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The Confederate States Navy

Yard at Charlotte, N. C.

1862-1865

*Vicent G. Alexander*

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Notes—This article appeared in the Charlotte News; June 5th, 1910— immediately after the unveiling of the Navy Yard Marker. It is re-printed by request of many who wish to place this date on file. Hon. Josephus Daniels, Secretary of the Navy, visited the site of the Charlotte Navy Yard in May 1914—and this has aroused a new and wider interest in its history.

VIOLET G. ALEXANDER.

The great development of historic activity in North Carolina during the last few years has been accompanied by the ripening of a taste for historical research and for the collection of matter bearing on county, as well as state and national history; and with this desire to preserve our county and state history has come the patriotic desire to mark historic places within our own borders, so that strangers and guests in each succeeding generation may know the patriotism, courage, bravery and true worth of North Carolina's sons and daughters, from the Colonial, Revolutionary and Confederate periods, even down to the present day.

Much of Mecklenburg's and Charlotte's splendid Colonial and Revolutionary history has been preserved and some of her historic places of those days have been marked, but her part in the Southern Confederacy, when our sons and daughters were one united people in their sacrifice, heroism, bravery and courage, has not received the recognition due her.—so the Stonewall Jackson Chapter U. D. C. through the interest of one of its members, Miss Violet G. Alexander has turned its attention to the history of the Charlotte Navy Yard, and has marked with an appropriate iron marker the site of the Confederate Navy Yard, which was established in Charlotte in the spring of 1862 and operated until 1865. The iron marker placed by the Stonewall Jackson Chapter, U. D. C., is a navy shield surrounded by sea anchors with this inscription in gold letters on a black background:

"Confederate States Navy Yard,  
Charlotte, N. C.  
1862-1865."

This marker is placed on the corner of the brick building of the S. A. L. freight depot, on East Trade street as this is the site of the former Navy Yard. The tablet was designed by a committee appointed by the U. D. C. composed of Miss Violet Alexander and Mrs. B. D. Heath and it was cast and placed by the Mecklenburg Iron Works, J. Frank Wilkes, manager. The tablet was unveiled by the Stonewall Jackson U. D. C. on June 3, 1910, which is President Jefferson Davis' birthday—a day of special veneration and observance in the South— Mrs. Stonewall Jackson life-president of the Chapter, graced the occasion with her presence, and large numbers of veterans of the Mecklenburg Camp of Confederate veterans, the Stonewall Jackson Chapter, U. D. C. Chapter of Children of Confederacy, the Stonewall Jackson chapter U. D. C., as well as many patriotic citizens were present. A splendid program was provided, Hon. E. R. Preston made an appropriate and patriotic speech—"Dixie" and other loved Southern songs were sung and prayer and the benediction were said.

Miss Violet Alexander, as chairman of the committee appointed by the U. D. C. to mark the site of the Confederate Navy Yard, deemed it advisable to give at this time to the general public a complete account of the Confederate Navy Yard at Charlotte. In compiling the article, she received much valuable aid from many who lived in Charlotte during that period, and some of whom were





associated with the Navy Yard during its operation in Charlotte.

Mr. H. Ashton Ramsay, formerly officer in charge of the Navy Yard, with his residence in Charlotte from 1862 to 1865, now (1910) contracting manager of the American Bridge Company of New York, with headquarters in Baltimore, Md., has furnished the following:

"Early in May 1862, it was determined to evacuate Norfolk and in order to save some of the tools and machinery and to continue to manufacture ordnance for the navy, a number of the machines, tools, such as lathes, planing machines and one small steam hammer, were hurriedly shipped to Charlotte, N. C. and Commander John M. Brooke, who was at that time chief of the ordnance bureau in Richmond (afterwards transferred to the army with rank of colonel, and after the war was a professor at the Virginia Military Institute at Lexington, Va., where he died) had assigned to him the United States mint property on West Trade street, and a lot located on and bounded by the railroad tracks of what was then known as the North Carolina Central Railroad and close to the station used, by the S. C. Railroad; this latter lot extended about 3,000 feet on the line of the railroad and faced on a side street parallel with the railroad about 1,000 feet. On this lot, there was a small building, which had been occupied as a machine shop, and my recollection is, that the property was purchased from Capt. John Wilkes.

Capt. R. L. Page, afterward General Page, was placed in command of the works, and had his headquarters, and also his residence, at the U. S. Mint on West Trade street, where his family lived during his administration of the affairs of the Navy Yard.

"Shortly after the machinery referred to had been forwarded to Charlotte, N. C., the 'Merrimac-Virginia,' which had been guarding the approaches to Norfolk, Va., had to be destroyed, together with other Confederate property at Norfolk, and Capt. Catesby, Capt. R. Jones and the writer, (H. Ashton Ramsay) who was chief engineer of the "Virginia" were ordered to Charlotte, N. C., in connection with constructing the ordnance works.

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Subsequently General Page was transferred to the army and ordered to the command of Fort Morgan, near Mobile, Ala., and Capt. Jones was ordered to ordnance works at Selma, Ala., leaving the writer (H. Ashton Ramsay) in command of the naval station at Charlotte, N. C.

A number of large, frame structures were erected on the property acquired, including a gun-carriage shop, a laboratory and a torpedo shop, and a large forge shop, where the largest steam hammer in the South was built, and where propeller shafting was forged for all the Confederate iron-clads; "The Virginia No. II" at Richmond, "The Albemarle," which successfully rammed and destroyed several United States gun boats in the Roanoke river; the gun boats built in Charleston and Savannah; the iron clads, "Tennessee," "Mobile" and other iron clads built at New Orleans; in fact none of the vessels could have been constructed had it not been for the works at Charlotte. Rifles, solid shot, shell and torpedoes were manufactured at these works in Charlotte and supplied the batteries of all the vessels and shore batteries manned by the Confederate navy.

In the last six months of the war, when General Stoneman burnt Salisbury, N. C., and was expected to advance on Charlotte, the writer (Ramsay), then in command was furnished with 300 muskets and directed to form a battalion of three (3) companies from the employes of the naval works and to ship as many of the naval stores and smaller tools as possible on railroad cars to Lincolnton, N. C., and to hold the battalion in readiness to receive orders from General Beauregard, to whom this battalion had been assigned.

After the burning of Columbia, S. C., by General Sherman, he advanced toward Charlotte as far as Chester, S. C., but in the meantime, the remnant of General Hood's army crossed over the country and came into Charlotte over the railroad bridge across the Catawba river, which we were instructed to plank over so the wagon trains could cross. General Johnston then assumed command of all the forces concentrated at Charlotte and immediately transported his troops eastward and confronted General



"The Confederate Navy Yard  
in Charlotte, N. C.,

1862

1865.

Sherman at Bentonville, where the last battle was fought and the enemy checked for the first time since the capture of Atlanta, Ga. Soon after this, President Jefferson Davis and his cabinet came to Charlotte, N. C., and for a few days Charlotte was the capital of the Confederacy.

Mr. Davis and his cabinet started from Charlotte soon after the surrender of General Lee, towards Washington, Ga., under the escort of General Wheeler's cavalry and one company of the navy yard battalion under Capt. Tabb the other companies, remaining to garrison Charlotte, and were surrendered together with the rest of General Johnston's army when the army capitulated at Greensboro, N. C., April, 1865.

You will note by above, that Charlotte, although several times menaced by hostile forces, and at one time the central focus of the Confederacy, was never actually captured by the enemy, their forces not coming into Charlotte until after the surrender at Greensboro."

(Signed) H. Ashton RAMSEY,  
Late Chief Engineer, C. S. N. and  
Lieut.-Colonel C. S. A.  
Baltimore, Md., March 1910.

Miss Alexander was unable to obtain data concerning Commander John M. Brooke referred to by Capt. Ramsey. Mrs. John Wilkes, one of Charlotte's most patriotic and beloved women at Miss Alexander's request, prepared the following sketch of the Charlotte Navy Yard. This article was read by Mrs. Wilkes before the U. D. C., of which she was one time historian, in April 1910—a manuscript copy, is filed with the U. D. C. Chapter and it appeared in the Charlotte Observer and The Charlotte News, April 3rd, 1910.

Mrs. Wilkes' article reads as follows:

"As the existence of a navy yard in Charlotte, N. C., has been doubted and derided, it is well to tell its story while there are some persons surviving who know of it and worked in it. I have found a number of workmen and persons, whose memory has aided mine, and here give a true history of the Charlotte Navy Yard.

"Soon after the fight between 'the Monitor' and 'The Merimas,' it became apparent to the Confederate government that it would not be possible to hold Norfolk, Va., and the United States navy would soon take possession of the fort and navy yard. So naval officers were sent to the interior in the spring of 1862 to select a site to which all the valuable movable property in the navy yard would be taken. They came along the only railroad then far enough inland to be safe, and reached Charlotte, N. C., on their mission. Both the officers, Capt. W. D. Murdaugh and, I think, Capt. Wm. Parker, were old friends of my husband, Capt. John Wilkes, during his fourteen year's service in the United States navy (1841-1854) and of course, he met and welcomed them.

"On talking about their request he showed them a place he had recently purchased, lying about 600 feet along the railroad with 100 feet frontage on East Trade street. This they thought exactly suited to the purpose, far enough inland to be safe from attack by sea and lying on the only railroad which connected Richmond with the Southern states of the Confederacy. So the Confederate government bought the property, on promise to pay for it.

"A large quantity of material and coke ovens, foundry and machine shops erected. A wooden landing stage was built from the yard to the railroad for convenience in loading and unloading. This was carried as far as the back of the brick building on East Trade street, near College street to facilitate the movement of naval stores and was then and for many years afterward called 'The Navy Yard wharf.' Subsequently it gave the name to all the cotton districts



about College street," which has always been known even to this day as 'The Wharf,' an enduring reminder of the navy yard in Charlotte.

"No large guns were cast there, according to the testimony of Capt. Aughton Ramsey, who now lives in Baltimore and who has given us much information on the subject. He told of a large trip-hammer, which was part of the machinery brought from Norfolk and which was a great curiosity here. I well member Capt. Wilkes taking me to see it work. With one blow it flattened a mass of iron and the next the pinderous mass came down so gently as only to crack an egg, placed under it.

"Many workmen came with the machinery from Norfolk and their families are still with us. Some of the names I recall:—

"B. N. Presson, R. Culpepper, R. W. Grimes, H. W. Tatum and many others. Other men of this vicinity entered the yard, Martin Frazier, Thomas Roberts, John Garibaldi, John Abernathy, John Rigler and many more.

"When the navy became a thing of the past, many of these staunch and good men entered Capt. Wilkes' service in the Mecklenburg Iron Works, where they remained until death, or forty (40) years afterward. In 1890, infirmity terminated their labors, forty subject of great gratification to Capt. Wilkes that his workmen were so long in his service. Many of the above list, as well as some excellent colored men, were with him until their death, and no strikes of discontent ever disturbed their cordial relations.

"One small gun was brought from Norfolk and passed with other material to the Mecklenburg Iron Works. For many years it was used in the celebrations and parades, but fearing it might burst and injure some one, Captain Wilkes had it broken up.

When Richmond was taken by the Federal army Mrs. Jefferson Davis and her family were in Charlotte, the house on North Brevard street (north-east corner) and East Fifth street, having been rented for her use. When the news reached here the authorities prepared to remove the specie from the treasury and other valuables sent here for safe keeping. Mrs. Davis in-

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sisted on accompanying the train with her children and her niece. The men at the navy yard were formed into a company as marines, armed and equipped as well as could be, and ordered out to guard the treasure train. Capt. Wm. Parker was in command. Just before they left he brought his old sword to me, asking me to keep it for him, and it still hangs in my hall.

The train went by rail to Chester, S. C., and then took up the march for the West. Forty-two (42) wagons with fifty-five (55) men on guard, carried the specie. Mrs. Davis and family and the government officials were in carriages and on horseback. They marched as far as Cokesville, a village beyond Augusta, Ga., and then were ordered back to Newberry, S. C., where the iron-bound boxes of specie were put in bank. It was a cold, rainy night and Mr. W. S. Culpepper recalls with pleasure a gracious act of Mrs. Davis. He, a young fellow of 17 or 18 years, was detailed as guard at the door of a little church where her family was spending the night. Mrs. Davis came to the door, bringing him a glass of wine, saying he must be cold and wet, and this was all she could do for him.

The next day the officials wanted to pay off the 55 men of the guard with pennies, but, remembering the weary tramp back to Charlotte, the men declined the offer and never received any pay for their labor.

A few days later, in April, 1865, President Davis and his cabinet came to Charlotte and for a few days this was the capital of the Confederate States. One of the last declarations and cabinet meeting was held in the building now occupied by the Charlotte Observer—then the bank, and some of their last acts were sealed and signed there.

After the news of President Lincoln's assassination was received the government broke up and the officers dispersed. President Davis set out to over-



take his family and the sequel is historic.

The navy yard was abandoned and when the Federal forces marched into Charlotte, it was taken possession of by the United States government as was the mint and all the stores of the Confederacy.

Later, Captain Wilkes was permitted to repurchase his own property (the Confederacy never having paid him for its use) at a reasonable rate. There he established the Mecklenburg Iron Works which occupied the site for 10 years, from April, 1865 to April, 1875. The last castings were made there on the day of our big fire, April 12th, 1875.

(Signed)

JANE RENWICK WILKES.

March 1910. (Mrs. John Wilkes.)

Mr. P. P. Zimmerman, of the Mecklenburg Iron Works, a life-time resident of Charlotte, and one of her most honored citizens, gave Miss Alexander invaluable aid in her researches for data and furnished her with the following list of men who came to Charlotte with the removal of the naval works from Norfolk. Mrs. Wilkes has made mention of some of them and paid a fine tribute to their sterling worth and fine loyalty. The list of names given by Mr. Zimmerman is as follows:

Ruben Culpepper.  
W. E. Culpepper.  
Henry W. Tatum.  
Joshua Sykes.  
Cornelius Myers.  
Wililam Myers.  
Willam Myers.  
Washington Bright.  
Cope Smith.  
Edward Lewis.  
Isaac Sumner.  
John Davis.  
James Lloyd.  
Clay Guy.  
Augustus Tabb.  
Andrew Hoffennagle.  
James Recketts.  
George W. Thompson, sr.  
Thomas Winfields.  
Charles L. Walker.  
Michael Holey.  
George W. Gleason, jr.  
Thomas Peed.  
Willoughby Butt.

A. Brewer.  
T. J. Roake, jr.  
Robert Culpepper.  
R. M. Grimes.  
B. M. Presson.  
Thomas Dwyer.  
George Dougherty.  
Jerry Nicholson.  
Hugh Smith.  
Henry Brown.  
Henry Tucker.  
Henry Goodwin.  
Elias Guy.  
Henry Tabb.  
John Thomas.  
John W. Owens.  
Augustus Reckctts.  
George W. Thomas, jr.  
Columbus Walker.  
Joshua Hopkins.  
George W. Gleason, sr.  
James Peed.  
John Howards.  
Marcellus Thurma.  
G. J. Rooke, sr.

Unfortunately, it has been impossible to secure a complete roster of the men who came to Charlotte with the naval works, and who served here from 1862 to 1865 part of that time as members of the three companies of marines. Mr. Zimmerman recalls the names of 51 men, all skilled workmen, who came to Charlotte from Norfolk in 1862. There were many others of whom we have no record, who either died, returned to Norfolk after the war, or moved elsewhere; as we learn from Capt. H. Ashton Ramsey that he was in command of three (3) companies organized from the men of this navy yard.

Capt. Wm. B. Taylor, formerly city tax collector, and one of Charlotte's best known veterans, a member of the Mecklenburg Camp of Confederate Veterans, tells us that Thomas Dwyer, who came to Charlotte from Norfolk with the navy yard men, invented a machine for turning a perfect sphere, a cannon ball or shell. It was the first successful invention of its kind and was used in the Charlotte navy yard. This valuable invention was confiscated by the United States government and put into use in the United States navy yards, no credit or remuneration ever being given to the Southern inventor.





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Capt. H. Ashton Ramsey was the officer in charge of the navy yard and Mr. Peters was in charge of the naval store located at the corner of East Trade street and South College street, convenient to the navy yard. Captain Richard L. Page was the commandant in charge of the entire station, with his official residence at the United States mint, on West Trade street, the latter building having been seized by the Confederate forces and was held by them until the end of the war. Here resided with Captain Page his niece, Miss Edmonia Neilson, who is still living, at present a resident of Norfolk. Miss Alexander had much correspondence with Miss Neilson regarding her residence in Charlotte, and she recalled those stormy days most distinctly, and gave many interesting and exciting episodes. She is indebted to Miss Neilson for the following valuable quotation from "The Confederate States Naval History," by Prof. J. Thomas Scharf, A. M., L. L. D., who says:

"General Page entered the United States navy as a midshipman in 1824. He served the United States navy until 1861, then a Virginian by birth, he cast his lot with the Confederacy, and entered the Confederate States navy, June 10th, 1861, with commission of commander, acting as ordnance officer of the Norfolk navy yard until the evacuation of that place by the Confederates. After the evacuation of Norfolk Commander Page was promoted to the rank of captain, and with the machinery and men removed from the Norfolk shops, established the ordnance and construction depot at Charlotte, N. C., which, under his administration became of inestimable value to the Confederacy."

Miss Alexander has in her possession a wooden anchor and also a wooden cup, which were turned in the wood-working department of Charlotte navy yard and presented by Captain Page to her aunt, Miss M. Sophie Alexander, on one occasion when he was showing a party of ladies through the navy yard. The naval officers stationed in Charlotte from 1862-1865 were highly educated and cultured men and they, with their families, received much social attention from the residents of the town.

The present owners of this historic naval site, the S. A. L. railroad, were communicated with and permission was asked by the Stonewall Jackson Chapter, U. D. C., to place the marker. The following reply was received:

"I have no objection to the Stonewall Jackson Chapter, U. D. C., erecting an iron tablet either at our freight depot building, at Charlotte, N. C., or in the yard near the sidewalk referred to in your letter, the understanding being that should the property ever pass out of the hands of the Seaboard Air Line railway, that your chapter have the privilege of removing the marker, if so desired.

"Before putting it up I would suggest that you take the matter up with our Charlotte agent, Mr. W. S. Bradley.

Yours very truly,

(Signed)

C. H. HIX,

V.-P. & G. M., S. A. L. Ry.

"Portsmouth, Va. March 24, 1910."  
Mr. W. S. Bradley, Charlotte agent of the S. A. L. railway, kindly acquiesced and assisted the U. D. C. in locating the marker on the northwest corner of the large brick building of the S. A. L. freight depot, facing East Trade street. It is frequently visited by strangers in our city who for the first time have heard of the Charlotte navy yard—thus the marker is serving its purpose of preserving history and instructing our youth and visitors in the remarkable fact, which is strangely unique, that our inland "Queen City" had a navy yard from 1862-1865.

Compiled and written by

\* VIOLET G. ALEXANDER.

Charlotte, N. C., June 3, 1910.













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