



# The Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

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## Whistler's Mother (and Brother)

By **David Norris**

Wilmington was the location of two major events in the life of **Anna Matilda McNeill Whistler**, the mother of the impressionist-era painter **James Abbott McNeill Whistler** and the model for the famous painting nicknamed **Whistler's Mother**. First, she was born in Wilmington on September 27, 1804. Six decades later, she escaped from wartime Wilmington on a blockade-runner to join her artist son in London.

Anna's parents were Scottish-born Dr. Daniel Whistler and his wife Martha Kingsley McNeill. The McNeill home, a two-story brick house on the southwest corner of Fourth and Orange Streets, was torn down well over a century ago. The McNeill family divided their time between Wilmington and "Oak Forest", their plantation in Bladen County [near Clarkton, Ed.], until the family moved to Brooklyn, New York about 1814. "Oak Forest" was a venerable brick house built in 1739, according to a 1948 article in the *Star-News* (Wilmington). The old place was burned down in 1931 by treasure hunters.

In 1831, Anna married civil engineer and West Point graduate George Washington Whistler. After marriage, they moved to Lowell, Massachusetts and a few years later the family moved to Russia, where the Czar's government hired Whistler to build a railroad from Moscow to St. Petersburg. After her husband's death in 1849, Anna and her sons James and William returned to America.

James Whistler briefly attended **West Point** while **Col. Robert E. Lee** was in charge. Whistler won an impressive number of demerits while at the Point. An often-told story, while unfortunately not true, catches the spirit of his West Point career. The story goes that an exasperated Colonel Lee decided to give Whistler one last chance before booting him out of the school. Soon after, Whistler was in a chemistry class when the professor asked him a question about silicon. "Silicon", he stated, "is a gas". "That will do, Mr. Whistler", replied the professor. Whistler was packing his bags soon after. The painter liked to joke in later years that if silicon had been a gas, he could have become a major general.

After his expulsion, Whistler worked for the Coast Survey, etching new maps of the West Coast. He soon moved to England and became known as a major artist by the time of the Civil War. The Whistler family, like many others, was divided by the war. Some of their relatives fought for the Union, but Anna's other son William had married a Virginian and became a surgeon in the Confederate Army. Dr. William Whistler served at a smallpox hospital near Richmond, as well as at Libby Prison.

Anna lived with relatives in the North until she crossed the lines in 1863 to help care for William, who was seriously ill. After his recovery, William was assigned to Orr's South Carolina Rifles and Anna decided to join James in England. To get there, Anna returned to the city of her birth. The quiet Wilmington of 1814 was now much larger, a wartime boomtown fueled by blockade-running profits. She found a berth on the *Advance* before the famous North Carolina-owned steamer left for Bermuda.

A rather colorful account had it, "just as the captain was about to give the command 'weigh anchor', a carriage drawn by a pair of panting horses rolled up on the dock. A lone and venturesome woman presented to the captain a letter from **Governor Vance** permitting her to sail on the ship." A family story said that because Mrs. Whistler's money was tied up in the North, she had to sell "a beautiful coat of Russian sable" to pay for her passage. The exact departure date is unknown, but Anna could have been in Wilmington at the time of the *Advance's* successful departures for Bermuda on September 23, 1863, or October 24, 1863.

James Whistler had no idea that mother was coming until a message reached him from her ship at Southampton. The sudden arrival of his straight-laced mother threw a monkey wrench into the painter's comfortable Bohemian lifestyle. He barely had time to shoo his lovely mistress Joanna Hiffernan out of his flat (into a place conveniently close by) before bringing his mother to London.

In the spring of 1865, James got another surprise when his Rebel surgeon brother turned up on his doorstep. William Whistler was at the end of quite an odyssey. Worn out from overwork and ill health, he was granted leave to visit his family in England on the condition that he carry some secret dispatches to Confederate naval agents there. By the time Dr. Whistler could leave his post in early 1865, Wilmington was lost. The only way out of the Confederacy was across the Chesapeake Bay in a dugout canoe, guided by a shadowy network of Confederate spies and outright smugglers. He shared part of his journey with a Confederate officer who was going to the North to get a new artificial leg. The doctor, disguised as a civilian, made his way to New York to book passage on a passenger steamer. It seemed that hordes of Yankee soldiers guarded every train station and at every step he worried that one of the guards would be a former patient from Libby Prison. But, William managed to avoid attracting suspicion and he and his dispatches reached England safely. Although he arrived too late for his secret papers to do any good for the Confederacy, at least the Whistlers were together again.

Anna McNeill Whistler lived with James in London for several years. She did not always approve of her son's relaxed lifestyle, but she took an active interest in his painting. She also charmed her son's patrons and artist friends who came to visit by serving them hot North Carolina-style biscuits, buckwheat cakes, and preserves. In 1871, Whistler painted her in his work, *Arrangement in Gray and Black*, the picture popularly known as **Whistler's Mother**. Because the painting was widely adopted in advertisements (and parodied countless times), Anna McNeill Whistler became one of the most recognized North Carolinians in history. She died in Hastings, England, on January 31, 1881. In 1939, the state of North Carolina put up a historical marker at Third and Orange Street in downtown Wilmington to honor her. There is also a marker erected in 1938, by the Daughters of the American Revolution, Elizabethtown Chapter, dedicated to Mrs. Whistler, the symbol of American Motherhood, near Clarkton.

As for "Whistler's Brother", Dr. William McNeill Whistler stayed on in London and became a prominent surgeon. He was the senior physician at the London Throat Hospital at the time of his death in 1900.

See: Kate R. McDiarmid, *Whistler's Mother: Her Life, Letters, and Journal* (North Wilkesboro, N. C., the author, 1936); *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*; Stephen R. Wise, *Lifeline of the Confederacy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988); Ben Steelman, "McNeill from North Carolina Posed in Art History", *Wilmington Morning Star*, August 29, 1984, p. 1C; *Wilmington Morning Star*, February 7, 1931, May 15, 1938; Whistler File, North Carolina Room, New Hanover County Public Library.

[**Editor:**(Bob Cooke) We would add just one more Whistler story.

### Whistler's Father

George Washington Whistler worked on railroad systems in the early days of steam transportation. He also invented a system of communication between the locomotive engineer and the train crew. Known as 'Whistler's Trumpet', the device consisted of a steam valve which could sound a shrill noise. It was eventually shortened to 'Whistler's', or 'whistle'. Whistler's Trumpet was the forerunner of the steam whistle!

See John Foard, *Stories of the Cape Fear Region*, (Carolina Beach, N. C.: Federal Point Historical Society, 2000), page 11, and Norman McCulloch, in the *Bladen Journal*, May, 1938.]

