

## COMMUNITY

# Botanist's journals tell of Carolina travails

1-18-99

In 1785 Andre Michaux (1746-1802), a French botanist, explorer and writer, was commissioned by the French government to study trees in North America and send back specimens for the royal gardens.

Michaux came to New Jersey with his 15-year-old son, Francois Andre, but two years later decided that the Carolinas were a better base. He bought a plantation outside Charleston to serve as a nursery and shipping center.

In 1787 he discovered the N.C. mountains and between that year and 1795 made five trips into Western North Carolina.

Michaux's journals have survived. Because his notes were brief and his fragmented sentences sprinkled with Old French, botanical Latin and phonetic spellings of American personal and place names, Michaux has not gotten the attention he deserves until recently.

Just this past June, a translation of the 1789 journal, edited by Richard Rankin, was published. And an English translation of all



**LOUISE  
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Nearby  
History

the journals is coming soon.

Michaux came through this area. He spent the night of July 20, 1794, in the "detestable tavern of Huston," probably in upper Lancaster County.

The following night he spent at a tavern or inn run by John Springs "Md de Chevaux" (master of the horse). It was a nice establishment and Michaux was well-treated. That site was probably in Mecklenburg County.

On April 23, 1795, Michaux "passed by Flat Rock, by Hanging Rock Creek and slept at Cane Creek, Lancaster County, in the house of a Mr. May." His horse strayed and Thomas Lee, the sheriff, let him have another and also sent men to search for the missing horse.

"The 25th, the horse came to Mr. Lee's house of his accord. Plants on the creek: *Dedecatheon Meadia*, *Asarum Canadense*, *Claytonia Virginica*, *Erythronium dens-leonis*."

From Cane Creek, after going by Colonel Crawford's house "on the Waxsaw," Michaux crossed the river at Landsford. Then he wrote that he passed "MacClean Hands (McClenahan's) ferry on the Catawba; Thence straight to the Iron Works called Hill's Iron Works" on Allison Creek in York County.

The first of May, Michaux was in Morganton, the oldest town in the N.C. mountains. In his five visits to the Black Mountain area, Michaux had found many rare plants, including ginseng, which had commercial value, but not enough to help him out of his financial worries.

The French Revolution cost the elder Michaux financial support. There was no pay for seven years. He became an ardent Republican but it was botany that had his first allegiance.

In 1796 Michaux sailed for France with his large collection. He lost some of his plants in a ship-

wreck and when he got back to France found the Revolution had either destroyed or scattered what he had sent to the royal government.

Michaux took a job as a naturalist and began a trip to Australia, which he never reached. He died in Madagascar of a fever at the age of 56.

In 1802, a book, "Travels to the West of the Alleghany Mountains, in the States of Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee, and Back To Charleston, by the Upper Carolinas," was published in English, in London, by Michaux's son, Francois Andrew Michaux.

"Travels to the West" mentions the land between Lincolnton, N.C., and Chester. Francois found the land to be "light and of an inferior quality."

About Chester, he left this short description: "Chester contains about thirty houses, built of wood; among the number are two inns and two respectable shops."

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