

Some of the larger plantations traded directly with Europe or northern cities rather than their neighbors. Many towns in the South ceased to grow and some vanished. With most agricultural land taken up, coupled with a decline in varieties of occupations, the opportunities for new settlers were very poor in the South and the population growth began to stagnate.

Charlotte, however, was destined to be affected by another watershed event. In 1799 young Conrad Reed found a 17-pound nugget of gold in a creek on his father's farm some 25 miles east of Charlotte in Cabarrus County. While the significance of his find was not realized until 1802,<sup>30</sup> this was the first authenticated discovery of gold in the United States. The resulting gold rush covered the Piedmont and Mountain sections of the entire southeastern United States. Where gold was found in abundance, the occupation of mining and the support services it required revitalized the diversity of human activities. At one point, gold mining was reputed to be second only to farming as an occupation in North Carolina,<sup>31</sup> and Charlotte was to be the town most affected. Blythe and Brockman conclude that it was gold and the subsequent development of an excellent transportation network converging on Charlotte which made the town great compared to other communities in the region.<sup>32</sup>

#### BRANCH GOLD

Soon after the 1799 Reed gold discovery, nuggets were found in a small stream or branch near Rozzel's Ferry in Mecklenburg County. At first the character of the nuggets was not realized. The Reed nugget served as a doorstep for 2 or 3 years. Nuggets from the Dunn mine near Rozzel's Ferry and elsewhere, are reputed to have been "used by the local gunsmiths"

for lining powder holes in rifles, as it would not rust, and though a considerable quantity was found, it was not put to any more practical use.<sup>33</sup> Dr. Samuel Henderson, who has been called the "gold pioneer" of Mecklenburg County, is reported to have worked the Dunn mine, located 9 miles northwest of Charlotte near the Catawba River, as early as 1802.

During the first few years of the 19th century most people in Charlotte and Mecklenburg considered other things more important than the occasional rumor concerning gold. Cotton production increased rapidly and people were searching for better means of transportation. In 1801 the Catawba Navigation Company was formed for the purpose of raising capital to make boat transportation feasible on the Catawba River.<sup>34</sup> Some cotton bales were already being shipped down the Catawba on flat-bottomed scows to Cheraw.<sup>35</sup> "Before 1810, the [county] commissioners, at their meeting, had many petitions for roads and bridges to consider. The Salisbury and Camden Road was the first one in the county."<sup>36</sup> In 1817 there were 70 families in Charlotte.<sup>37</sup>

The particular "fever" that drives men to search for gold was not to be denied, however. Once news of gold discoveries had been verified, more and more prospectors began searching in nearby places. The progress up to the early 1820's was slow, and mining was restricted to a very limited area. Professor Denison Olmstead, the first State Geologist of North Carolina, estimated the extent of the then known gold country at 1000 square miles including the northeastern corner of Mecklenburg County.<sup>38</sup> By 1821 placer gold mining was "practiced somewhat extensively" in Mecklenburg County.<sup>39</sup> Gold dust and nuggets, commonly referred to as "branch gold", acquired in placer mining gradually came to be a common