

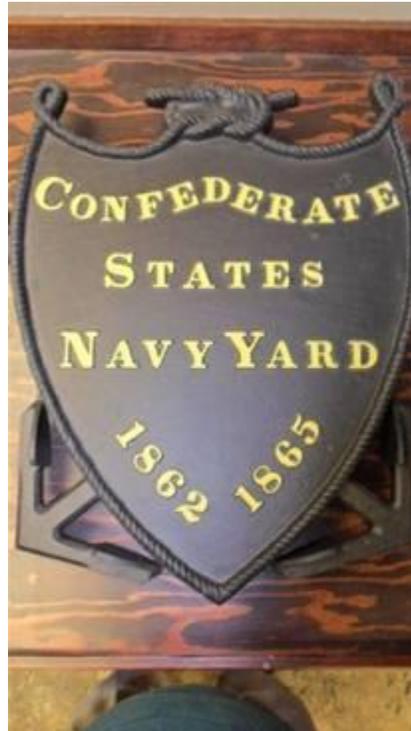
# Confederate States Navy Yard Markers

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*In Charlotte, North Carolina, 1862–1865*

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Where should the “Confederates States Navy Yard” plaque be re-erected? It must be attached to a vertical surface. In 1910, this plaque was manufactured by the *Mecklenburg Iron Works* and erected on a railroad office building on the south side of East Trade Street west of the railroad tracks. Recently, this hundred-year-old plaque was refurbished.



1910 Confederate States Navy Yard plaque

Perhaps the best wall would be one of the tall white columns in front of the *EpiCentre* loading docks.



EpiCentre loading dock alleyway and columns. Railroad tracks on the left at original ground level.

Unfortunately, EpiCentre management has restricted use of its property. We could ask them to reconsider. An alternative vertical surface is the column or beam supporting the railroad tracks.



East Trade Street underpass cut under railroad tracks at original ground level.

Or the plaque could be mounted on specially-designed post or countersunk into granite stone. These options allow a more detailed description on the opposite side. Such a description could mention John Wilkes and the beginning of the *Mecklenburg Iron Works*.



Example plaque countersunk and attached to granite stone

Placement of the NC historical marker “Confederate Navy Yard” is less complicated. It will be re-erected on a post inserted into the sidewalk. Michael Hill of the NC Office of Archives and History has already directed this historical marker be re-erected there. Since it will be in a public space, it should not conflict with EpiCenter property.



NC Historical Marker

The main conclusion is that the Navy Yard plaque and historical marker should be remounted as near as possible to where they were before on the south side of East Trade Street just west of the railroad tracks. But if you visit this site today, you might think that improbable. The historical story of the Confederate Navy Yard is surprisingly interesting. What follows is a reexamination of that history for the purpose of deciding where it should be marked. To address the many questions, this memo includes input from Tom Handchett, Jane Johnson, and Mary Boyer. It is a rather long email. So read it if you are interested.

On 16 December 2010, Les Epperson and Chip Gallup, Charlotte DOT, asked where the refurbished “Confederate Navy Yard” plaque should be remounted. Having never studied the Navy Yard before, I was not qualified to respond. But I guessed that verifying this historical site would be straightforward, I knew contacts who knew more, and so maybe I could keep the process moving. However, on a visit to the site, I noticed that the ground is about 20 feet below the railroad tracks. Also, the land slopes upwards towards College Street and Tryon Street. It seemed improbable that a shop that routinely moved heavy equipment and materials would reside on unlevel ground and below the railroad tracks. Also, it is sometimes mentioned that the Navy Yard was on the north side of Trade Street where the Bobcats Arena is today. All this suggested that the original plaque location was inappropriate.

The railroad tracks are level across town and apparently have never been elevated. Thus, a huge amount of soil has been removed to build underpasses for East Trade Street, 4<sup>th</sup> Street, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Street. The East Trade Street underpass existed by 1925. Soil was excavated west off the railroad tracks between East Trade Street and 4<sup>th</sup> Street, and almost to 3<sup>rd</sup> Street. The EpiCentre loading dock and bottom floor of other buildings occupy this space today. But even before this soil was removed, the strip of level ground west of the railroad tracks was rather narrow. It is difficult to understand why a Navy Yard would be built wedged between the railroad tracks and a hillside. In addition, this location is rather close to uptown to have built “rifle [artillery] solid shot and [explosive] shell and torpedoes [underwater mine]” although such ordnance could have been armed elsewhere. Concern that the Navy Yard plaque might be erected in an inappropriate location made me ask many of you for advice.

Jane Johnson, from the Carolina Room, Main Public Library, was most helpful. She discovered the [1877 Beer’s map of Charlotte](#) that shows the railroad tracks had many sidings between East Trade Street down to Stonewall Street, about 5 blocks. Also between near East Trade Street and down to 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, it shows a long structure marked “Platform” and buildings marked as “Cotton Department”. Jane also discovered the [1881 Gray’s New Map of](#)

[Charlotte](#). Both of these maps show Mecklenburg Iron Works, the alleged continuation of the Confederate Navy Yard, on the opposite side of town, on West Trade Street by the railroad tracks.

So, what happened? Can we believe the Confederate Navy Yard was on East Trade Street? Although the subject justifies more research, the following timeline seems consistent with all references.

1. Before the Civil War, Commander John Wilkes owned an iron foundry along the railroad tracks south of East Trade Street. A foundry makes castings for tools, containers, etc. Aside from selling to the public, the foundry supported Wilkes' other nearby businesses.
2. In early 1862, the Confederate Navy Yard moved its Navy Yard machinery from Norfolk to Charlotte. It commandeered Wilkes' property. It built new facilities off of East Trade Street. That site also was also used as a depot for naval stores. The name "Confederate Navy Yard" applied to the original facility in Norfolk, Virginia. In Charlotte, the official name was probably "Confederate Marine Engineering Works and Naval Ordnance Depot".
3. One report indicates that on 7 January 1864 an explosion caused a terrible fire at the Confederate Navy Yard. No one could determine the cause. The Navy Yard was destroyed.
4. After the Civil War, Wilkes reacquired all his property and named this business *Mecklenburg Iron Works*. It continued operation on East Trade Street until a fire on 12 April 1875.
5. Summer 1875 New foundry is built at 510 West Trade Street.
6. About 1875, Wilkes moved his operation to West Trade Street, again adjacent to railroad tracks. That operation continued until at least the 1950s, maybe as late as 1982.
7. July 4, 1875 The Wilkes move into their new home at 508 West Trade Street. The house must have been an odd structure. Originally, William Elms joined three houses together between 1820 and 1826. Elms sold the house to Doctor William Hayes, who in turn sold it to the Wilkes. (Shelia Bumgarner correspondence 2011)
8. In 1910, the *United Daughters of the Confederacy* (UDC) arranged that the above iron plaque be manufactured at the Mecklenburg Iron Works and erected on East Trade Street. The UCD may own this plaque.
9. The Confederate States Navy Yard marker was designed by J. Frank Wilkes, the son of Capt. John Wilkes and was cast at the Mecklenburg Iron Works. Cost of marker, \$25. (Boyer correspondence 2011)

In 1910, Violet G. Alexander wrote the booklet "[The Confederates States Navy Yard at Charlotte, N. C. 1862-1865](#)". It includes a 1910 letter written by H. Ashton Ramsey, formerly CSA Lt. Colonel and CSN Chief Engineer in charge in Charlotte, and an independent article by Jane Renwick Smedberg Wilkes, widow of Captain John Wilkes.

In 1910, H. Ashton Ramsey wrote:

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, tool, 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.

[One web source](#) indicates that the *Charlotte & S.C. Railroad* was completed in 1852. An [old map](#) shows the NC Central Railroad and the SC Railroad Depot on the east side of town. Ramsey continued:

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 ironclads; ... none of the vessels could have been constructed had it not been for the works at Charlotte. Rifles, solid shot, shell and torpedoes [underwater mines] were manufactured at these works in Charlotte and supplied the batteries of all the vessels and shore batteries manned by the Confederate navy.

Notably, Ramsey did not use the expression "Navy Yard".

In 1910, Jane Renwick Smedberg Wilkes, widow of Captain John Wilkes, began her article defensively:

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.

Maybe doubt was caused by the choice of name. "Confederate Navy Yard" has the advantage of being short, but that may not have been the official name. She continued:

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 [1910] as "The Wharf" an enduring reminder of the navy yard in Charlotte.

She ended it with:

The navy yard was abandoned [at the end of the Civil War] 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 it 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.

Before the excavation around the railroad tracks there was enough level ground west of the railroad tracks for a few buildings. The Navy Yard foundry and workshops must have been small, at least by modern standards. There is evidence that naval stores filled the block up to College Street. The excavation must have occurred after 1910 and before 1925, since Jane Johnson discovered a 1925 newspaper article that states, "the ground was not as steep as it is today [1925]".

An interesting [sketch of the Mecklenburg Iron Works is on page 15 of "Charlotte and the Carolina Piedmont"](#), Hanchett and Sumner, 2003. The layout of buildings in this sketch matches the layout of buildings on West Trade Street as shown on both the [1877 Beer's map](#) and [1881 Gray's New Map](#). Here is a [bird-eye view of the site of the Mecklenburg Iron Works](#), now a parking lot.

Some references say the Mecklenburg Iron Works was north of Trade Street, and thus infer that the Confederate Navy Yard was where the Bobcats Arena is today. However, these references are probably to the Mecklenburg Iron Works being north of West Trade Street after 1875. Moreover, the [1877 Beer's Map](#) shows residential houses where the Bobcats Arena is today. Had the Wilkes Foundry [Navy Yard] been there, all those homes would have been built within two years of the 1875 fire. Four years later in 1881, [Grays New Map](#) shows *Liddell & Co. Foundry & Machine Shop* where the Arena is today. But a foundry in 1881 does not infer a foundry in 1865 if the site had houses in 1877. For a long time, I believed the Navy Yard was on the level ground where the CATS bus Transportation Center is today. But the [1877 Beer's Map](#) shows residential houses there also. (It's amazing that these residents lived so close to railroad trains, foundry, and other industries. It's a wonder that they got any sleep during the Civil War.) Today, the CATS Transportation Center sits on land that is about 20 feet below the original ground level.

Jane Johnson and Mary Boyer discovered more references to the plaque in modern times.

- A Charlotte News article from 12/13/1925 says that there was a burning a few nights ago of the old building, adjacent to the East Avenue (E. Trade) underpass, which was used for many years as a warehouse by the Seaboard Air Lines freight department. It goes on to say that it was the naval yard building. "Entrance to the yard from the Trade Street side was just west of the present underpass. The underpass was not constructed at that time and the sharp grade that now extends from the Trade and College Street intersection did not exist." It goes on to say, quoting William A. Lucas, "I remember in addition to the naval supplies kept in the yard, there was a storehouse of naval goods in a store under the Central Hotel, about where the Greek shoeshine place is now located. The store was kept by Fullans and Springs before

the war [presumably WWI]. Another storehouse, about where the Howell Arcade now is located that had been kept before the war by S. M. Howell, also was used as a Confederate Navy warehouse.

- Another article from 1959 shows the tearing down of the building where the plaque was. It says it was torn down for the purpose of building a parking lot on the site. "The parking lot will front 100 feet on Trade St. and 108 feet on 4th St."
- An article from 5/7/1973 said the building was just west of the Southern Railway overpass on Trade St. Part of the Civic Center will be on this site. The plaque was on the retaining wall just under the Navy Yard structure.
- A 5 August 1982 *Charlotte Observer* article "Mecklenburg Iron Works to End Operations Friday" states "Wilkes regained his property after the war [Civil], relocated it on West Trade Street, west of Graham Street, and operated it until his death in 1908."

So, despite the huge amount of soil excavated, the original site of the historical plaque and marker are correct. Of course, that should be presumed since some of those who erected the 1910 plaque were eyewitnesses of the Navy Yard during the Civil War. Maybe you agree or disagree. If you disagree, then speak up because we need to provide Charlotte DOT clear guidance on where to place the plaque and historical marker. Secondly, we should ask EpiCentre management to reconsider mounting the "Confederate States Navy Yard" plaque on one of the columns in front of the loading docks. Or, alternatively, the plaque could be mounted a specially-designed post or granite-stone. The last two options allow a more descriptive account of the Confederate Navy Yard, John Wilkes, and Mecklenburg Iron Works. The United Daughters of the Confederacy should be involved since they ordered it in 1910.

The Mecklenburg Iron Works on West Trade Street was an important employer in Charlotte for many decades. Due to its importance and longevity, it also deserves a historical marker.

Here's an interesting aside. John Wilkes' father was US Navy Rear Admiral Charles Wilkes, the leader of the 1839-1840 *US Exploring Expedition* that discovered Antarctica had a land mass, thus was a continent, and on which a large portion is now known as "Wilkes Land".