

‘Michaux’s Discovery’ Marked
By Jill Thomas, Herald Citizen Staff
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Front page, 24 April 2005 “thank you” to Andre Michaux,
a French botanist who passed through the Gainesboro area more than 200 years ago.

Michaux was on an exploration that took him throughout North America to find trees that could replace the forest of France which had been decimated to make warships as the French and British fought for the control of the high seas.

While Michaux looked for appropriate tree stock, he also made note of the wildflowers and plants on his journeys which took him as far south as Florida and as far north as northern Canada.

On March 1, 1796, Michaux was hiking through the woods near Ft. Blount in what is now Jackson County when he spotted a new species of tree. When he cut into it, he found the wood itself was a buttery yellow and named the tree “yellowwood.” The Latin name for the tree is *Cladrastis lutea*. Some Tennessee natives also know the tree as a yellow beach.

He gathered up seeds to take them back to his private garden where he might grow some before returning with seed to France.

All of Michaux’s findings were published in the landmark book, *The Flora of North America*, in 1803 following his death.

In 1991, Tennessee legislators named the yellowwood the state’s ‘Bicentennial Tree.’

To honor the discovery, the Jackson County Historical Society applied for an official historical marker to be placed next to a 12-year-old yellowwood on the Courthouse lawn.

Standing in for Michaux at Friday’s ceremony was Charles Williams, a retired librarian from Mecklenburg County in South Carolina who travels the country educating school children and the public about Michaux by dressing in period clothing and telling Michaux’s story.

For Williams, the marker serves at least two purposes.

“Michaux came to the US for an environmental reason. The French had cut down their timber to build ships. They needed to import tree seedlings in order to build up their forests again, and that was a time-consuming and difficult thing to do.

“Michaux’s goal was to be the one to restock those forests.

“Unfortunately the French Revolution came along and the royalty in power who had supported Michaux were all either executed or exiled. So his primary mission was a failure, but he did succeed in inventorying plant life in America.

“He was the premier field botanist in North America at that time and many of his scientific descriptions are still accurate today,” William said.

“Secondly, Michaux represents an era in American history where the US had good relations with France,” he told the crowd, adding: “I think he can bring French people and Americans together again.”

Ronnie West, president of the Jackson County Historical Society, and his wife, Donnitta, who wrote the text for the historical marker, agree. They went to a Michaux commemoration in France last year and found people there extremely friendly and accommodating.

Plus, the couple thinks that Michaux's importance will eventually lead to more interest in Fort Blount and even Jackson County itself.

"We think Michaux has such significance because we can use this knowledge of him to bring attention to the importance of Ft. Blount," West said.

The Jackson County Historical Society is hoping to create a Ft. Blount replica that will include a Native American village and virtual reality museum.

When the members of the Historical Society applied for the historical marker, they had to present a written description and the text for the plaque to the Tennessee Historical Commission. The commission then double checked the findings, and then, to Ronny West's surprise, the commission refused to issue the marker.

"They didn't accept the title we'd put on it," said Donnitta.

"We called it 'Yellowwood' but they said that was too common. It was like giving an historic marker for 'The oak.'

"So we changed the title to 'Michaux's Discover' and then everything was fine," she said.

"Apparently our timing was just right because we heard that a woman in East Tennessee is also trying to get a Michaux marker, but she couldn't get one because the commission had already made a marker to Michaux in Jackson County," Donnitta said.

The Jackson County group was so excited about getting the marker that they put the sign up at their own expense rather than waiting for the red tape to play out at the Tennessee Historical Commission.

"If we'd waited, we would have received \$500 to put the sign up, but we were too excited. We wanted it up now," Ronny said.

Donnitta thinks this is just the start of a Michaux movement.

"I think we're going to hear a lot more about Michaux. I think Charlie (Williams) will go far in making people recognize Michaux's contributions in North America," she said.

The historical marker reads:

"Michaux's Discovery"

"Traveling through the Tennessee Country, Andre Michaux, a French botanist, arrived at Fort Blount on the First of March (1796). On the next day, in the vicinity of Flynn's Creek about 12 miles from the Fort, he discovered the native ornamental yellowwood, scientifically known as *Cladrastis lutea*. It was designated Tennessee's bicentennial tree in 1991 by the Tennessee General Assembly."

And in final celebration of the marker, the yellowwood which has been growing on the Square of the past 10 years or so shows signs of wanting to bloom. Little chains of seeds are forming and should burst into bloom in the next few weeks.

"A yellowwood only blooms once every five years," Ronny West said. "It seems appropriate that this is the year."

Yellowwood trees one of Tennessee's beautiful secrets

Jackson County's George Dudney would like to spread the secret around, make the world a more beautiful place

Dyana Bagby
Herald-Citizen Staff

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A tree is a tree is a tree. Not so for many nature lovers, including George Dudney, 68, of Jackson County, who has a passion for the yellowwood tree, known by other arboreal admirers as that "rare Tennessean."



George Dudney of Jackson County studies the beautiful blooms of his yellowwood tree, native to Tennessee and one of the rarest of all the trees in the eastern region of North America. * H-C Photo/Ty Kernea

"I guess it all started years ago when I was talking with my Uncle Bob, who is now 87, and he told me his father showed him a yellowwood tree when he was six-years old," recalled Dudney, who lives across the street from his uncle in the small community of Free State, near Gainesboro.

"Uncle Bob didn't remember exactly what his father told him about the tree, but he was left with the impression that this was a tree that needed to be taken care of."

Considered an ornamental tree, the yellowwood, native to Tennessee, may best be known as the state's Bicentennial Tree, given this honor in 1991 by Gov. Ned McWherter when he signed the resolution to that effect sponsored by Sen. Tommy Burks of Monterey and Sen. Anna Belle O'Brien of Crossville.

It was the Jackson County Historical Society, in which both "Uncle Bob" Dudney and George are active members, that lobbied for the yellowwood's designation.

"The yellowwood (*Cladrastis lutea*) was selected because of its deep roots in Jackson County and Tennessee history," the younger Dudney, a retired public health dentist who worked in North Carolina, told the H-C.

And while it is Tennessee's Bicentennial Tree, most Tennesseans are apparently unaware of its existence, Dudney said.

"A lot of people mistake it for a locust tree because the blooms are similar, but they are two very different trees," he explained.

"And loggers around here call it a yellow beech if you say 'yellowwood,' they don't know what you're talking about," Dudney said.

"It is an ornamental tree and apparently popular in gardens throughout the world, but I just wish more people knew about preserving it in the wild, especially in its home state."

More than 200 years ago, in March 1796, three months before Tennessee was admitted into the Union, noted French botanist Andre Michaux, braving a harsh and snowy winter, discovered the tree while on a plant gathering expedition for his country near Fort Blount on the Cumberland River in what is now Jackson County.

The botanist, whose adventures took him around the world to such places as Persia and Mesopotamia, recognized the yellowwood as a rare species with its silvery gray bark and realized that he was the first white man to see the strange specie which, according to experts, is best represented in the mountains of China and Japan.

And so Michaux, with the help of a soldier at Fort Blount, was able to cut a few trees from the hard, icy earth and collect seeds and roots to ship back to France.

Unfortunately, the ship carrying the seed sank, and Michaux never again journeyed to America.

However, his son, F.A. Michaux, followed in his father's footsteps using his journal as a guidebook and visited Nashville. This time, the yellowwood seeds collected by the younger Michaux did make it back to France and are said to have found their way into the Tuileries gardens in Paris where yellowwoods still grow today.

Although the tree now is mostly used for decoration, it once served practical purposes for the first settlers in Tennessee.

Its hardness and strength as well as its ease in polishing made the yellowwood ideal for gunstocks for many pioneer men. And pioneer women and most likely Native Americans used the yellow dye from the trees' roots for such things as adding color to their homespun, Dudney explained.

In 1996, the 99th Tennessee General Assembly ended its session with the Jackson County Historical Society presenting Gov. Don Sundquist, the Speakers of the House and Senate and Sen. Burks with shiny new gavels made from the yellowwood tree.

Because of its rarity, Dudney said he has seen the yellowwood listed as an endangered species, but adds that young trees can be bought at many area nurseries, including several in McMinnville.

In Cookeville, there are yellowwood trees planted along the median on Neal Street, one at the Depot Museum, a few around town and other yellowwoods are located in the Burgess Falls State Natural Area and also the Edgar Evins State Park on Center Hill Lake.

Members of the Jackson County Historical Society also started a movement to have a yellowwood tree planted in every one of Tennessee's 95 counties, an initiative which Dudney is unsure was ever completed.

"This is such a beautiful tree," Dudney said simply, looking out his window across the road to where two of the trees are still growing in his uncle's yard. "Right now, it has such nice emerald-green leaves."

"A lot of people look at trees and say, 'It's just a tree,'" he added. "And that's unfortunate all trees have different characteristics and different parts they play in our ecology."

Dudney himself has a special admiration for a beech tree in his community that he used to watch while growing up and still respects today.

"It's a huge, huge tree and I've watched it for years, when I was in school," he said. "I don't know how old it is, but you look at it and wonder how long that tree has been here and you notice the coolness and the shade it offers it's one of the prettiest trees I've ever seen."

And this tree, along with the yellowwood plus all other trees are worthy of our admiration, Dudney believes.

"I wish people would learn to identify the yellowwood and preserve it I think many would enjoy having one in their yard," he continued thoughtfully.

"What it boils down to is people appreciating nature, doing what they can to make our world a beautiful place. Just think, if we all did a little bit, what a beautiful world we would have," he added.

"And I guess my idea of preserving the yellowwood fits into that scheme that nature is here for us to enjoy and admire."

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Jackson County yellowwood in new home at Middleton Place Gardens

By RONNY J. WEST
Special to the Herald-Citizen

A yellowwood tree from Jackson County has found a home in the beautiful and verdant Middleton Place Gardens in Charleston, S. C.

My wife, Donnietta, and I, representing the Jackson County Historical Society, recently traveled a total of 1,000 miles carrying an eight-foot yellowwood tree to its destination in Middleton Place.

The yellowwood was first discovered on the Avery Trace in Jackson County in 1796 by Andre' Michaux, an eminent French botanist, while searching for plant specimens in the Tennessee wilderness.

From Tennessee, Michaux took yellowwood seedlings to his Acclamation Garden in Charleston but his gardens were almost totally destroyed when the International Airport was constructed there. A monument was placed there to mark Michaux's French garden, although it is very hard to find.

Michaux has a strong connection to Middleton Place, the country's oldest landscaped gardens. He was an acquaintance of Henry Middleton, an enthusiastic botanist in his own right.

Ten years prior to the discovery of the yellowwood, Michaux was responsible for planting the first *Camellia japonicas* at Middleton Place in 1786, some of the first of that specie of flower to be placed in any American garden. Today, one of the original Camellias still remains and others continue to flourish throughout the Gardens.

Michaux was also responsible for the tea olive, crepe myrtle and possibly the big leaf magnolia.

In memory of Andre' Michaux's contributions to Charleston and to Jackson County more than 200 years ago, officials at Middleton Place Gardens proudly accepted the yellowwood tree and it was planted in a prominent location in front of the Middleton Place mansion, overlooking the butterfly lakes and close to Michaux's *Camellia japonica*, Reine des Fleurs.

Sidney Frasier, vice president of horticulture at Middleton Place, said, "Michaux played a vital role in the discovery of the yellowwood as well as the camellias located in the Gardens at Middleton Place. We are delighted to have the yellowwood tree amongst our plant material and it will be a wonderful addition to our South Green Walk."

For those of you unfamiliar with the Gardens at Middleton Place, it is not only the country's oldest landscaped gardens but one of the most beautiful. If you get a chance to visit the Gardens, Marlene Ward, interpretive coordinator at the Gardens, has assured us that the yellowwood will be mentioned in the tour.

Members of the Jackson County Historical Society are honored to interweave the history of Andre' Michaux and the yellowwood with the Gardens at Middleton Place.

** Ronny J. West is president of the Jackson County Historical Society, Gainesboro.*

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