The Burgwin-Wright House

Margaret T. Hall

"...Standing on the (Carolina) Hotel steps and looking up Market Street, the visitor in Wilmington will see on the right hand side, on the corner of Third and Market Streets, an antiquated looking building, standing somewhat back from and above the street, with piazzas on the second and third stories, a hipped roof and a door yard filled with trees and shrubs. This building was the headquarters of Cornwallis during the time he remained in the city after his battle with Greene at Guilford court house. The city was taken possession of and occupied by Major Craig, in the fall of 1780, who held it until the arrival of his superior in the following April. Cornwallis remained in the city some eighteen days, to recruit his shattered forces and arrange his plans, and took possession of the house represented in the engraving as his head-quarters, it being the most considerable one in the place. The floors still bear the marks of the ruthless hand and axe of the British scullions, who chopped their meat thereon. These and other reminiscences of revolutionary times are sacredly preserved intact by the present occupant, Dr. T. H. Wright." This paragraph is copied from the article about Wilmington, North Carolina, which was published in Ballou’s Pictorial Drawing Room Companion in 1855. The house referred to is today known as The Burgwin-Wright House but for many years it was called the Cornwallis House.

John Burgwin [1731-1803] who built the house came to America in 1750 at the age of nineteen. His father told John to seek his fortune in the Colonies as his family estate was entailed to his brother James, and gave him letters to his old friend George Inglis of Charleston. With his help, John soon got a job with “Hooper, Alexander and Co. Merchants” of Charleston and Wilmington. Evidently he was a personable young man, educated at Elon and Cambridge and he was well received in both towns. It wasn’t long after he came to Wilmington that he met Margaret Haynes and in 1753 they were married. She was not of age and the marriage agreement, which is on file in the New Hanover County Court House, was signed by John Burgwin and her mother, who is described as the “relief” of Roger Haynes. She was the daughter of the Reverend Richard Marsden, the first episcopal minister in North Carolina, who received a large land grant on the North east branch of the Cape Fear river from King Charles II. It was through this agreement that Margaret and John acquired the property at Castle Hayne, one thousand acres on Prince George creek called The Hermitage, where he later built his great plantation house and 640 acres in Bladen County on the west side of “White Marsh”.4

John did very well and soon became a successful merchant. He owned as many as five ships, some in the coastal trade and others trading with London, Amsterdam and the Barbados. He and Hugh Wadell were business partners for a time. Hugh had fought in the Indian Wars and was a leader of the patriots in their resistance to the Stamp Acts in Brunswick and Wilmington. He was married to Margaret’s sister Mary and they had three sons. Their plantation, up the Cape Fear river in the White Marsh district was called Belfont. From the deed books in the New Hanover and Bladen Court houses we find that John bought considerable property in Wilmington and in Bladen County near the Wadells.

For the next fifteen years Burgwin was very active in community affairs and divided his time between Bladen County and Wilmington. In 1755 he was quartermaster in Captain McKenzie’s Troops in New Hanover; in 1757 he was clerk of Court in Bladen County and 1759 he was Register of Deeds and Road Commissioner in the White Marsh district. In 1760 he was appointed Clerk of The Assembly. From 1762 to 1765 he was private secretary to Governor Dobbs, who was near the end of his term and spent most of his time at his plantation at Russelborough, just south of Wilmington, where he died in 1765. Evidently John and Margaret were spending more time at Castle Haynes as he was appointed Clerk of Superior Court in New Hanover in 1768 and served until 1773. In 1767 he was appointed Treasurer of the Province of North Carolina and held this office under Governors Tryon and Martin.

Margaret died in October of 1770. Whether she ever lived in the Burgwin-Wright house is doubtful but John must have built it for her. The accepted date for the completion of the Burgwin-Wright house has been 1771 but it could have been started in 1769 when John Burgwin bought the property on which stood the foundations of the abandoned jail house which is mentioned in court records in 1744 and is shown on the Sautier map of Wilmington, drawn in 1749. The jail was abandoned in 1769 and Burgwin bought the property soon after. The house is built on top of these foundations which are constructed of large dressed stones brought from the West Indies as ballast in the sailing ships. At this period John became "the builder". In 1771 he was building his great plantation house on the Hermitage tract at Castle Hayne, eight miles up the North East Cape Fear river.

(continued on Page Two)
LOWER CAPE FEAR HISTORICAL SOCIETY, Inc.

BULLETIN

Volume XXII, Number 2 Wilmington, N.C. 28401 February 1979

OFFICERS

Mrs. Robert W. Williams ........................................... President
Dr. Thomas V. Musey ............................................ Vice-President
Mr. James Robert Warren ......................................... Past President
Mrs. John Cashman ................................................ Recording Secretary
Miss Margaret T. Hall ............................................... Corresponding Secretary
Mr. R. Bertram Williams III ...................................... Treasurer
Mr. R. N. Shooffner ................................................ Assistant Treasurer
Mrs. Ida B. Kellam ................................................ Archivist
Mrs. Robert Walker ................................................ Assistant Archivist

DIRECTORS

Terms expiring May 1979: Mr. John H. Debnam, Dr. Charles P. Graham, Mrs. Paul V. Henderson, Cdr. Robert B. Johnston, Mrs. W. B. Rodman IV.

Terms expiring May 1980: Mrs. James D. Carr, Mr. James D. Carr, Mrs. Robert A. Little, Capt. W. B. Rodman IV, Mrs. Frederick Willetts, Jr.

Terms expiring May 1981: Mrs. E. Tighman Poole, Mr. Robert White Johnson, Mrs. Walter G. Craven, Mrs. Walker Taylor III, Mr. Robert Lane.

COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN: Archives, Cdr. Andrew H. Harriss, Jr.; Candelight Tour and Wassail Bowl, Mr. James Robert Warren; Clarendon Award, Mrs. Wm. G. Broadfoot, Jr.; Finance, Cdr. Robert B. Johnston; Lettner House, Mr. John Robert Lane, Jr.; Membership, Mrs. Walker Taylor III; Program, Dr. Thomas V. Musey; Publications, Mrs. E. M. McEasen; Publicity, Mrs. Robert A. Little; Servants Quarters Preservation, Dr. Charles P. Graham; Historic Wilmington Tours, Mrs. E. Tighman Poole, John Robert Lane Jr.

MEETING

Date: Thursday, February 15, 1979
Time: 8:00 P.M.
Place: St. James Great Hall
Subject: The U.S.S. North Carolina—What has Been Accomplished Since the Ship Arrived in Wilmington
Speaker: Captain Frank S. Conlon
Captain Conlon is a veteran of more than thirty years with the Navy, a native of Baltimore, Maryland, and a 1951 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy.

Gifts

Mrs. Patrick Welder of Victoria, Texas has again made a generous gift to the Society. Many times in the past she has sent a check to be used in the Archives and this time she sent $500 to be used in the preservation of the Servants Quarters. Would we had more Mrs. Welders!

IDA B. KELLAM RECEIVES NATIONAL AWARD

The American Association for State & Local History at the annual meeting of the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association in Raleigh on November 17, 1978, presented Ida B. Kellam with an award for her distinguished contributions to the collection, preservation, and writing of the history of the Lower Cape Fear. In presenting the award Dr. H. G. Jones said “For the past two decades she has devoted herself to organizing, leading, collecting, researching, and writing. An incorporator and former secretary of the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, she is now its archivist. From its inception she was a member of the award-winning Wilmington Historic District Commission and served on the board of the Wilmington-New Hanover Museum. She has been the magnet around which an unusually active history program has been established in the Lower Cape Fear. Mrs. Kellam is still collecting historical materials, still studying the remarkable archives she has collected and which are located in a room named for her, and still writing good local history.”

THE BURGWIN-WRIGHT HOUSE

(continued from Page One)

His daughter by his second wife, Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitheroe, kept a diary, in which she wrote that her father had an English architect for The Hermitage. It is possible that it was John Hawkes who designed the Governor’s Palace in New Bern in 1770. He is the only English architect we know visited North Carolina at that time.

In 1772 Hugh Weddell died, leaving John as administrator of his estate and guardian to his wife, Mary and his three sons. They lived at Belfont in Bladen county and John’s White Marsh property was near by. He probably built Marsh Castle at this time and spent much time there after Margaret’s death. In 1773 he was elected and returned to the Assembly as representative from Bladen. This was his first elective office.

John Burgwin often has been labeled “Tory”, which was undoubtedly true when he came to America but at this time we find him a man of divided loyalties. His mercantile business created close ties with England but the evidence of his friends, such as Hugh Weddell, and his activities show that his sympathies were with the patriots. In 1772 he was living in his house in Wilmington for the Wilmington Town Book reads “the necessary house belonging to John Burgwin on the lot where he lives is open to Market Street and is a nuisance to the inhabitants of the town”. On June 6, 1775 the Wilmington Committee of Safety asked everyone to declare how much gun powder they had on land. John Burgwin refused to comply and was reprimanded by the Committee. A few days later he wrote an apology, saying that a part of it belonged to his sister-in-law, the widow Mary Weddell. His apology was accepted in a letter signed by Cornelius Harnett, the Chairman.

It was only a few days after this incident that John Burgwin had a fall during a game of Blind Man’s Buff and broke his leg. After lying in the same room at The Hermitage for eleven weeks he decided to go to England for further medical attention. “After taking the oath of citizenship he leased Marsh Castle, The Hermitage and Castle Haynes and went to England”. It was probably at this time that his partner, Charles Jewkes, moved into his house in Wilmington.

He must have recovered fairly rapidly for it was not long after his arrival in England that he met Elizabeth Bush of Bristol. Her family were Quakers and lived at Ashley Barn in Gloucestershire. John was forty-seven and Elizabeth twenty-five when they became engaged. In 1778 he wrote to her from London, “my portrait is finished, also a miniature for your bracelet”. The portrait was painted by John Singleton Copley, the American from Boston who became very popular in London. A copy of the painting hangs in the entrance hall of the Burgwin-Wright house.

John’s affairs were going badly in America. Because of his
English connections his estates were confiscated. In 1778 we find that he is back in New York. The Council of State at Kingston granted him a parole to go through the lines and he and Robert Hogg were given permission to remain at The Hermitage until the Assembly met. In January of 1779 a joint Council of both houses of the Legislature heard petitions from persons desiring citizenship in North Carolina. "A very favorable report was made on John Burgwin and it was ruled that he be received as a citizen and his property be restored to him." This was an unusual occurrence. Mr. Archie Davis in his thesis on Harry K. Burgwin says, "The fact that he [John] was officially cleared by the Assembly of North Carolina without reservation speaks clearly in his favor as a provincial patriot."

Evidently John was putting his affairs in order and making plans for his marriage to Elizabeth. In the Deed book in Bladen County we read that in 1781 he gave all the slaves at Marsh Castle, "where I now reside" to his three nephews, Haynes, Hugh and John Burgwin Wadell and appointed one of his friends as their trustees and guardians. He had looked after these boys as if they were his own sons and had taken the two older ones to England with him to be educated. Before he died he gave them all of the White Marsh property.

Finally in 1782, he returned to England and on April 27th he and Elizabeth Bush were married. He leased an estate at Thornbury near Bristol called The Grove and it was here that his first son, John Fanning, was born the following March. In 1784 they returned to America, leaving the baby with his grandmother. They landed in Charleston on April 9th and that night Caroline Eliza their daughter was born. While he was away the British soldiers had fired Marsh Castle, taken his slaves and vandalized The Hermitage. Nevertheless he took his family there. Elizabeth's sister Priscilla and two servants came with her and Caroline Eliza, in her diary tells of the busy plantation life they led for the next three years. In September 1787 George William Bush Burgwin was born at The Hermitage. Elizabeth was very ill and Caroline Eliza wrote, "The more readily to receive medical aid it was deemed advisable to remove my mother to their town house in Wilmington. As she could not bear the motion of the carriage four men carried her on a litter," But it was of no use and on October 19 Elizabeth died and was buried at Castle Hayne.

Priscilla soon went back to England taking Caroline Eliza with her and leaving the baby with his father. For the next ten years we find almost no mention of John Burgwin and no record of his holding public office.

During the years of the war when John Burgwin was in England and Bladen County, Wilmington, a busy port, was in turmoil. Major James Craig captured the city in January 1781, "The Bull Pen", a stockade where he lodged his political prisoners was on Market Street between Second and Third, perhaps on Burgwin property. When General Lord Cornwallis arrived in Wilmington on March 18th after his dubious victory at Guilford Courthouse, he commandeered the Burgwin-Wright house, "the most considerable house in town" for his headquarters. He was there for about three weeks before he went to his final defeat at Yorktown, Va. He stabled his horses in the recently built St. James church across Third Street and kept his prisoners in the dungeon which was under the foundations of the old jail.

There is a trap door in the west room on the ground floor which leads to this dungeon or basement. In the west wall is a bricked up opening with a Roman arch at the top which covers the entrance to the tunnel. This under ground passage is walled with brick, has a vaulted roof and a sand floor. These arches were built to cover the many small streams in the area. Many stories are told about the tunnels, smugglers and run away slaves are featured in most of them.

It was in 1799 that John Burgwin sold to Joshua Grainger Wright (1768-1811) the house at Third and Market for 3,500 "Spanish milled dollars," Joshua Grainger was the son of Thomas Wright and Ann Grainger, his wife was born at their home Fairfield plantation on the sound. His father died in 1771 and his mother married Charles Jewkes sometime before 1773. A deed in the Bladen County deed book mentions land sold by "Charles Jewkes and wife" in 1773. This was the same Jewkes who sold White Marsh land to Burgwin and was in partnership with Burgwin in the mercantile trade, "Burgwin, Jewkes and London". It is probable that he and Ann Grainger and her children, Thomas, Mary, Ann and Joshua Grainger Wright moved into the house when John Burgwin went to England in 1775. Charles Jewkes died in 1795 leaving in his will, "to Joshua Wright, son of my deceased wife, one half of my property." Joshua Grainger Wright had married Susannah Bradley in 1791. She was the daughter of Richard Bradley and Elizabeth Sharpless, whose property adjoined that of Thomas Wright on what is now Wrightsville Sound. Wright became a lawyer and a well known orator. He was a member of the Legislature from 1792 until 1800 when he was elected Speaker of the House. The Bank of Cape Fear was started in 1809 and Joshua Grainger Wright was elected the first President. He wanted to resign when he was appointed Judge the same year but the Directors refused to release him. He was a member of the Masonic Order and appointed Grand Sword Bearer in 1807. He was involved in many real estate transfers in the town and had large holdings on the sound which he inherited from his father. He built a summer home there which he called Mount Lebanon. His sons acquired more property in this area and it was later named Wrightsville. Susan, his wife, lived on in the Burgwin-Wright house for over fifty years and died there in 1842.

John Burgwin's daughter, Carolina Eliza, went to England with her Aunt Priscilla, after her mother's death to join her brother, John Fanning who had grown up there with his grandparents. In 1801 they returned to America to be reunited with their father and young brother. They landed in Charleston on September 29th on the ship General Ogletorpe. In her diary Caroline Eliza tells of attending her first ball in Wilmington, a few days after she arrived. She says that her brothers took her into town to the house of Judge and Mrs. Wright, who were her chaperones. She was escorted to the ball by Mr. Giles. She describes the dress she wore, "my dress was of sprigged India muslin with a drapery trimmed with lace, an ostrich feather was fastened by a silver bandeau in my hair, which was curled short all over my head, and I wore my gold chain." That night she met George Clitheral of Charleston, the grandson of Mr. George Ingle who befriended her father when he came to America. The following year they were married. John Burgwin lived to see his daughter married at the Hermitage but on May 21, 1803 he died and was buried at Castle Hayne.

Thomas Henry Wright inherited the house from his mother (his older brother, Charles Jewkes predeceased her). He had married Mary Allan in 1825. In the drawing room of the Burgwin-Wright house is a three piece silver service made by Baldwin Gardner of New York which was given to them for a wedding present. The date and their initials are on one side and on the other are the initials of one of their descendants who was married in 1925. Mary Allan was the daughter of James Allan of Edinburgh, Scotland and Mary Earl of New Hanover County. Both parents died when Mary was an infant. Her father left a large fortune and named
William Watts Jones her guardian. She was educated at the school for young ladies in Smithville, now Southport, which was taught by Mrs. George Clitheral (Caroline Eliza Burgwin). In 1856 she lost her eyesight in an accident. The rest of her life she devoted to charitable works and St. James Church. Dr. Thomas Henry Wright, (1800-1861) her husband, graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1820. He received his medical degree also but did not practice as he found finance more to his liking.

When the cornerstone was laid for the present St. James church building in 1839, a scroll signed by two wardens and five vestrymen was included in its contents. Dr. Wright signed as Senior Warden, a position he held for many years. It was he who built the little chapel at Mt. Lebanon, which later was given to St. James Church. He and Mary Allan had eleven children. In 1850 he was listed in the census as "President of the Bank of Cape Fear, having real estate valued at $43,000, having a wife Mary and eight children." It was Thomas Henry and Mary who made the alterations in the Burgwin-Wright House, adding the large wing on the South side and changing the front. The handsome Palladian doorway with Ionic pilasters on each side and Ionic columns and vase shaped balusters on the front porch are interesting architectural features. Mary lived to send four sons to battle in the War Between the States, two of them were killed and one, Joshua Grainger II was seriously wounded.

Dr. Adam Empie Wright, the fourth and eldest son was the next owner of the house. He was born in 1833, graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1853 and from the University of Medicine in New York in 1855. He practised in Wilmington for many years and during the War between the States he was Surgeon in command of the Post Hospital. He married Sallie Fotherill Potter at St. James Church in 1864. Sallie and her sister Liza were known as the beautiful Potter sisters and lived in the big square Federal house at Second and Orange Streets. They traveled in Europe and when Liza married Mr. Thomas settle her trousseau was made in Paris. At times these dresses are on display at the Burgwin-Wright House.

In 1869 the house went out of the hands of the Wright family when it was sold to William Hamilton McRary for $5,000. He made a large fortune as a commission merchant before he died in 1886. His wife, Martha Wiggins died in 1907 and left the house to her sister Rowena. At the time of her death Martha Wiggins McRary was said to be the richest woman in the state.35

The National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of North Carolina purchased the house in 1937 for their Headquarters. It has been carefully restored and beautifully furnished with many English Antiques of the 18th century. The gardens are laid out on eighteenth century plans and the plant material is authentic. The house and gardens are open to the public Tuesdays through Saturdays from 10 A.M. to 5 P.M. for a fee. It is included also on The Historic Wilmington Tour.

FOOTNOTES
3. Ibid., Book R, p. 175.
8. Ibid., Vol. 25, p. 461.
9. Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 439.
10. Ibid., Vol. 9, p. 617.
12. The Caroline Eliza Clitheral Diary, Archives of Lower Cape Fear Historical Society.
17. Caroline Eliza Clitheral Diary, p. 16.
22. The Caroline Eliza Clitheral Diary.
24. Mckoy, Elizabeth F., Early Wilmington, Block by Block, p. 55.
26. Mckoy, Elizabeth F., Early Wilmington, Block by Block, p. 111.
29. Caroline Eliza Clitheral Diary.
30. Ibid.
31. Hicks, Eugene, The Wright Family (notes).
33. Hicks, Eugene, The Wright Family (notes).
34. Star-News, Wilmington, N.C., Nov. 9, 1975, Supplement, p. 31, Bill Reeves.

LOWER CAPE FEAR HISTORICAL SOCIETY
P. O. BOX 813
WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED.

Non-Profit Organization
U. S. POSTAGE
PAID
Permit No. 306
Wilmington, N. C.