

1

ROBERT LECKIE AND THE LANDSFORD CANAL
by Louise Pettus

In the 1820s there was a dream of connecting South Carolina to the Mississippi River by a series of canals. The push of pioneers into the "West" and the need for "internal improvements" were at the bottom of "canal fever" which infected nearly every state in the union.

At the time South Carolina happened to have unusually advanced planners in the persons of Col. Abram Blanding, head of the Board of Public Works, and Robert Mills, the State Engineer and famed architect.

Landsford an ancient crossing between Lancaster and Chester counties, was selected for the building of a canal and locks. Robert Mills designed the works and Robert Leckie, a Scotsman, was chosen as the contractor in 1820.

Leckie was both an engineer and stonemason. He had great skill--still to be seen in the fine stone and rock work that has survived. Unfortunately, in the three years Leckie worked at the Landsford site he encountered terribly personal tragedy along with much interference in his project.

The personal tragedy came when four members of his family died within a span of 20 months. First, his 2-year old son, George Bomford Leckie died in August of 1822. Leckie's aunt, Mary Wilson, died in September. On January 23, 1823, Leckie's wife, Mary, died. On May 19, 1824, his 22 year old son, Dr. James Taylor Leckie died of pulmonary consumption at the residence of Major Allen Jones Green at Landsford. James Leckie was a graduate of South Carolina College and the Medical College of Pennsylvania.

Robert Leckie built an unusual grave enclosure for his lost family members in the Waxhaw Presbyterian Church cemetery.

The stone wall around the Leckie burial plot is 7 feet high and approximately 50 feet square. There is no entrance but there are small steps on one side that allows one to climb to the top and peer over. The markers are built into the west wall. A marble slab reads: "Infuriate Archer, could not one suffice? Thy shaft flew thrice and thrice my peace was slain."

The inscription was carved before the death of James Leckie who is not buried there. However, a sketch in Leckie's papers at Duke University shows a place for him.

Leckie's contract with the state called for a payment of \$1,000 per mile and 35 cents for each cubic yard removed. In November 1824 Leckie protested that John Couty, who had been appointed engineer over Leckie, was "not an honest man" and was giving him orders that reduced the strength of the canal.

One example given by Leckie was that the "foundation of the Lock at the stone Bridge was solid rock, and said John Couty caused me to blast out between three and three feet six inches of said rock and substitute in its place puddle [brick mortar] and build the heavy masonry on it; and the walls of said Lock settled considerably. . . ."

In bitterness, Leckie wrote further that Couty said that he did not believe engineers should communicate with contractors "because if they did the contractors and others would soon know as much as themselves did". Also Leckie was offended by Couty's language who "ordered me in the most abusive manner and with much insolent language to follow implicitly his instructions". Couty struck \$2,745.65 from Leckie's bill.

When Leckie left Landsford, the state still owed him \$3239.95 and he saw no hope of getting his money.

Leckie went on to Yorkville and supervised the construction of a Robert Mills-designed courthouse and then turned his back on South Carolina forever.