

# a tempestuous legacy

## charles wilkes and the united states exploring expedition

by Brian Insolo and  
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He once whipped a sixteen-year-old cabin boy named Charles Erskine, who had accidentally gotten some letters wet, and would flog his crew on the smallest pretext. He was court-martialed twice during his career, delighting officers who had served under him. Yet Charles Wilkes successfully headed an expedition into the southern Pacific that established the scope and breadth of Antarctica, exploring 1500 miles of its coastline. It was an accomplishment that had evaded even Captain James Cook. Moreover, the voyages of his ships radically changed the face of scientific research.

On August 18, 1838, the young Lieutenant Charles Wilkes set sail from Hampton Roads, Virginia commanding the United States South Seas Exploring Expedition, called the “Ex. Ex.” for short. Under his command were his flagship, the *Vincennes*,

and five other naval vessels, the *Peacock*, the *Porpoise*, the *Relief*, the *Flying Fish*, and the *Sea Gull*. Seven scientists were on the expedition, including geologist James Dwight Dana, whose mineral classification system is still used worldwide, and naturalist Titian Ramsay Peale, esteemed artist of the

*Black-Necked Stilt*



Lynda Schrack



*Common Bleeding Heart - Dicentra spectabilis*

American West. Two other artists, Alfred T. Agate and James Drayton, also joined the expedition, which would not return home until 1842. During the Wilkes Expedition’s nearly four years at sea, over 87,000 miles were covered. With the help of “Scientifics,” derisively called “clam diggers” or “bug catchers” by crewmembers, 280 islands (mostly in the Pacific) were explored, and over 800 miles of Oregon were mapped. Of no less importance, over 60,000 plant and bird specimens were collected.

Aboard the Expedition, ship conditions were harsh. Quarters were cramped, drinking water was foul, live animals were kept



*Protea* illustration by Alfred Agate.

on deck for food, and the tyrannical Wilkes was ever-present. Tragedy struck more than once. The *Sea Gull* and its crew of fifteen were lost during a South American coastal storm in May 1839. A little more than a year later, two sailors, including Wilkes' nephew, Midshipman Wilkes Henry, were slaughtered while bartering for food in western Fiji's Malolo Island in July of 1840. Retribution was severe. According to an old man of Malolo Island, close to eighty Fijians lost their lives in the incident. The *Peacock* would also be lost in July of 1841 on the Columbia River, though with no loss of life, thanks to a canoe rescue by John Dean, the African American servant of the *Vincennes'* purser, and a group of Chinook Indians. Dean would also save the artist Alfred Agate along with his paintings and drawings.

Upon returning to New York City in 1842, Wilkes faced a court-martial for repeatedly flogging his crew more than the allowable twelve lashes. The affair led to Wilkes' reprimand. He was, however, in charge of the Expedition's collections that were displayed in the Great Hall of the U.S. Patent Office Building until the Smithsonian Institution was created in 1857. At this time, Wilkes, who had possession of officers' journals, also began work on numerous reports based on the Expedition. A staggering amount of data and specimens were collected during the Wilkes' Expedition, including the seeds of 648 species, which were later traded, planted, and sent throughout the country. Dried specimens were sent to the National Herbarium, now a part of the Smithsonian Institution. There were also 254 live plants, which mostly came from the home stretch of the journey, that were placed in a newly constructed greenhouse in 1850, and would later become the United States Botanic Garden.

With the publication of Wilkes' Expedition works, he and his wife Jane became a socially prominent couple in Washington, D.C. However, Wilkes' happiness was shattered when his wife passed away in August 1848 after badly hurting her leg and falling ill from blood poisoning. Four years later, Wilkes moved his family to a new Washington, D.C. address where he met Mary Lynch Bolton, the widow of Commodore Bolton who served on his court-martial board. They married in 1854. In 1859, Wilkes, at the age of sixty-one, had a daughter, Mary.

In June of 1863, Wilkes was recalled by Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, who believed that he had been remiss in not capturing the raiding ship *Alabama*. Wilkes rashly responded by publishing a scathing response in *The New York Times*, for which he was again court-martialed in the spring of 1864. He was suspended from the Navy for three years. Although his sentence was shortened to one year by President Lincoln, he would never serve on active duty again.

The United States South Seas Exploring Expedition's contributions to science and discovery are nothing less than extraordinary. The Expedition made major contributions to geography, charting not only Antarctica and South Pacific Islands, but also San Francisco Bay, the Columbia River, and Puget Sound. The voyage also returned thousands of specimens



*Vandopsis* illustration by Alfred Agate.

***“As the sailor lives, so he dies... [T]here is no audience but those who share his dangers. He lies down afar from home and friends, with no one to tell the story of his battles, so bravely fought, though lost; no one to witness his suffering, or note the courage with which he faced his last moment.”***

Penned by Charles Erskine in his book, *Twenty Years Before the Mast*, describing the sailors who helped make the Wilkes Expedition possible.

and volumes of data, making significant contributions to the fields of botany, zoology, and ethnography. The collections became an integral part of the Smithsonian Institution and the United States Botanic Garden. In addition, the expedition helped Washington, D.C. realize the importance of funding

large-scale expeditions, and demonstrated to Europe that the United States could accomplish that task. In August 1909, the United States paid its final tribute to the controversial Charles Wilkes by moving his remains to the Arlington National Cemetery.

Two excellent books on the United States South Seas Exploring Expedition, *Magnificent Voyagers*, edited by Herman J. Viola and Carolyn Margolis, and *Sea of Glory*, by Nathan Philbrick, are both available from book vendors on GSA Schedule 76, Publication Media.

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Gaston County Museum

Courtesy of Barbara Brose, Gaston County Museum

The collage for this article was created as part of a year-long *High Seas to High Shoals* joint-exhibition about Charles Wilkes presented recently by two North Carolina museums. The collage is an artist's rendering that illustrates a number of accomplishments and interests of Wilkes and his family.

The Figure placed in the background is King Kamehameha III, who was the ruler of Hawaii when Wilkes visited on the Exploring Expedition. The ship is a generic rendering of the type Wilkes sailed. The Smithsonian building depicted was designed by Wilkes' nephew, James Renwick, and housed the first Smithsonian exhibition of artifacts from the Expedition. The parrots were drawn by Titian Ramsey Peale during the Expedition and were published in a resulting Atlas. After his return from the great Exploring Expedition, Wilkes became President of the family's St. Catherine's Gold Mine and ran it until his son John took over management. The Gold Coin in the collage is from the Mint in Charlotte, NC with gold mined from St. Catherine's Mine.

At both museums, The *High Seas to High Shoals*' exhibit illustrated Wilkes' life, family, troubles, and accomplishments beginning in the 1830s. The two North Carolina museums focused individually on different aspects of Wilkes' legacy. The Gaston County Museum's exhibit specifically focused on the Exploring Expedition, the art of science, and the Wilkes family. At the Schiele Museum, the exhibit's focus was on iron and gold mining, navigation and mapping, and on biological and anthropological discoveries. For more information on Wilkes or other exhibits, contact the Gaston County Museum or Schiele Museum at:

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#### Schiele Museum



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