife down at Shelton. The people that have stayed, generally commute to Winnsboro, Columbia or Newberry for work. A few are employed in the local timber industry or at the VC Summer Nuclear Plant about 20 miles away. There is no real town, no gas stations, no hardware stores, no grocery stores, it probably qualifies as a “food desert” (if you don’t have a garden that is). There is a dollar store down the road a piece, and a few mom-and-pop enterprises scattered about. But the countryside is beautiful. The springs run clear, there are deer in the woods, bobcats, wild turkeys and songbirds. There are winding creeks and hardwood cove forests. And, there are some beautiful old houses and country churches left over from a more prosperous time. Oh yeah, there is also a pleasant spot down along the river you might want to visit sometime. It has a train trestle, a dead-end country road, and most likely a few ghosts too.

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