

NEARBY HISTORY:

Adm. Charles Wilkes

Extensive traveler, who wrote of his journeys, didn't think much of Charlotte and the rugged, desolate stagecoach route from Columbia

Adm. Charles Wilkes passed through this area twice. In 1848, after visiting his sister's family on a Sea Island plantation near Charleston, he headed for Charlotte, where a son was in the gold-mining business.

Wilkes kept extensive notes of his travels, which he later incorporated into his autobiography. He found Columbia attractive, but so widely spread were

the businesses and the houses that he thought it was not for a pedestrian.

When he boarded a stagecoach, he was warned it

would take two days to reach Charlotte - a distance of about 100 miles - and that unpaved roads would make the trip fatiguing. A quarter-century later, Wilkes thought the Columbia to Charlotte road was the worst he had ever traveled.

At Winnsboro, he found a few brick houses and stores, surrounded by many shanties with "no life and no energy to be seen or felt."

Dinner was broiled chicken and bacon floating in the grease. When Wilkes expressed his disgust, he was told the accommodations were as good as any he'd find in the Upstate.

It was late when the stagecoach arrived at "the House at Chester of two stories and wood." In the morning, he saw the facilities clearly and pronounced them the most desolate and dirty place he'd ever stayed in.

"I was glad to get away without breakfast."

Again they set off across Black Jack country. (The "Black Jacks" is an area of Iredell soil type extending from below Chester to the edge of Rock Hill. It drains so poorly that swampy places are frequent. The Black Jack oaks, which dominate, rarely grow taller than 30 feet and much of the plant life resembles Midwestern prairie more than the usual S.C. vegetation.)

Finally, the party got to the

Catawba River about 12 miles from Charlotte. They probably crossed over Nation Ford, for Wilkes said they stopped at the White house to change horses and refresh themselves.

The stagecoach got stuck so fast in mud south of Charlotte that the four horses needed assistance in dislodging the coach. The party had left Chester that morning. It was late afternoon when they arrived at Saddler's Hotel in Charlotte. After his visit in Charlotte, Wilkes left with a low opinion of the people and government.

The following year, Wilkes returned to Charlotte. When he left for Charleston, he went south from Charlotte to Camden where he could get railroad connections to Charleston.

In Charlotte, Wilkes rented a wagon driver. They arrived in Lancaster in the early afternoon. "We found Lancaster a pleasant town and the hotel quite comfortable," he wrote.

The next night was spent in Camden. During the night, the hired driver, Levi, stole Wilkes' purse, which contained \$75 in gold. The landlord took steps to arrest Levi, who was harnessing the horses. Levi confessed, but had already passed the money on to another man. Wilkes, not wishing to remain in Camden for a trial, felt the only thing he could do was to have the fellow "well-flogged."

Wilkes predicted the Civil War would come soon and over slavery. During the Civil War, Wilkes played a major role as commander of the USS San Jacinto, which captured the Trent, a British ship carrying Confederate ambassadors.

Wilkes is also remembered as a scientist who led the four-year expedition to Antarctica that first identified the area as a continental land mass and collected its first animal and plant specimens.

Wilkes died Feb. 8, 1877, and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

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