

◆ ◆ ◆ AHEAD OF HIS TIME ◆ ◆ ◆

ARCHIBALD MURPHEY'S BOLD IDEAS TO IMPROVE EDUCATION AND TRANSPORTATION

LEARNING OUTCOME:

Students can:

- ◆ *Describe Archibald Murphey's ideas for improving education and transportation in North Carolina and explain the reasons why they were not carried out in his lifetime.*



Archibald DeBow Murphey

If you have ever attended a North Carolina public school or ridden in a car on a public road anywhere in North Carolina, you can thank a man named Archibald DeBow Murphey who lived in the early 1800s. He is sometimes called “the Father of North Carolina Education,” and he also proposed many good ideas for how to improve transportation throughout the state.

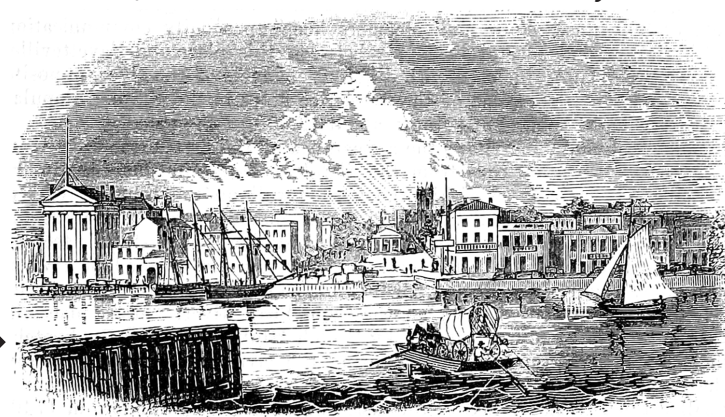
Murphey was born around 1777 in what is now Caswell County, North Carolina. He grew up during the years after the American Revolution when people from other states called North Carolina “the Rip Van Winkle State.” The expression “Rip Van Winkle” refers to a fantasy story written by Washington Irving about a man who fell asleep for 20 years and was surprised at all the changes that had taken place while he was asleep. When people called North Carolina “the Rip Van Winkle State,” they were implying that North Carolina was behind the times and “sleepy.” (It was not intended as a compliment.) In the early 1800s, many North Carolinians were leaving the state, moving west into Tennessee, Kentucky, and other states. Moreover, North Carolina’s economy didn’t seem to be thriving at that time.

Beginning in 1815, Archibald Murphey proposed two major improvements to “wake up” North Carolina: one was a state-financed system of public education, and the other was a network of roads and waterways to improve transportation throughout the state. (At the time, improvements in transportation were often called “internal improvements.”)

Before the Industrial Revolution, North Carolina had some serious geographical weaknesses. Before the invention of the steam engine and railroads, the easiest way to travel or transport products over long distances was by ship on the ocean or on a large river.

But unlike its neighbors (Virginia and South Carolina), North Carolina had only one major port city — Wilmington, where the Cape Fear River flows into the ocean. The northeastern part of the state had several small port towns such as Edenton, but only small ships could reach these towns due to a chain of barrier islands just off the coast called the Outer Banks. Between the Outer Banks and the North Carolina mainland, there are stretches of shallow water called sounds. The sounds often had shifting **sandbars** (sand that collects in the water), so large ships had a hard

Throughout the 1800s, there was no bridge across the Cape Fear River in North Carolina’s largest coastal city, Wilmington. To enter the city from the west, travelers had to cross the river in a ferry boat.



time passing through them without getting stuck.

Archibald Murphey wanted the state to make water transportation easier by clearing rivers of debris, connecting rivers by digging canals, and making North Carolina's sounds easier to navigate by ship. He also wanted the state to improve its dirt roads and build sturdy **plank roads** (roads made of wooden boards).



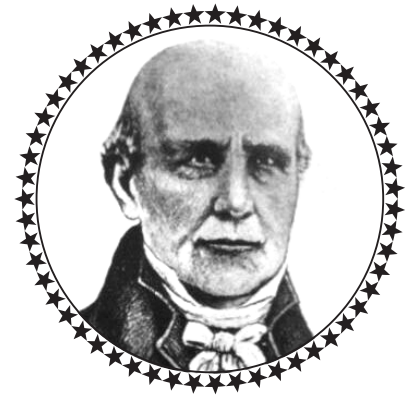
Eventually a plank road similar to the one shown in this photograph was built between Fayetteville and Winston Salem.

INTERNAL IMPROVEMENTS?

Many people were impressed by Murphey's bold ideas, but very little was done during his lifetime to carry out his proposals. The state's population was divided over a long-standing question of who should pay for transportation improvements: private companies, the North Carolina state government, or the U.S. government?

Although the U.S. government was reluctant to provide much funding in the early 1800s, it did provide some money to improve transportation throughout the United States. But, at this time, many North Carolinians (including the state's political leaders) were suspicious of the federal government and avoided it as much as possible. As historian Troy Kickler wrote, "out of almost \$4.2 million in national internal improvement expenses, an 1828 report disclosed that North Carolina had received only \$1,000."¹

Some of North Carolina's political leaders were suspicious of all government projects, including those paid for by the state government. For example, a respected political leader named Nathaniel Macon had exactly the opposite position from Murphey. Macon worried that state government officials would become corrupt if the North Carolina General Assembly agreed to spend money on large-scale internal improvement projects. Macon had good reason to be concerned. Later in the 1800s, when the North Carolina government did begin to support the construction of railroads, train stations were often built in the hometowns of the state's most powerful political leaders. This coincidence caused some North Carolinians to suspect **collusion** (illegal cooperation) between political leaders and the owners of railroad companies.



Nathaniel Macon

In 1814, Macon stated, "[The] importance of inland navigation is not at this time questioned by anyone; But by what ways and means the navigation is to be improved, and the roads to be made, is not a question so easily answered. . . ."² So, although the state government did pay for some transportation improvements, such as plank roads in the late 1840s, it largely stayed out of the business of improving transportation until railroads came along.

PUBLIC EDUCATION

Archibald Murphey also proposed a system of public education, which he thought was just as important as internal improvements. In a series of reports to the North Carolina General Assembly beginning in 1815, Murphey explained in detail how a state-sponsored school system could be financed and organized. He even recommended the courses that he thought should be taught in public schools. Murphey not only wanted the North Carolina government to support primary schools (grades 1–8) but also high schools and schools for the deaf. He also wanted the state government to provide more money to support the University of North Carolina.

In education, as in internal improvements, Murphey's careful work was admired. Even so, the General

Assembly voted “no” on all public education appeals between 1815 and 1825.

Finally, in 1825, the General Assembly created a fund to support public schools (which were called “common schools” at the time). However, the fund (which was called “the Literary Fund”) was not a success.

“The Literary Fund grew very slowly and its history reflects the legislature’s attitude toward education,” wrote historian William S. Powell.³ Three years after the fund started, the amount earned by the state for the fund was still small — not enough to start a school for poor children, which had been proposed.

There were a number of reasons for the fund’s lack of money. Politicians began to use the Literary Fund to pay the salaries of members of the General Assembly. Also, \$28,000 was **embezzled** (stolen by someone who was supposed to be responsible for managing the money and keeping it safe). Furthermore, individuals and private corporations found sly ways to use money from the fund to benefit themselves. The uses were legal, but they were not what the General Assembly had originally intended. It was not until 1839 that North Carolina started a statewide system of “common schools.”

ASSESSMENT

Looking back at his impressive effort to create a state-sponsored public education system and improve transportation, many people consider Murphey a “prophet” whose recommendations went unheeded for too long. Others, however, think that the North Carolina government was not ready to manage such large projects in the early 1800s and that the General Assembly made the right choice by saying “no” to these projects to avoid the wasteful spending and corruption that would have inevitably come with them.

READING REVIEW QUESTIONS:

In the early 1800s, why did some people call North Carolina “the Rip Van Winkle State”?

Describe the improvements that Archibald Murphey proposed to North Carolina’s roads and waterways and explain what he hoped these improvements would achieve.

Describe Archibald Murphey’s proposal for creating a state-sponsored public education system in North Carolina.

Explain why Nathaniel Macon opposed Murphey’s proposed transportation and education projects.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Troy L. Kickler, “‘Is Anything Free?’ Debates Regarding Internal Improvements in Antebellum North Carolina,” North Carolina History Project, accessed November 19, 2024, <https://northcarolinahistory.org/commentary/is-anything-free-debates-regarding-internal-improvements-in-antebellum-north-carolina/>.
- 2 Kickler, “‘Is Anything Free?’”
- 3 William S. Powell, *North Carolina through Four Centuries* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 258.