



BROWSE



 **By Her Hands: Catawba Women and Survival, Civil War
through Reconstruction**

N. N. Augusté

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

By Her Hands
**Catawba Women and Survival, Civil War through
Reconstruction**

N. N. Augusté (bio)

Some Indians would walk to Columbia [South Carolina, approximately sixty-eight miles from Catawba Indian lands]. Just the women would go. Grandma told me that they'd put the pottery on their backs and went on.

— Furman Harris

During the Senior Powwow in late spring of 2008 I found myself soaking in an elder's voice; Beckee Garris whispered strong, capturing my ear, teaching me that the Catawba women hold the key to their nation's survival. It was not until much later, after considerable time and effort poring over primary documents such as interviews, genealogies, and other archival materials in the T. J. Blumer Archival Collection, that I began to understand what she meant: the Catawba, or The People of the River—the only federally recognized Indian group in the state of South Carolina—survive because of their women; these female potters gave their hands, their backs, their minds, their whole bodies for their people. My intention in this piece is to retell the Catawba women's narrative of survival from the Civil War through Reconstruction, around 1860–1880. It was within these critical twenty years that Catawba women literally kept their nation alive by creating, trading, and selling pottery. In the spirit of the storytelling tradition I have attempted to use the purest voices, Catawba voices, whenever possible to provide the reader with a historically accurate account. What follows is the story of a few courageous women, told from their descendants who remember their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers sacrificing themselves for their people. These stories also help to provide a voice for other Catawba **[End Page 148]** women potters who lived similar lives but who have been silenced due to lack of descendants' voices or absence of records.¹

The story of Catawba pottery begins approximately 4,500 years ago, but this particular survival narrative begins in 1861 because it was then—at the commencement of and during the War between the States—that the Catawba Indian nation of less than 100 members lost many of its

men, leaving the women to support the nation. Catawba historian and theorist Thomas Blumer recounts that all sixteen of the nation's able-bodied men served in the war, but they did not enlist simultaneously. Although the first group of four Catawba men volunteered December 9, 1861, the last group of two men did not enlist until August 29, 1864. Of the sixteen able-bodied men who left to fight for the Confederacy, only five returned to their Catawba families, leaving a total of approximately eighty people in the nation in 1865. And, as Blumer suggests, "of the five men who returned home to face the hardships of Reconstruction, only two were without wounds and remained able to support their families."²

Women's Work: The Necessity of Life

The loss of the majority of able-bodied Catawba men during the Civil War added more burden to the women's already heavy responsibilities in these bleak, precarious times. And as a result of a long history of land loss, social marginalization, and political exclusion, the Catawbas were left living on six hundred acres of hostile barren land, which today encompasses only one square mile. Such times tested the women's resiliency and forced them to lead their nation out of its crisis. They had a long history of leadership and initiative from which to draw dating back to their infamous ancestress the Lady of Cofitachequi, who had duped Hernando de Soto and saved her people from his violent cultural genocide. But whereas the Lady had sought to defend her people against the Spanish invasion, the Catawba women of the late nineteenth century had to rebuild their land and themselves anew.³

Catawba Indian women knew that at that time the only profitable resource that could be extracted from the infertile land was its clay: plentiful and marketable for the exchange of food, clothing, and other goods. From the Civil War to well into the twentieth century, Catawba women, with the assistance of their children at times, dug the clay, molded the clay, fired it into...

By Her Hands

*Catawba Women and Survival,
Civil War through Reconstruction*

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