

Charles Dickens in Shullsburg?

By Cory Ritterbusch

Of all the Shullsburg legends and lore during its long history, few are more intriguing than the supposed visit by that of famed writer Charles Dickens, who may have visited this city in 1842.

The apocryphal story became widespread seventy years after its questionable occurrence. In 1911, Shullsburg's newspaper, the *Pick and Gad*, began to publish a weekly series on Shullsburg's history as provided by J.E. Rule. Rule, an old-timer who came to Shullsburg in 1849, wanted to preserve his memories of the early days - to not be forgotten. In his first published narrative, he mentioned that Paul Jones "had the distinction of lowering Charles Dickens down a mine shaft to see John Cleminson, who was the son of a neighbor of Dickens." With this in print people began to add their memories and a more cohesive story began to form, some of which began to be published in newspapers in the Midwest. In the early 1900s, Charles Dickens was the most popular and celebrated novelists in the world.

In the late 1830s Shullsburg saw an influx of miners coming into the area to utilize their mining experience. Included were many from Cornwall and England. Among them: John Cleminson, who after arriving in the new country failed to write his mother in London. In December of 1841, as Dickens was preparing for his first tour of America, former Dickens classmate and neighbor Mrs. Cleminson asked Dickens to look up her son there and give him some provided gifts. Dickens was told that he could be found "among the lead mines in the vicinity of Galena." The trip was not unlike that of the Beatles in 1965, with fans crowding his every move. After leaving England on January 3, 1842, he would arrive in America and visit Boston and New York. After dinner at the White House, he would embark on a steamboat trip starting at Pittsburgh. The boat would go down the Ohio River to see the American West, with stops in Cincinnati, Louisville

and Cairo, Illinois. He finally arrived in St. Louis on April 10, where much ado was made about seeing an American prairie. In St. Louis, he *apparently* inquired about making it to the Galena lead mines, where he was informed about steamships making frequent trips to the important port city. He then took one north to Galena. There he registered at the United States Hotel and checked in with the land registrar about a John Cleminson. Cleminson was located at an Elevator Mine at Shullsburg and "a conveyance was secured and Mr. Dickens drove overland a distance of 22 miles to Shullsburg."

At Shullsburg, the list of "*apparent events*" continued. Arriving at Shullsburg he would meet several of the Burg's fine men on Water Street - Paul Jones, Tom Swinkbank, Dick Brown, and John Redshaw, among others - who would escort him to Cleminson. At the mine, Dickens yelled down the shaft, "Hello, John," to which was answered "Who are you?" "Dickens of London." "And are you the book maker?" "Yes," said Dickens. Cleminson was hoisted to the surface and a "very happy meeting took place."

Cleminson had a cabin about 100 feet from the mine, near what is today the Methodist Church. Here Dickens spent the night and was "royally entertained." He provided the gifts as promised and was given a letter containing money for Dickens to return to Cleminson's mother and a promise that he would thereafter write to her.

Dickens would see Niagara Falls and Canada and push off for London on June 7. In October of 1842 he would publish his travelogue that detailed his trip to North America that year called *American Notes*. The piece contained no mention of his trip up the Mississippi, to Galena, lead mines or Shullsburg, although it did famously expose many flaws of American society. The

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next year Dickens would publish *A Christmas Carol* and later *David Copperfield*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*. He would die one of the greatest fiction writers of all time.

In 1926, a *Wisconsin State Journal* article explored the Shullsburg legend, including this statement: “It was easier to make the promise than to fulfill it.” In 1934, Shullsburg High School’s school paper, *The Prospector*, expanding on the legend further. It wrote, “It is thought that the reason this trip to Shullsburg was not

included in Dickens’ *American Notes* was that this leg of his American journey was merely a personal accommodation to a friend and not included as the main purpose of his trip to America.” Whatever happened, it is noteworthy in this town.

Today in Shullsburg, Dickens still inspires imagination, providing a sense of wonder and thought-provoking dreaminess. Not around his novels, but rather, what may or may not have happened on our street and in that little house by the Methodist Church in 1842.