The work of the Corps of Engineers in the Cape Fear region was imperative to the citizens of Wilmington and the outlying regions. Having witnessed some improvements on the river, the citizens of Wilmington were now faced with ever increasing trade, larger ships and stiff competition on land and by sea. It was important to them that the Corps continue its work on the river; for much more work was needed after completion of the jetty at New Inlet. The Corps had planned to continue this work and began surveying the river in 1881.

The Corps surveyed the river anew, in an attempt to ascertain the effects of the jetty on the river and the most feasible depth the river could attain. The engineers at the Corps, under Henry Bacon’s direction, found this depth to be 20 feet. Senator Matthew Ransom urged that the river be dredged to this depth, and that the money be appropriated in the rivers and harbors act. Dredging to this depth was deemed too costly by the Senate however; the price being estimated at over one million dollars.  

In 1881 the Corps presented a new project to deepen the river to 15 feet. This project was accepted, at a cost of $500,000, on March 3, 1881, with $140,000 being appropriated in that year. Work on deepening the channels was to be completed by 1883.  

To begin the project the Corps of Engineers awarded a contract to G. H. Ferris of Baltimore to dredge a channel through Snow’s Marsh, located 20 miles below Wilmington. This channel was to be 270 feet wide by 16 feet deep. Ferris began work in 1881, but encountered many difficulties with storms and refilling in the channel.  

In 1882 the Board of Engineers met to consider work on a swash that had occurred at Smith’s Island. This swash had been caused by a large storm in 1881 and threatened to undermine the work accomplished at New Inlet. The board recommended that an experimental wooden mattress be sunk at the swash to see what effect it would have in stopping further erosion in the area of the swash. This mattress was to be filled with stone and would reach across the entire cut. The Board also extended the work on the channels to 1884.  

Unfortunately, by 1886 this project was still continuing and the contract for dredging had changed hands four times. The Corps found many companies to be slow in their dredging of the river. Of five channels to be dredged under this project, only two had been completed in five years; these were Snow’s Marsh channel, which required constant dredging due to accretion, and Midnight shoal. The other three channels, consisting of Brunswick River shoal, the “Logs” and Lilliput, were only partially completed. Snow’s Marsh proved to be the most difficult channel to maintain because, due to tidal currents, it was refilling at the rate of over one foot per year.  

During 1886 it was dredged to 18 feet to allow for refilling over the next year. In 1886, Bacon reported that nearly two million cubic yards of material had been removed from all of the channels since 1881, and that over $400,000 would be needed to finish the project.  

The work of building the dam at Smith’s Island began in earnest in 1883, due to a bad storm which had caused two new cuts to be made above Smith’s Island. The dam at New Inlet withstood the storm with only minor damage. The new dam was built in five feet of water and was constructed of wooden mattresses covered with large stone.  

Bacon estimated, in 1884, that 78,000 tons of stone would be needed to complete the dam, and more if a severe storm occurred during construction. Bacon’s fears proved true, for in 1885 storms washed the top off the dam, requiring more work on the project. Work on the dam continued until 1889, when Bacon reported to Captain William Bixby, who had taken over supervision of works on the Cape Fear, that the dam had been finished and connected to the dam at New Inlet, for a total length of 3 ¼ miles. The work had a base of 24 to 38 feet and stood out of the water at ordinary spring tide. The amount of stone needed to finish the project was 78,600

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LOWER CAPE FEAR HISTORICAL SOCIETY
BULLETIN
Volume XXVIII, Number 2  Wilmington, N.C.  February 1985

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MEETING
Date:  Sunday, February 17, 1985
Time:  4:00 P.M.
Place:  Thalian Hall
Speaker:  Dr. John D. Neville
Executive Director,
America’s Four Hundredth Anniversary Committee

Topic:  America’s Four Hundredth Anniversary: Major Celebration Events

Note: Members of the Nominating Committee will be elected at this meeting.

In Memoriam: Winston Broadfoot

PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

Faced with a unique situation, Dr. Landon Anderson coordinated volunteers who produced the grandest Wassail Bowl and Candlelight Tour in the eleven years of their existence. About 200 people—not just Society members—decorated and opened their homes and businesses to 1,500 visitors; extended Wilmington hospitality to each; charmed our guests with music, carols and entertainment both in homes and on the streets; publicized the attractiveness of the tour; patrolled the streets and reenacted part of our history; illuminated the paths between tour sites and performed a multitude of other functions.

Mrs. Anderson, with lots of help, prepared and served a marvelous Wassail Bowl and dinner. Mrs. Muriel Piver’s Christmas Shop offered many unique things downstairs. Dr. Robert Fales took time to sign his excellent book, Wilmington Yesteryear.

Thanks to so few, yet so many, we had a marvelous Christmas season.

As the gray days of winter set in, we look ahead to expanding our membership in April/May; to a new administration in May and its new year; to starting early (but in a timely fashion) to plan the 1985 Candlelight Tour and Wassail Bowl. Everyone rallied around the flag for the 1984 season and we met with great success. Now we must settle down for the less traumatic year ahead, slowly but steadily to expand our membership, enhance the Latimer House and Garden and increase the holdings and availability of our Archives.

Sincerely,
Frank Conlon

NEWS FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Ida B. Kellam Archives moved last fall from the basement room in the Latimer House to two rooms on the second floor apartment, which was formerly rented. Plans are underway to extend the hours for public use. Donations of historical materials, equipment and furnishings for the new quarters are always welcome.

GIFTS TO THE SOCIETY

The Society gratefully acknowledges the following gifts and loans:

GIFTS TO THE ARCHIVES

Andrew H. Harris, Jr.

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Family of Miss Elizabeth F. McKoy
Map of early plats along the Atlantic Coast; Scrapbook about Henry Bacon.
Mr. and Mrs. Edmond W. Downes
Donation to purchase books needed to complete the
Leora H. McEachern Collection.
Merle Chamberlain
Step ladder, Archives vacuum cleaner, paper cutter.

BOOK COMMITTEE

Wilmington Yesterday was written by Dr. Robert M. Fales and edited by Mrs. Diane Cashman. It arrived in Wilmington December 7, 1984, just in time for sale at the Candidlight Tour and for Christmas gift sales. The initial shipment of 100 books was sold in the first 48 hours. The remainder arrived in time to stock retailers immediately following the Candidlight Tour weekend.

Sales were extremely active during the holiday season, partly due to autograph signings by the author hosted by the Little Professor Book Center, Belk-Beery, and The Bookery. To date, a total of 1,187 copies of Wilmington Yesterday have been sold, already representing a significant contribution to the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society.

The retailers selling Wilmington Yesterday include Little Professor Book Center, Belk-Beery, The Bookery, and New Hanover Memorial Hospital Auxiliary Gift Shop. The books have been and continue to be sold at the Latimer House. We look forward to continued sales and are grateful for the contributions already made to the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society.

Linda Hundley

ONE OF THE FINEST RIVERS IN THE SOUTH

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tons, slightly exceeding Bacon’s estimate.10

A new project was initiated by the Chief of Engineers in 1890. Work on dredging the channels had progressed slowly, but nearly all were finished to the specified widths and depths of 1881. The new project was to complete the work of 1881 and dredge all the channels to 20 feet from Bald Head bar to Wilmington.11 It was also decided to dredge the Wilmington shoal and Kidder’s Mill shoal, one mile below Wilmington, and abandon the old channel at Snow’s Marsh and begin a new one in the area of the Old Horseshoe shoal. By the end of 1890, when the new project was adopted, over two million dollars had been appropriated for works on the Cape Fear. The money had been well spent, for trade in Wilmington was expanding. And as Henry Bacon reported in 1889, if the river had not been improved Wilmington would have been annihilated, as a port, by Charleston and Savannah.12

The Corps of Engineers also sought to enhance local trade in Wilmington by beginning ancillary works upon small rivers and streams leading into the Cape Fear or carrying on direct trade with it. Among these streams were the upper Cape Fear; the Shallotte River, the Black River, Lillington River, Lockwood’s Folly and the North-
and highly exposed to weather and water conditions. Dredging was still needed in the channel and a new dredge was contracted for in 1895, after the Woodbury had burned at its dock at Southport in 1893. This dredge was to be named the Cape Fear.

The Cape Fear took the Woodbury’s place working on the bar and Snow’s Marsh, doing ten times the work of the Woodbury. In 1897 the Corps purchased another dredge to begin work on the river. This dredge, the Ajax, gave the Corps near self-sufficiency in its dredging operations: it no longer had to rely on contractors with their high dredging prices, which usually averaged around 13 cents per cubic yard. With the Cape Fear and the Ajax working on the river, the Corps had lowered its dredging costs to around 8 cents per cubic yard.

With the new dredges working on the river, work on the shoals of the river progressed with dredging taking place on all of the shoals to obtain 20 feet. This work was suspended briefly, however, in 1896 with the outbreak of the Spanish-American war. The war caused quite a stir on the Cape Fear and much work was done to bring the defenses of the river up to date. The defenses of the Cape Fear had been allowed to fall by the wayside after the Civil War. In 1871 Craighill had suggested that the defensive works on the river be strengthened, but his advice was overlooked until the need arose in 1898. Minor work had been done on the defenses of the river before 1898, but mainly at Fort Caswell, which had become the main line of defense for the river. The war caused a flurry of activity on the Cape Fear; the channels were mined and torpedoes were placed in the river. A cargo steamer was also fitted out for torpedoes. The Cape Fear was unprepared for war, but the Corps could not be blamed for the river’s poor defenses. They had been presenting plans for defense of all the harbor in the United States since 1865, yet had received no money to carry out the work. The defensive activities continued on the Cape Fear into the year 1899 but thereafter slowly declined until the First World War.

The war had been a cause for much frenzied activity on the river, not only by the Corps but also in the area of trade and commerce. During the war commerce rose to its highest level ever, tonnage reached a record 630,000 tons and the value of foreign exports rose to over nine million dollars, cotton comprising 95% of this figure.

By 1902 another project was given to the Corps of Engineers at Wilmington. The project of 1902 was to build a turning basin in the harbor of Wilmington large enough for ships to turn around in. The condition of the river was that all the shoals had been dredged to 185 to 222 feet in width and from 18 to 20 feet in depth. The Cape Fear had obtained a width of 300 feet and a 20 foot depth at the Bald Head bar and was maintaining an 18 foot depth at Snow’s Marsh.

In 1899 a severe storm did considerable damage to the swash dam, knocking down over 3000 feet of its length. The dam was repaired after the storm but another storm struck shortly thereafter, leveling the dam to the low water mark in many parts. Assistant Engineer Charles Humphreys reported that to repair the dam would require 10,000 cubic yards of stone at a cost of $30,000.

Up to the year 1902 only minor repairs were carried out on the dam due to the lack of appropriated monies.

The project of 1902 was slow to get underway, for a dispute between the Corps and many merchants of Wilmington held up its progress. The merchants wanted a turning basin dredged below the confluence of the Cape Fear and the Northeast rivers and also wanted the harbor to be deepened along the Wilmington waterfront. The President of the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, Marcus W. Jacobi, stated that since Wilmington was the only deep-water port in the state and since the government had been expending large sums of money to give it a 20 foot channel, some money should be appropriated to widen the harbor to allow ships to swing safely at anchor. He added:

We are not prepared to care for vessels that this increased depth of water [in the channels] gives us. Our business has and is materially increasing each year, and with this basin we will be in the position to care for many more vessels and increased commerce.

The Wilmington harbor master also reported that: “25 to 30 vessels drawing 17 to 20 feet of water have grounded in the lower harbor . . .” He felt that the whole state would benefit from the work.

The Corps, however, could not agree with the citizens of Wilmington and felt that the $200,000 estimated for the work was too much money. The Corps proposed that a suitable number of mooring dolphins be erected alongside the channel so that ships could be secured instead of having to anchor. This project was approved at a cost of $30,000.

From 1902 to 1907 work on the Cape Fear consisted mainly of finishing the project of 1890 and repairing the swash dam. The Cape Fear and the Ajax worked in earnest on the river from 1902 to 1904, in order to obtain the 20 foot depth on the shoals, with the Ajax working on the shoals upriver and the Cape Fear working on Snow’s Marsh and the Bald Head bar. In 1906 another dredge, the Delaware, was brought to the work and another dredge was ordered to be built to help the Ajax on the river channels. By 1907 all ten channels from Wilmington to the Bald Head bar had been completed to a width of from 148 feet to 270 feet and all of them except Snow’s Marsh had a depth of 20 feet.

Work on repairing the swash dam was finally begun in 1905, with stone being placed along the length of the break. On September 17, 1905, however, another storm struck the coast and damaged the work again, this time along 6,000 feet of its length. This damage would require that 20,000 tons of stone be placed on the dam in the next year to secure it finally against storms.

In 1907 it was decided to go ahead and dredge a turning basin in the Wilmington harbor instead of constructing dolphins. The basin was to be in excess of 20 feet and the work on it was performed by the dredge Jacksonville, on loan to the Wilmington district in exchange for repairs. The Corps was also ordered to obtain a depth in excess of 20 feet on all of the river channels. In 1909 Captain Earl I. Brown reported that the basin had been dredged to a depth of 24 feet and a width of from 150 to 300 feet for a length of 5300 feet. In 1911 Brown
reported that the basin had been completed to 300 feet throughout its length and only maintenance was required for the next year.32

Dredging on the channels of the river continued and by 1912 the Cape Fear had reached a depth of 26 to 28 feet and a width of from 74 to 270 feet up to Wilmington. Five to six dredges worked continuously on the river from 1907 to 1912, dredging three million cubic yards of material annually.33 The government was pushing the work on the Cape Fear to a finish, granting $600,000 in sundry civil acts, which can be combined with $800,000 appropriated through the rivers and harbors acts of 1912. This push was paying off; for in 1911 sixty million dollars of coastal and foreign trade was reported, with exports totalling nearly twenty-five million dollars. Commerce on the river since the Corps took over improvements had increased ca. 300,000 tons every ten years since 1890.34

The project of 1890 now had been in effect for over twenty years and had been modified several times. In 1912 another modification was approved; this one called for a channel 300 feet wide, to an attainable depth. Work began on the modification in 1914 and continued until America entered the first World War in 1917, when Major A. E. Waldron reported that the project depth and width existed on all the shoals in the river—except Snow's Marsh, where there was a low water depth of 23 feet. Waldron reported that all the other channels had been dredged to 300 feet by 26 feet, the main work on the other channels now being in the form of maintenance.35

The outbreak of World War I, in 1914, had some particularly bad effects on the commerce of the port of Wilmington in all articles of trade except cotton. As can be seen above, work on the Cape Fear progressed as usual; but the amount of goods entering the port dropped drastically in 1916. The commerce of the port had been slipping since 1912, when a record one million tons of freight was transported worth sixty million dollars. In the next year this total dropped to 700,000 tons and a total value of forty million dollars. The figures rose slightly in 1914, with a gain of 20,000 tons, but the value fell by fifteen million dollars. Cotton was the main foreign export for that year, being worth six million dollars. The export of cotton had been worth thirty million dollars in 1912.36

In 1916, with the war continuing in Europe, the commerce of the port of Wilmington again dropped drastically, losing nearly 200,000 tons of freight. The amount of foreign commerce was only eleven million dollars, a figure lower than that of the foreign commerce of 1895. The bulk of this figure came from cotton, ten million dollars of which was exported in that year. The coastal trade was still good, however, having a tonnage of around 400,000 tons out of a total of 500,000 tons. This trade was mostly in wood products with some new items beginning to play a part in the trade. These items were gasoline, kerosene, and hardware. The high amount of foreign trade in cotton could be attributed to its vitality as a war material, being used in the making of uniforms and shells.37

With the United States entry into the war in 1917, the commerce of Wilmington fell off even more significant-ly, decreasing to 400,000 tons, due to the threat of German submarine attacks and lack of ships to transport goods. The value of the commerce was on the rise, however; for in 1914 it had been twenty-eight million dollars and in 1918 it was forty-four million dollars, even with the drop of 500,000 tons in trade. This increase was attributed by District Engineer Robert C. Merritt to a rise in the prices of all commodities.38

With the end of the war in 1918 things began to return to normal on the Cape Fear River, although trade would take several years to return to near normal. The Corps once again began working on the river and a new peacetime project was begun. This improvement involved dredging the river to 30 feet deep and 400 feet wide at the Bald Head bar. In 1919 Merritt reported that over five million dollars had been expended for improvements to the Cape Fear River.39

To the citizens of Wilmington this was five million dollars well spent; for not only did the Corps provide safe travel for ships navigating the Cape Fear, it also provided for an increase in yearly commerce from 1870 to 1914. Indeed the service provided by the Corps of Engineers continues to be important even to this day, for the Cape Fear is an ever changing river, as is the traffic that travels upon it. The Corps helps Wilmington as the largest port in North Carolina to grow and adapt to these changes.

FOOTNOTES

2Ibid.
3Annual Reports, 1882, pp. 1098-1114.
4Ibid., pp. 1105-1114.
5The contract was given to the National Steam Dredging Company in 1883, and then to the N.Y. Steam Dredging Company in the same year. It was awarded to Rittenhouse Moore in August of 1884; he began work in 1885. Annual Reports, 1883, pp. 857-858; and Annual Reports, 1885, pp. 1091-1094.
6Annual Reports, 1885, pp. 1003-1004; and Annual Reports, 1886, pp. 1006-1002.
7Annual Reports, 1886, pp. 1009-1112.
8Annual Reports, 1884, pp. 1110-1114; and Annual Reports, 1885, p. 1091.
9Ibid., 1885; and Annual Reports, 1886, pp. 1000-1002.
10Annual Reports, 1889, p. 1089; and Annual Reports, 1888, pp. 994-956.
11Ibid., 1889, p. 1132.
12Annual Reports, 1887, pp. 1052-1053, Annual Reports, 1895, p. 1344; and Annual Reports, 1889, p. 1096.
13Improvements upon these rivers usually involved clearing channels, dredging and snagging; except on the Upper Cape Fear, where intensive work was done from 1881 onwards, including the lock and dam project of 1902. Commerce in naval stores was heavily depended upon all of these streams, it being easier to produce and involving less capital than cotton. For example in 1887 the total value of wood products and naval stores on the Upper Cape Fear was over $500,000, while the value of cotton was $400,000. This is the norm for most of these streams, with some having even greater amounts of wood products. Annual Reports, 1887, p. 1099; and Annual Reports, 1914, pp. 2006-2007.
14Annual Reports, 1891, p. 401; and Annual Reports, 1877, p. 348.
15Ibid.

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FOOTNOTES
Continued from Page 5

16 Lawrence Lee, New Hanover County . . . A Brief History, (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History), 1971, p. 87.
17 The figures for the drafts of ships were compiled from cotton steamer records in the Annual Reports. Annual Reports, 1890, p. 712; and Annual Reports, 1891, p. 1491.
18 Annual Reports, 1890, pp. 1132-1136; and Annual Reports, 1891, p. 738-743.
19 Annual Reports, 1892, pp. 1170-1172; Annual Reports, 1893, pp. 1475-1482; and Annual Reports, 1894, pp. 1047-1051.
20 Annual Reports, 1895, pp. 1335-1342; and Annual Reports, 1895, p. 1706.
21 Annual Reports, 1897, p. 1413.
22 These are my own figures, mainly from contract records before 1895 and government dredging costs after 1895. Annual Reports, 1891, p. 758; Annual Reports, 1893, p. 419; and Annual Reports, 1895, pp. 1336-1337.
23 Annual Reports, 1898, pp. 1259-1262; and Annual Reports, 1899, pp. 1511-1514.
24 Annual Reports, 1900, pp. 1509-1510.
25 Annual Reports, 1903, p. 241.
26 Annual Reports, 1900, pp. 1820-1821; Annual Reports, 1901, p. 308; and Annual Reports, 1902, p. 1104.
27 Annual Reports, 1901, pp. 1557-1566.
28 Ibid., pp. 1566-1569.
29 Ibid.
30 Annual Reports, 1904, pp. 1500-1504; and Annual Reports, 1906, pp. 1165-1166.
31 Annual Reports, 1907, p. 286.
32 Annual Reports, 1911, p. 381.
33 Annual Reports, 1912, pp. 459-460; and Annual Reports, 1909, p. 431.
34 The figure of 300,000 is based on my own calculations; for example, the commerce in tonnage for 1890 was 346,577 tons, in 1900 it was 689,356 tons, and in 1910 it was 944,657 tons; see Annual Reports, 1912, pp. 782-785.
35 Annual Reports, 1913, p. 505; Annual Reports, 1914, pp. 2015-2018; and Annual Reports, 1917, p. 2312.
36 Annual Reports, 1913, p. 1963; Annual Reports, 1914, p. 2023; and Annual Reports, 1915, p. 2376.
37 Annual Reports, 1898, p. 1092; and Annual Reports, 1899, pp. 2314-2317.
38 Annual Reports, 1919, I.672, II.2473.
39 Ibid., II.372.