

French Botanist André Michaux

In the years immediately following the American Revolution the United States enjoyed a period of close diplomatic relations with France. Ambassador Benjamin Franklin had skillfully brought France into the struggle as America's ally. With the arrival of peace, Franklin's successor in Paris was the brilliant and talented writer, philosopher-statesman and scientist Thomas Jefferson who made special efforts to connect with the French scientific community. Enlightenment France was a center for scientific activity. The French government sponsored scientific expeditions to study the natural history of other parts of the world. It is against this backdrop that the botanist André Michaux (1746-1802) came to America in 1785 bearing a royal commission from King Louis XVI. In America this scientific emissary of France would meet Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson, state governors, senators and congressmen as well as hundreds of ordinary Americans.

André Michaux was a trained botanist known in French scientific circles for his skill and enthusiasm. Moreover, he had recently completed a successful three-year botanical journey to the Middle East. There Michaux had overcome a series of hardships and dangers that highlighted his physical strength and boldness in the face of danger as well as his botanical talents. Michaux's mission in America was to explore the country and study its native plants, especially the forest trees. He was to find the best species, then gather and ship large quantities of the best seeds and young trees to France in order to improve French forestry and agriculture.

Michaux's state-sponsored mission provided the impetus for his extensive travels throughout North America. In the course of eleven years in America he journeyed from Florida north to Quebec and west to the Mississippi. Usually he rode on horseback, but he also walked mile after mile closely observing the country and its plant life and talking with the people he met. Michaux's southern base of operations was the plant nursery garden he established near Charleston, SC. From Charleston Michaux made a series of journeys of exploration crisscrossing the Carolinas from the sea to the mountains.

Three times in 1789, once in 1794 and one last time in 1796, five times in all, André Michaux crossed the Catawba River at modern Mount Holly. One time in 1795 he crossed the South fork of the Catawba at Armstrong Ford near modern Belmont passing the future sites of the Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden and Belmont Abbey College. Near Mount Holly Michaux is the first foreign traveler to journal mention the "Tuck-a-segee Foard" [Tuckesege Ford] in his journal. This was the most important crossing place on the Catawba for many miles and the key link between Mecklenburg and Gaston Counties. The road from Charlotte across the Tuckesege Ford linked the Piedmont and the western settlements.

Michaux recorded an early observation of the Catawba's water quality in 1794 when he noted that the river had been clear when he crossed in 1789, but in 1794 it was the color of tobacco. What interested Michaux most of course was the area's plant life. On his very

first journey in 1789 he and his son made a discovery along a creek bank a few miles west of Mount Holly in modern Stanley. Then learning the botanist's skills from his father, Michaux's 19-year old son François-André was the first to spot a bigleaf magnolia tree which his father immediately recognized as a new species to science. On each subsequent visit to the area, Michaux made notes on this new species. When his American plant studies were published a few years later, André Michaux gave this tree the scientific name *Magnolia macrophylla*, which means big leaf magnolia in Latin. The Michauxs collected a few of the trees and sent them to France. The Empress Josephine had two of the Michaux magnolias in her famous garden at Malmaison. A few years later, John Lyon, an acquaintance of François-André Michaux's, would enlist the help of early settler Peter Smith to grow, collect and ship hundreds of bigleaf magnolias for his Philadelphia nursery business

During his repeated visits to the area André Michaux became acquainted with several early settlers and mentioned them in his journals. Michaux praised the hospitality of Captain Robert Alexander whose plantation, then within sight of the Tuckesege Ford, forms the core of modern Mount Holly. He also visited Christian Reinhardt in Lincolnton and lawyer Ben Smith on Hoyle Creek (near Stanley) more than once. In fact, Michaux's notes about the hospitality of planters John Springs II in Mecklenburg, Thomas Lee in Lancaster, Henry Whitener and his son-in-law Robertson near Hickory, as well as several visits with Waightstill Avery near Morganton suggest a network of friendly citizens in the Carolina Piedmont, who like Captain Alexander, enjoyed the visits of this French scientist and offered him their help and authentic southern hospitality during his visits.

More information about André Michaux may be found at www.michaux.org

Charlie Williams 9-17-06