Wood Works:
The Architectural Creations and Personal Histories of John Coffin and Robert Barclay Wood

by Janet K. Seapker

The March 31, 1841 Wilmington Weekly Chronicle described North Carolina's chief port:

It is a pleasant duty to record the evidences which our Town exhibits of a healthful progress under all the depressing circumstances of the times. The recent census showed an increased population of about fifty per cent since 1830, and the greatest part of that increase has been within the last four years. Those who know Wilmington only as it was five years ago, would now hardly recognize it, so great have been the changes in buildings, streets, wharves, etc. The greater part of the space over which the fire of January 1840 swept, has been filled up with buildings, all of brick and fireproof, and of a handsome style of architecture. There are now going up, we learn, in various parts of the Town, and under contract to be put up, over thirty buildings, mostly dwellings including two Hotels, and a third Hotel being in completion ... There is also building a County Court House, that will be an ornament to the place; one of the best Jails probably in the country ... was not long ago completed....

Wilmington in the 1840s and 1850s was a perfect spot for people engaged in the construction trade. It was growing by leaps and bounds. Buildings were erected to accommodate the growing commerce of the largest city in the state and to replace buildings destroyed by devastating and successive fires. Of all the construction trades, brick masons were in the best position to benefit, as their trade provided buildings of a more or less fireproof nature. A pair of masons, brick masons, John Coffin (J.C.) and Robert Barclay (R.B.) Wood, could not have found themselves in a better environment. R.B.'s son Thomas Fanning Wood noted, perhaps somewhat exaggeratedly, that the brothers "built up the town with brick houses of a far better sort than had been known here."
The Wood brothers' uncle, Phineas Wines Fanning, surely was the impetus for their settling in Wilmington. Phineas came to Wilmington before 1830 and in 1833 was engaged in the printing business. Throughout his life he provided friendship and support to his nephews.

The building of St. James Church proved to be the beginning of lifelong and tumultuous careers for both Nantucket, Massachusetts natives. They were among the hundreds engaged in the building trades who came to Wilmington in the boom years of the mid-nineteenth century; but, they were among the few who stayed to put indelible marks on the city. It was not a certainty that they would stay. R.B., on October 24, 1839, wrote to his mother that he had not “made up my mind to stop in this place.” His remark came on the heels of his father's death, which event perhaps contributed to his uncertainty. He obviously was concerned about his mother's welfare and his being so far away from her.

THE BUSINESS OF BUILDING

The Woods' first documented building project in the Port City was St. James Episcopal Church (1839-1840). The 30 year old J.C. was the “principal mason” and R.B., at 24 years of age, was the “builder.”

The St. James construction team included at least two other notables: Thomas U. Walter, the architect, and John Norris, the supervisor of construction. Walter is most famous for designing the dome of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Norris stayed in Wilmington and designed the Bank of Cape Fear and the 1843-1847 U.S. Custom House before he migrated to Savannah to become a celebrated architect there.

Immediately following completion of St. James Church, the Wood brothers advertised that the “operative masons, are ready to draught for Blocks, Squares, or any description of Buildings, and will contract to any extent either for the Mason Work Alone or for the Entire Work to a complete finish and delivery of furnishing all materials and executing the whole agreeably to the taste or design of the employer.” Despite their willingness to build virtually anything, very little payment came their way in the 1840s.

The Wood brothers' letters to their relatives in the north reveal their situation. On March 29, 1840 John's wife Mary Frances wrote to her mother-in-law that “for what with the scarcity of money to pay hands and the many calls to do work he [R.B.] was nearly bewildered.” In the same letter J.C. wrote: “We are drove to death with work. We are now employing about 40 hands. We have had 6 vessels come to us from N.Y. & Phil. within the last 10 days. We have got a carpenter with whom at present I am much pleased.” On July 5, 1840 J.C. told his mother “we have nearly completed the contract I made before I went to New York.” The nature of the project J.C. mentions has not been determined. But not all was rosy for the brothers. In the same letter, J.C. noted: “Money never was scarcer since the world was made ….” One has to wonder why their financial situation was so tenuous when they were so busy. Perhaps the business was just a short spurt.

J.C. took a job at Fort Caswell “to superintend the (repair) work” in 1841, because the pay was good. R.B. tried to handle the business in town by himself. J.C. went back to Fort Caswell two years later for the same reason as noted by R.B. in his April 3, 1843 letter to his mother:

“Have been in hopes to make a turn & get some money & send you, but I assure you it is hard times with us. It is with great difficulty that we can raise money enough to pay the installments on our notes as they come due … We have good prospect ahead. We have property that is worth about ten Thousand Dollars which now pays us one thousand per annum & when we get clear of this Bank debt that is hanging over our heads we shall have something substantial to work on. If the times were good we would sell the property at once, but it is useless to think of it. We should not get half the worth of it. If nothing happens to us we shall walk clear this summer … I am again left alone in town & have all the business to attend to. John is stationed again at Ft. Caswell. He did not like to go down there again, but
as we were in a tight place & as the money is sure he thought best to take the chance again.”

Construction work slowly found its way to the Wood brothers in the 1840s. R.B. was hopeful of getting the contract, or a part of it, for constructing the 1843 U.S. Custom House. He noted in a letter to his mother, “We are in hopes to finger some of the change.” It seems from the surviving records of the Custom House construction that virtually every mason in town was involved, except J.C. and R.B. Wood. The situation is even stranger considering that John Norris, with whom they had worked on St. James Church, was the architect and supervisor of construction.

AN ALTERNATIVE CAREER

A speculative venture in 1841, building a hotel, set R.B. on a fifteen-year alternative career. The March 3rd Wilmington Weekly Chronicle noted, “A fine brick building intended for a hotel is being put up by J.C. and R.B. Wood.” In January 1841, the brothers purchased the first parcel of property on the north side of Market Street, between North Front and North 2nd on which the hotel would be set, from Thomas Byrnes of Bladen County for $800. By April 1841 the brothers advertised for lease or sale, “a very commodious Hotel to be fitted up in superior style, with generally single lodging rooms . . . four stories high, of brick.” An 1851 insurance policy described the Greek Revival style structure as being “42’ x 45’, with a 22’ rear addition and 25 fireplaces, 6 of which had coal stoves.” Apparently there were no takers of the offer to lease or sell, so the Wood brothers, jointly, singularly and in partnership with others, ran it as the Carolina Hotel.

With the building business not providing the Wood brothers much patronage, it was fortunate that they had the hotel. R.B. Wood became thoroughly involved in the hotel business, so much so that in the 1850 census, he listed himself as a “hotel keeper.” R.B.’s family of seven and his cousin, Thomas Fanning, his wife and child, lived in the Carolina Hotel with 28 boarders.

R.B.’s son noted that his father and J.C. . . . “had not been successful in getting good tenants, (managers)” and that his father “undertook to keep it himself. He knew nothing about the business and so engaged the services of a cousin, Thos. C. Fanning, of Poughkeepsie, New York. He was an active upstart of a little yankee, spry and consequential, and nearly ruined my father by his extravagance and dishonesty.”

Little wonder that in August of 1852, R.B. dissolved his partnership with his cousin and announced that he would manage the Carolina Hotel by himself. By April 1852, the hotel business must have picked up, because R.B. and his brother requested proposals from carpenters for the extension of the hotel on an adjoining parcel they had acquired in 1843. In June 1853, R.B. established a partnership with his son in law, N.B. Vincent, to run the Carolina Hotel. The partnership lasted one year, in June of 1854, Vincent and B.B. Brown took over the management of the hotel.

The brothers owned the hotel until November 1857 when they sold it to John McRae. During the fifteen years they owned the Carolina Hotel, J.C. and R.B., or J.C. by himself, used it as collateral for loans totaling an astounding sum which exceeded $21,000. R.B.’s son Thomas observed, “. . . 1857. It was a year of great business trouble. A great many merchants north and south failed, and money was very scarce.”

The Carolina Hotel, shown as the Bonitz Hotel, was built by J.C. and R.B. Wood as a speculative venture in 1841. The eastern (right) addition was built about 1852. R.B. operated the hotel until 1857. The building continued as a hotel until its demolition in 1917 (Star, Aug. 21, 1917) to make way for a theater. The 1841-43 Masonic Hall is on the left. Photograph courtesy Cape Fear Museum, John Bonitz Collection, Image Archive, #1499.
Not until 1844 is there a record of the Wood brothers' accomplishing another building. They, with a "Mr. Sherman," obtained the contract for Front Street Methodist Church, on the northeast corner of North Front and Walnut streets. The temple-form structure with Doric portico replaced a wood-frame church consumed in the fire of 1843. It was to be "a plain, substantial, commodious brick house to be completed for $7,100." The church minutes indicate that $50 were to be paid for plans and specifications, but they do not indicate to whom. The church was the largest in the town at the time, being 55 by 70 feet with the portico adding 10 feet more. It was destroyed by the fire of 1886.

If it had to do with brick or stone, the Wood brothers seemed to have been involved. The enterprising brothers not only built with brick, but also made it. By 1841, R.B. and his brother owned a brickyard on Smith's Creek, about 3 1/2 miles from Wilmington, where they employed a "great number of negro men." They made the kiln which could burn around 120,000 bricks.

In 1854, J.C. used the brickyard as collateral for a loan. The brothers sold it, with other property, in 1857, to John McRae, with the "Culbertson and Scott's dry Clay brick press" and the patent rights to the press. The Woods' involvement in the brick industry is not documented again until 1884, when a newspaper reported that the brick kiln in Brunswick County, run by R.B., caught fire. Less than three months before his death in 1890, R.B. wrote to his daughter that he was "making additions to my brick works which will require all my time."

For the most part the bricks made loca-
With little luck in obtaining many building contracts in the 1840s, the brothers began other enterprises, particularly operating the Carolina Hotel, a brickyard and a toll bridge. Between 1844 and 1846 the brothers bought the property that included the Little Bridge on Smith Creek. With the property came the right to collect tolls on the bridge. They insured the Little Bridge Toll House in 1849 for $300; it was leased to a toll keeper at the time. They also used the property as collateral for loans in 1849, twice in 1854 and finally sold it to John McRae in 1857 (along with the Carolina Hotel and the brickyard).

Finally, in the early 1850s, a flurry of construction activity commenced and kept the Wood brothers busy building. The Wood brothers are documented as builders of at least four of the stuccoed Italianate-style houses built in the town between 1851 and 1853. The houses show up in the ledger of James F. Post under the account of J.C. and R.B. Wood. Post was subcontracted as the carpenter, under the direction of the Woods.

The 1851 Edward Savage House is the first in town suspected to have been built using A.J. Downing's design for a “Suburban Cottage.” Interestingly, the book in which the design is contained was published in 1850, indicating that Wilmington was indeed in the forefront of national stylistic trends. It is not known who owned the pattern book—the Wood brothers, James Post, Edward Savage or someone else—but it surely is responsible for providing Wilmington with the architectural imprimatur which became a signature of the town. Many of the architectural elements which were used over and over again in buildings throughout the nineteenth century are found in Downing's book — the low-pitched hip roof; wide, overhanging eaves supported on brackets; canopy porch roof; and scored stuccoed walls. The other houses of the same era are the Donald McRae House (108 South Third), the Duncan K. McRae (currently spelled MacRae) House (520 Orange) and the Zebulon Latimer House (120 South Third).

The June 18, 1851 contract between the Wood brothers and Zebulon Latimer for the building of his house survives. It is the only known building contract between a client and J.C. and R.B. Wood, and contains detailed specifications for the dwelling. The Latimer House is at least one-third larger than the other Italianate-style houses built in the early 1850s and is more ornamented. Whether such manifestations were products of the Wood brothers or the owner is unknown.

For the construction, interior plastering, exterior stuccoing, carpenter's work, painting and tinning of the roof of the house, the ‘fence walls,' and the privy, the contract called for them to be paid $7,000. The final accounting, dated April 23, 1853, indicates they received $9,899.54. James F. Post's carpentry bill amounted to about $330. Before the construction of the Zebulon Latimer House (1851-1852), the Woods had their stable in a building which, in whole or in part, became the servants' quarters of the Latimer House.

The brothers purchased from their uncle, Phineas Fanning, in 1851, property on Market Street between North Seventh and North Eighth streets, at the time on the very eastern edge of town. On it J.C. built his most remarkable house, often referred to as “The Castle.” R.B.'s son Thomas Fanning Wood recalled that the area had “no regular cleared street east of 5th and Market. ... Scrubby oaks surrounded our house and all the original growth of the trees and shrubs except pines. The section was known as Gallows Hill, because of the execution by hanging of two negroes at different times at or near our house. It was gradually filled up with small frame houses." While both brothers purchased the 8th and Market Street property, J.C. alone carried out all other transactions related to the Market Street property. When he insured it in 1853 for $3000, it was described as being “of brick, with a metal roof, new ... a cupola ... 4 story, 46 by 32 feet, 4 chimneys, 12 fireplaces, cooking stove in basement.” The house was as an elongated octagon in the front. A photograph reveals its Gothic-Revival qualities in the square-topped labels above the windows and a reverse, relief crenellation along the cornice. It must have been quite a sight in 1853 when buildings had only 90-degree corners. After using it as collateral several times, J.C. sold the house to Donald McRae in 1859 for $5000. About 1905, a MacRae relative, Henry Bacon, architect of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, designed a remodeling of the house. The MacRae family continued to own and reside in the house into the early 1950s. It was demolished in 1955 or 1956.

The Post and Wood triumvirate constructed the 1854 jail on the south side of Princess near 4th Street. R.B. Wood designed and drew the plans and the Woods and Post were awarded the contract to build for $1800.
The ledgers of James F. Post reveal an intense professional relationship with the Wood brothers between 1851 and 1854. The relationship continued with the building of City Hall-Thalian Hall from 1855 through 1858.

The Classical Revival City Hall-Thalian Hall, the grandest of the public buildings constructed in Wilmington in the antebellum era, was superintended by James F. Post, who, among other things, was to "furnish all the working plans necessary for the due execution of the work." The initial construction bid of $35,786 was won by J.L. Keen, a brick mason, and carpenter G.W. Rose. A week later, Keen and Rose asked to be relieved of their commitment. By December, J.C. and R.B. Wood and G.W. Rose had secured the construction contract.

The Wood brothers were the principal masons for City Hall-Thalian Hall, but R.B.'s involvement in City Hall went well beyond laying bricks. The record is clear that New York architect John Trimble designed Thalian Hall, but his involvement in City Hall is questionable. On December 8, 1855, the Town Commissioners ordered that R.B. Wood be allowed forty dollars "for drawing plans and specifications for the Town Hall." Presumably, the allocation was after the fact, since the project had already been put out for bid. The opening of the cornerstone in 1883 revealed the only known architectural drawing of R.B. Wood—a drawing on linen of the profile of the portico of City Hall; it was signed by Robert B. Wood and dated 1855. James F. Post often is listed as architect of City Hall, but R.B.'s drawing, combined with the commissioners' action in December 1855, pulls R.B. Wood into strong contention as City Hall's designer. For the City Hall portico, R.B. chose to repeat the Corinthian order used in the Thalian Hall porch, but blew up the column capitals to a bodacious size.

City Hall-Thalian Hall is the last major project on which J.C. and R.B. are known to have collaborated. 1857 was another bad business year and J.C. and R.B. Wood dissolved their nearly twenty-year partnership.

The same year R.B. demonstrated his masterful command of the local building scene. He wrote to the U.S. Treasury Department, criticizing the unrealistic specifications for the Marine Hospital to be built in Wilmington. Specifically, he commented that the specifications call for "the best quality of pressed face brick." He proceeded:

Please inform me whether the iron grey bricks proposed will be received. The Baltimore press brick are considered here to be the most beautiful, but I notice those areas in the Custom House, here, and some other work, that they do not stand our climate. The grey brick made here are like those made in Savannah and Charleston, only much smoother.

He further noted that the specs required that the stone used for "the steps and sills of the doors and windows must be of the best quality of stone for the purpose, found in the vicinity." R.B. let the Treasury Department know in no uncertain terms, that "we have no stone in this vicinity. We import our granite from Boston and brown stone from New York. Connecticut brown stone is generally used here." He concluded that he would like to know the preference of the Treasury Department. It is not known if he ever received a response.

R.B.'s bid of June 13, 1857 for the Marine Hospital totaled $37,061.31 and presented three options—iron grey, Baltimore pressed and Philadelphia bricks. While his bid was unsuccessful, it was accompanied by exuberant testimony about his skill and integrity, and signed by leading citizens of the town. The contract was awarded to John Walker of Virginia, who wound up paying the price for not knowing the territory. He lost months because he did not know of the dearth of local stone. He was forced to stop work, return to Virginia and reopen a quarry before he could continue constructing the hospital.

R.B. Wood intermittently designed and drew plans for buildings. In 1859 he offered his "services to the public ..." for "Plans, specifications and every other matter connected with the erection of Buildings or Mason Work in general ..." Despite his willingness, R.B. "did but little business until [1859, when] he was engaged by Maj. W.H.C. Whiting of the U.S. Engineer Corp. to build a light house on Hunting Island about 30 miles south of Beaufort, S.C.""86

Between 1862 and 1865, J.C., "a fierce secessionist," served the Confederate States of America. He was among those who built Fort Fisher's casemates of palmetto logs.

R.B. was a firm "Unionist," but, at the age of 45, when war was declared, "joined a company of mounted horse-guards for home defense under Capt. W.C. Howard." Shortly thereafter, he was stricken with sciatica and was forced to resign. That condition did not end his contribution to the Confederate cause. He made salt, an essential commodity. In 1862 his son, Thomas, came home to Wilmington from Richmond, VA, where he was serving in a Confederate hospital and studying medicine. Thomas brought the happy news that he had passed his examination and was an Assistant Surgeon. He found "the family on the Sound (Masonboro's - Fowler's [Nathaniel]) where Pa had gone to make salt and where the family took refuge during the yellow fever epidemic which began in August 1862 and continued until Oct. or Nov. of that year." Later R.B. and his family refugeed in Lumberton where they purchased property adjacent to a brickyard – an advantageous location for a brick mason. They stayed on there the better part of six years.

By 1869 R.B. was back in Wilmington, but not in good financial shape. The U.S. District Court granted discharges in bankruptcy to him and Nathaniel B. Vincent, his son-in-law. Vincent also was a builder, so the business probably was construction-related. By 1871 R.B. was advertising his willingness to "furnish plans and specifications."

J.C. apparently exited the building trades for a time. In the 1865-66 City Directory, he was listed as "coroner" and the next year, as "magistrate for New Hanover County, Standard Keeper and Senior Coroner." In 1869 J.C. immersed himself in other activities. He compiled a family history which, unfortunately, is riddled with errors; and he "exhibited an earth closet at the
First Annual Fair of the Cape Fear Agricultural Association. Later directories list no profession for J.C., but he had not completely given up building. In 1870 he superintended work on the river and the bar at Smith's (Bald Head) Island and in 1872, he superintended construction of the Adrian and Vollers store additions and warehouse. J.C. died on December 3, 1873 at the age of 64.

R.B.’s next major project was the construction of the 1874 U.S. Post Office and Courthouse at the southwest corner of N. Second and Chestnut streets. The 1874 Post Office is an enigma. There is no known photograph of the front of the building; we know only that it was a two-story building, 44' on Chestnut and 60' along Second, and that it was of Baltimore pressed brick.

In subsequent years R.B. built or designed a number of commercial and industrial buildings and laid pavement on streets. A complex in Florence, South Carolina was the largest. He built it in 1876 for the Wilmington, Columbia and Augusta Railroad when it moved from Wilmington. The complex consisted of a main building, roundhouse, car shops, foundry, machine and blacksmith shops.

His last major project, superintending the construction of the new Queen Anne-style Grace Street Methodist Church, harkened back to a major commission some forty years earlier. R.B., with his brother, built the 1844 Front Street Methodist Church which housed the congregation until the church was destroyed by the fire of 1886. The Front Street congregation wisely chose not to rebuild on the site, but to move away from the fire-prone waterfront location to N. Forth and Grace streets. It was R.B.’s last documented creation.

WITH WHOM THEY WORKED

As did many artisans of the nineteenth century, J.C. and R.B. took apprentices to train. In 1842 George W. Griffith apprenticed himself to J.C. The next year, J.C. advertised to recover an “indentured apprentice, Maurice Parker,” who had run away. In the 1850s his brother trained E.D. Sidbury in the trade of brick mason.

In the Wood household, the 1840 census listed a total of nine slaves; of males, four were between the ages of ten and twenty-four and one between twenty-four and thirty-six, probably were among the four people in the household engaged in “manufactures and trades.” The 1845 and 1846 tax records list 29 slaves under the joint account of J.C. and R.B. Wood; they might have been the blacks Thomas Fanning Wood mentioned as working at the brickyard. There is no evidence that the Woods owned slaves, but they could have “rented” them. Such an arrangement was de rigueur in antebellum Wilmington. In addition to slaves, many free blacks worked in the construction trades. One free black, Solomon Nash, a mulatto builder, died as a result of falling from scaffolding while constructing a building with R.B.

THE PERSONAL SIDE

Building did not take up all the brothers’ time. Their personal lives revolved chiefly around their families. Both brothers were strongly attached to their parents and their own families, as borne out in their compassionate correspondence to their mother. They evidenced concern that their business dealings were maintained on a high plane, desiring that any debts they incurred were repaid.

When they arrived in Wilmington, the brothers’ families lived together, a practice common among immigrants in a new situation. R.B.’s son, Thomas Fanning Wood, wrote that in 1839, upon arriving in Wilmington, their family lived in “a quaint looking low two story brick dwelling, the two tenements under one roof, divided by an arched carriage way. The house was built by one of the French Islanders … not particularly attractive but at the time … one of the few houses for rent.” It was located on the west side of S. 2nd St. between Market and Dock. The household included nine slaves, at least two of whom probably worked with the Woods in the construction trade. In 1843 R.B. reported to his mother that they were living in a “large and airy [house] with fine garden,” the location of which is unspecified.

By 1850 the brothers, oriented to the Lower Cape Fear scene, separated their households. R.B.’s family lived in the Carolina Hotel; the location of J.C.’s family’s residence is not known. The 1841 tax listing enumerated J.C. and R.B. Wood (the firm), and the individuals, J.C. and R.B., but listed only one lot, that upon which the hotel sat. By 1853 J.C.’s family was living in the Market Street house, later known as “The Castle.” R.B.’s family moved to that neighborhood to “the commodious dwelling house on the corner of 8th and Chestnut streets, the property of the estate of Lott Mills, deceased, at present occupied by R.B. Wood, Esq.”

R.B. lived at the corner of Orange and 3rd before the Civil War, then did his stint in Lumberton. In 1865-66, J.C. lived on the west side of 3rd between Nun and Church, a residence he maintained until his death in 1873.

Upon returning to Wilmington after his Lumberton
residency, and certainly by 1871. R.B. settled into a house on the east side of N. 2nd between Princess and Chestnut, which he purchased in 1874. He lived there and operated his business from that house until his death in 1890.


The brothers took on civic obligations. While both men had a lot to gain from the ravages of fire, they were involved in firefighting. J.C. was “captain of the Fire Engine” in 1849. Like his brother, R.B. was active with fire safety, serving as fire warden for the town from 1847-1852.

J.C. belonged to the Cape Fear Lodge #2, Independent Order of Odd Fellows. About the only other known personal aspect of J.C.’s life is that he was a naturalist. While off duty during the construction of Fort Fisher, he “made a good collection of sea-mosses” from the waters of New Inlet.

R.B. was a tall, clean-shaven man. He was a member of St. John’s Lodge #1, A.F. & A.M., from which he received the third degree on Feb. 1, 1842 and for which he held the office of Steward in 1843-1844. When Daniel Webster visited Wilmington in 1847, R.B. had attained a position in the community sufficient to be named a member of the committee to oversee arrangements. He was a staunch supporter of the Wilmington and Raleigh (later Wilmington and Weldon) Railroad, and allocated his gray mare to be used to advertise railroad meetings.

Thomas remembered that R.B.’s family worshipped together and had daily morning prayers. The family attended the Presbyterian church, although they were not members. While that may be, the Woods often turned to St. James (Episcopal) Church, which edifices the brothers helped build, for their religious needs. R.B. and his wife had their daughter, Kezia Fanning, baptized at St. James and his aunt Hetty W. and mother Caroline Matilda buried from there. R.B.’s son Thomas was baptized in 1858 at Front Street Methodist Episcopal Church, another edifice his father and uncle built. R.B. and his wife, Mary Ann Wilbur, were confirmed in 1859 at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church. R.B. wasted no time in taking a leadership position in the church. Two months after being confirmed, he chaired the vestry. In June of the same year, in the role of architect, he proposed a plan for the building of a vestry room; it was referred to the ladies of the church and never again was mentioned. R.B. was buried from St. Paul’s in 1890.

SELF-IMAGES

Being enterprising Yankees, the brothers took advantage of what they saw as opportunities. They built a hotel to accommodate the increased activity spurred by the burgeoning railroad and started an omnibus. During the Civil War, R.B. made salt, a highly prized necessity during that conflict. Immediately after the war, J.C. had a career change. He was “coroner;” in 1866-67, a “magistrate for New Hanover County, Standard Keeper and Senior Coroner.” That deviation did not mean he had given up the building trades, for in 1872, he superintended construction of the Adrian and Vollers store additions and warehouse.

The occasional distractions aside, the Wood brothers gained professional reputations in the practice of building, as masons. R.B. was somewhat more expansive in describing himself: builder, contractor, mason, brickmaker and architect. Interests others more often referred to R.B. as “architect” than did he, perhaps indicating his modesty.

The histories of John Coffin and Robert Barclay Wood are those of nineteenth-century Wilmington. Their financial well-being went up and down with that of their adopted city. Many of the fine buildings they erected fell victim to the “progress” of the eras. Fortunately, several of their significant structures remain to testify to their talent: St. James Church; the houses of Edward Savage, Duncan K. McRae, Donald McRae, Zebulon Latimer, St. Thomas Church; and City Hall-Thalian Hall. Other Wood-built structures may survive, but have not been documented. Wilmington is a richer city for having lured J.C. and R.B. to take up residence and cast their lots with our history. We are not yet out of the Woods.

FOOTNOTES

1 J.C. and his family were in Wilmington by May 11, 1838, since one of his five children, Elizabeth Gardner, died there in May 1838. (Wilmington Advertiser May 11, 1838; hereinafter cited as Advertiser.)
2 R.B. was in Wilmington by October 24, 1839 as documented in a letter to his mother contained in A. Jarvis Wood, Jr., compiler. “Letters Received by Kezia Coffin Fanning and Caroline Fanning Wood, 1817-1854,” unpublished typescript manuscript, in possession of author; hereinafter cited as “Letters.” Other references to R.B. appear to be inaccurate. A Wilmington Weekly Star, March 21, 1884 article (hereinafter cited as Weekly Star,) said he arrived “fifty-two years ago,” or in 1832. An obituary noted that he came to Wilmington in 1833, to assist his uncle, Phineas Fanning, with the publication of a newspaper, the Peoples’ Press. (Wilmington Review, March 17, 1890, hereinafter cited as Review.) While the Peoples’ Press was published between the years 1833 and 1837, R.B. was not living in Wilmington that early. The obituary also claimed that R.B. subsequently left for Saint Louis, although, if that is true, he must have stayed only four years before returning to Massachusetts. (Thomas Fanning Wood, “Some Recollections of His Life,” unpublished memoir, New Hanover County Public Library, 1914, 57; hereinafter cited as “Recollections.”) James Sprunt described R.B. as “a railroad contractor” and placed him in Wilmington in 1836. (James Sprunt, Chronicles of the Cape Fear River [Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton Printing Co., 1914] 154; hereinafter cited as Chronicles.) Another obituary said he came here in 1838 as a “contractor and builder.” (Wilmington Morning Star, March 21, 1890; hereinafter cited as Star). The family history correctly places his arrival in 1839. “Recollections,” 102 & 103.
4 Fifth Census, 1830: New Hanover County, Population Schedule, 9; hereinafter cited as 1830 Census.
5 Weekly Star, Dec. 12, 1873; Chronicles, 177; 557.
7 September 10, 1809 (gravestone, Oakdale Cemetery) married Mary Frances Gardner (1816) of Maryland (Seventh Census, 1850;
New Hanover County, Population Schedule, hereinafter cited as 1850 Census; on October 2, 1831 (Nantucket, Mass. Vital Records, 4:516); by whom he had five children ("Recollections," 102.)

8 March 31, 1815 – March 15, 1890 (gravestone, Oakdale Cemetery and "Recollections," 102.) March 20, 1890 (obituary, Star, March 21, 1890.) In March 1837, R.B. married Mary Ann Wilbur (April 12, 1815-August 8, 1888); "Recollections," 102; Wilmington Messenger, Aug. 9, 1888; hereinafter cited as Messenger and grave stone, Oakdale Cemetery. They were the parents of seven children. His two eldest children, Agnes Fanning and Robert Barclay, Jr., were born in Nantucket, respectively, May 7, 1837 and April 20, 1839. ("Recollections," 103-106.)

9 Ida B. Kellam and Elizabeth F. McKoy, St. James Church, Wilmington, N.C., Historical Records, 1737-1872, mimeographed transcript by Ida B. Kellam, 1965; 4; hereinafter cited as St. James Church, Vol. I: the cornerstone was laid April 3, 1839.


12 People's Press and Wilmington Advertiser, May 14, 1840, but first listed in the February 7, 1840 edition: from notes of Mary E. Gadski, deRossel House research file, Research Branch, N.C. Archives and History, Raleigh.


16 New Hanover County Deeds: Y, 488; hereinafter cited as NHC Deeds.

17 Advertiser, April 8, 1841; Weekly Chronicle, March 31, 1841.

18 NHC Deeds: II, 221.

19 1850 Census, 403; "Recollections," 282.

20 "Recollections," 282. In 1851 Wood and Vincent provided "omnibus" service, probably as a convenience for guests shuttling between the Carolina Hotel and the train depot or the docks. It was said to have been the first in Wilmington and "an indication of approaching city-hood." (The Daily Journal, Dec. 12, 1851; hereinafter cited as Daily Journal.)

21 Wilmington Herald, Aug. 4, 1852; hereinafter cited as Herald.

22 Herald, April 14, 1852.


24 Tri-Weekly Commercial, June 9, 1853; hereinafter cited as Commercial.

25 Commercial, June 15, 1854.

26 NHC Deeds: UU, 667.

27 NHC Deeds: Z, 375; Z, 705; AA, 764; EE, 159; GG, 401; LL, 595; UU, 667.

28 "Recollections," 284.

29 Grace Methodist Episcopal Church, Quarterly Reports, Minutes of Meetings, Conferences Held at Wilmington, N.C., from the year 1810, Report of the Board of Trustees to 4th Quarterly Meeting, 1844.

30 NHC Deeds: FF, 421.

31 Chronicles, 537.

32 "Recollections," 281.


34 NHC Deeds: LL, 595.

35 NHC Deeds: UU, 667.

36 Star, Oct. 17, 1884.


38 Dispatch, March 14, 1896.

39 Wilmington Chronicle; June 30, 1847.


41 "St. Thomas the Apostle Parish Register, 1845-1968," 1.


43 NHC Deeds: BB, 3; DD, 373; CC, 434.

44 NHC Deeds: FF, 376.

45 NHC Deeds: UU, 667.


48 "Contract."

49 Nicholas W. Schenck, "Schenck Diary," 1905, 133.

50 NHC Deeds: HH, 554.

51 "Recollections," 281. When Thomas F. Wood refers to "our house," he means a house other than "The Castle;" R.B. was renting a dwelling in the same vicinity.

52 NHC Deeds: KK, 666.


54 Emma Woodard MacMillan, Wilmington’s Vanished Homes and Buildings (Raleigh: 1966) 63.

55 NHC Deeds: PP, 892.


57 Commercial, March 16, 1854.

58 Minutes of the (Wilmington) Town Commissioners, 1847-1855, Wilmington City Clerk’s Office, Dec. 8, 1855; hereinafter cited as Minutes.

59 Minutes, Sept. 20, 1855.

60 Opinion of Judge Edward Cantwell, Aug. 22, 1870.

61 Minutes, Dec. 8, 1855; Daily Journal, Oct. 12, 1858.

62 Minutes, Dec. 8, 1855.

63 Minutes, Aug. 27, 1855.

64 "Recollections," 284.

65 National Archives, Record Group 121, Letters Received 1843-1910, Entry 26, Box 1644.


68 "Recollections," 284.

69 "Recollections," 289.

70 "Recollections," 289.


72 "Biography," 15.

73 Star, May 7, 1869.

74 Star, Aug. 6, 1871.

75 Star, Nov. 17, 1869.

76 Daily Journal, Sept. 7, 1870.

77 Weekly Star, Dec. 12, 1873.

78 Star, March 3, 1872.

79 Star, April 13, 1874.


81 Weekly Star, Dec. 12, 1886.

82 New Hanover County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, June 1842, 179.

83 Weekly Chronicle, Sept. 27, 1843.

84 Star, Aug. 28, 1881.

85 Sixth Census, 1840: New Hanover County, Population Schedule, 6; hereinafter cited as 1840 Census.

86 "Recollections," 281.

“Recollections,” 278.

“Recollections,” 278.

1840 Census. 6.


1850 Census. 427 and 403; “Recollections,” 284.

NHC Deeds: KK, 666.

Herald, Sept. 22, 1855.

Kelley’s Wilmington Directory ... for 1860-61 (Wilmington: Geo. H. Kelly, 1860) 89; hereinafter cited as 1860 City Directory.

“Biography,” 15.

Frank D. Smaw, Jr., Wilmington Directory ... for 1865-66 (Wilmington: P. Heinsberger, 1865) 81; William H. Bernard, Bernard’s Wilmington and Fayetteville Directory ... 1866-67 (Wilmington: Bernard’s Printing and Publishing House, 1866) 118; Frank D. Smaw, Jr., Smaw’s Wilmington Directory, (Wilmington, Frank D. Smaw, Jr., ca. 1866) 151; T.M. Haddock, Haddock’s Wilmington, N.C. Directory (Wilmington: P. Heinsberger, 1871) 242; hereinafter cited as City Directory and the date of the respective publication.

1871 New Hanover County Tax list.

NHC Deeds: MMM, 141.

Benj. R. Sheriff, Sheriff & Co.’s Wilmington, N.C. Directory and General Advertiser for 1875-6 (Wilmington: Benj. R. Sheriff, 1875) 152 & 159; R. Sheriff, Sheriff’s Wilmington, N.C. Directory and General Advertiser for 1877-8 (Wilmington: Benj. R. Sheriff, 1877) 166; William H. Boyd, Boyd’s Wilmington, N.C. Directory and General Advertiser 1881-82 (Wilmington: P. Heinsberger, 1881) 164; Richards & Co., Directory of the City of Wilmington, North Carolina (Raleigh: Edwards, Broughton & Co., 1883) 137; A Directory of the City of Wilmington, N.C., for 1885 ... (Wilmington: DeRosset & Meares, 1885) 136 & 141; Directory of the City of Wilmington, North Carolina, 1889 (Wilmington: Julius A. Bonitz, 1889) 150 and 159; hereinafter cited as City Directory and the date of the respective publication.


“Minutes,” Jan. 17, 1852.

Gravestone, Oakdale Cemetery.

“Recollections,” 290.

“Biography,” 16.

“St. John’s Lodge,” 40.


“Recollections,” 285, 283.

“St. James Church, Vol. II,” 12, 65, 86.

Merle Underwood, Records of Front Street Methodist Episcopal Church & Grace Methodist Church, 1796-1905, Vol. II, np.

St. Paul’s Parish Registry, February 27, 1859; “Recollections,” 285.

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church Minutes and Register, 1858-1917, 4; hereinafter cited as St. Paul’s.

St. Paul’s, 6.

Star, March 16, 1890.


City Directories: 1865-66, 81; 1866-67, 118; ca. 1866, 51; 1871, 242.

Star, March 3, 1872.

Eighth Census, 1860: New Hanover County, Population Schedule, 35-36; City Directories: 1875-76, 152 & 159; 1877-78, 166; 1881-82, 164; 1883, 137; 1885, 136 & 144; and 1889, 150 & 159.