The Gentleman Scholar: E. Lawrence Lee, Jr.
1912-1996
By Susan Taylor Block

"I am not one of those historians who ignore oral tradition. Oral tradition is the basis of history."
E. Lawrence Lee, September 10, 1996.

Lawrence Lee, a well known and respected historian in both North and South Carolina, died October 18, 1996, in his hometown of Wilmington. His birthdate was New Year's Day, 1912. He was one of four sons born to Enoch L. and Janie Reilly Lee. His ancestry was primarily Irish, and as his friend, Raleigh attorney Howard Manning, has said, "There was a touch of red in his hair and a touch of red in his soul." His burning interest in history began in childhood, hearing Civil War tales of his famous grandfather, Major James Reilly, and being steeped in the stories of old Wilmington.

One of his favorite childhood memories was of international businessman and local historian James Sprunt paying visits to the Lee house at 413 North Fourth Street. "James Sprunt occasionally came to our house. We had a fence around our yard and when my brothers and I were still boys, we would sometimes be playing inside the yard when Dr. Sprunt was walking from St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church at 4th and Campbell to visit members of the Sprunt family at their home at 3rd and Grace.

"He was one of the finest gentlemen I ever knew. I loved him. He loved my grandfather. He always said he enjoyed seeing Major Reilly's grandsons. After Grandpa's death, James Sprunt wrote my mother a letter and ended it with the words, 'There was a man.'"

Lawrence Lee also loved going on trips with his mother down the Cape Fear River to Southport, on the Steamer Wilmington. Sometimes Captain John Harper would stop at the rugged Brunswick Town landing, an historic colonial site Dr. Sprunt had acquired. Lawrence Lee was intrigued with the jungle-covered scene, and St. Philips, the church with no roof let alone a steeple. He was fascinated by the fact that a community could be so active only to disappear entirely and decided to try and "find that old town," one day.¹

The young boy grew up to be a singular and complex man; singular in his ardent love for family and his lifelong allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church (specifically St. Mary Church, Wilmington), but complex in almost every other way. His many interests and abilities give a hint. In addition to being a noted historian, he was a certified public accountant, a businessman who managed a number of real estate concerns, a Citadel Professor, a world traveler, an engaging conversationalist and an elegant, gifted writer. Though encouraged to write fiction by a number of people, including friend Inglis Fletcher, he chose to write history instead. His published works include The Lower Cape Fear in Colonial Days (1965), The History of Brunswick County, North Carolina (1980), Indian Wars in North Carolina: 1663-1763 (1963) and New Hanover County: A Brief History (1971). Lee also wrote a lengthy unpublished manuscript entitled Pirates of the Ocean Seas.

Soon after Lawrence Lee received a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of North Carolina, in 1934, he moved to New York where he worked as an accountant for Arthur Andersen & Company. In 1940, he married Mary Borden

¹ E. Lawrence Lee, Jr., series of interviews by Susan Taylor Block, 1996, hereafter referred to as 1996 interviews.
Wallace, a Wilmington native and an accomplished musician, who was also living in New York at the time. From 1940 until his death, Lawrence Lee was president of “Shore Acres,” a real estate management firm with diverse holdings in New Hanover and Brunswick counties that were accumulated by Oliver T. Wallace, father of Mary Borden Wallace Lee and Nancy Wallace Henderson. Because of Lee’s ownership of Wrightsville Sound, a beach waterway is named Lee’s Cut, a geographic moniker chosen by Wilmington civil engineer Henry VonOesen.2

Soon after they were married, Mary Borden urged her husband to take the certified public accountant test, which he did and passed on his first attempt. With the advent of World War II, Uncle Sam laid claim to his mathematical prowess and sent him to Red Stone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama. In 1945, after four years of government accounting, he began to consider a career change. In the late 1940s, the Lee family, including Lawrence Borden Lee, born 1944, and James Reilly Lee, born 1947, moved to Chapel Hill where Mr. Lee enrolled as a graduate student in the School of History. It was a step he had “contemplated for some years... as history had always been a subject of great interest.”3

In 1951, Lawrence Lee received a Master of Arts Degree and began to pursue his Ph.D. degree. His Master’s thesis won accolades from his professors and impressed state historian Hugh T. Lefler. The subject, Brunswick Town, was his lifelong pet historical project and he brought it into the state archeological spotlight in the 1950s. “I was always fascinated by the fact that the people were there and then they were gone,” Dr. Lee said in a 1996 interview, his face still showing the childlike wonder that led him back to the place he visited as a youth. Armed with knowledge and fueled by his passion for the project, Lawrence Lee began speaking to organizations across the state on the importance of mining the information that lay beneath the vines along the Cape Fear River.4

In the summer of 1952, while holding the William R. Davie memorial scholarship in history, he carried Joffrey Coe, his archeology professor, to the Brunswick site. “That day, we simply walked the land, but Joffrey spotted many shards of pottery, glassware and china.” Based on that trip, Dr. Coe recommended the excavation of Brunswick Town to state officials. Dr. Wallace Caldwell, Lee’s friend and a professor of ancient history at Chapel Hill, encouraged the project, and J. C. Harrington shared knowledge he had gained at Jamestown. Lee also met several times with North Carolina archivist Christopher Crittenden, requesting that he make the site a state park.

While the wheels of government began to turn, Lawrence Lee continued his own work in the surrounding areas, exploring Brunswick County’s backwoods and crossroads communities with native Jakie Taylor and continuing his research on eighteenth-century land transfers at the courthouse. He put together a detailed picture of the county and the intricate network of its early citizens. His deed research would prove invaluable when excavations finally began at Brunswick Town.5

Although he was making progress, frustration abounded. There are no authentic drawings of Brunswick Town and official maps created in 1726 and 1745 have never been found. An anonymous 1734 eyewitness account merely teased the researcher. “There were several vessels lying before the town of Brunswick, but I shall forbear giving a description of that place.”6

The process of sanctioning the area took not only effort but timing and diplomacy. Lee, with Hugh Morton’s help, procured the site for the State of North Carolina, just in time to prevent it from becoming an inaccessible part of the Sunny Point Army Terminal. For over a century, Brunswick Town had been a part of Orton Plantation. Frederick J. Hill, an earlier Orton owner, had purchased the 85 acre tract in 1842, for $4.25. In 1951, convinced of the value of Dr. Lee’s work, owner J. Laurence Sprunt, son of James Sprunt, graciously gifted 114 acres to the state. In 1953, the acquisition of the State Historic Site at Brunswick Town was complete when St. James Church in Wilmington gave St. Philips Church and five surrounding acres to the state. Wallace Caldwell obtained a large donation from a friend in New York to cover the cost of the early excavation.7

In 1955, Lawrence Lee received his Ph.D. degree.

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2 1996 interviews.
3 Lawrence Lee to Mrs. Frances T. Williams, no date, Lower Cape Fear Historical Society.
4 1996 interviews.
5 1996 interviews.
6 Lee Collection, Lower Cape Fear Historical Society.
His major was history, with an emphasis on the colonial period and his minor was archaeology. In 1956, he took a teaching position at the Citadel, in Charleston, S. C., but in his spare time, he continued his quest to reclaim Brunswick. He took a leave of absence in the summer of 1958 and moved his wife and two sons, Larry and James, to Brunswick County where he served briefly as the first director of the Brunswick Town State Historical Site. He organized a labor force using several of Laurence Sprunt’s Orton employees and a group of convicts from the local prison. Lawrence Lee himself, though of average build, was a physical powerhouse on the site. Together, they cut lines forty or fifty feet wide across the site and made several perpendicular swaths. That still left a lot of wilderness.

“We had to hack our way through - make our way with bush axes. It was a pure wilderness,” said Dr. Lee. “There were mosquitos and it was hot. There was no breeze. There were animals there, too. Someone saw a bear, but I never saw it. I saw wildcats and deer. I carried a .22 rifle all the time, but now I look back and wonder why it wasn’t a .12 gauge shotgun. What was I going to hit in that excitement?”

On June 9, 1958, armed with the positioning of the massive walls of St. Philips Church, his deed research, a somewhat unreliable 1769 map of the town by C. J. Sauthier, and a machete, Dr. Lee began the early archeological work. “Using St. Philips Church as a starting point, I began locating houses. Then we laid out the streets.”

Larry Lee, now an assistant U. S. Attorney in Savannah, was 14 and worked with his father at the site. One day, he stumbled over something as he was clearing a path: it was the first foundation they discovered. Made of English ballast stone, the thick footings were conspicuous in an area devoid of natural stone. Most of the houses measured 16 by 24 feet, the minimum building restriction at Brunswick Town.

The best preserved foundations, waist high with intact door openings and fireplaces were discovered near the bay. One heavy front door key and facing were found on a threshold as if the owner left in a hurry. Wells lined in beautiful curved brick were also uncovered. “They proved to be gold mines,” said Dr. Lee. “In 1748, the Spanish attack occurred. As the residents were leaving, they threw everything, it seemed, into the well. We even found silver pieces they tossed.”

Identifying the foundations was a different story. “We needed to find a lot we could identify by number on the town plan. We had almost given up hope of finding such when fortune smiled. In the south end of the town, along the river street, we came upon a stone wall enclosing an area, or yard. Because of a half-moon indentation in the front line of the wall we could identify it with a similar feature on the Sauthier map. This wall was the most important find of the summer I spent at Brunswick. From it, all other lots could be measured off and identified with their proper number in the town plan.”

Documents indicated that the key house was owned by William Dry, customs collector for the port of Brunswick. A wine bottle seal that read, “Wm. Dry - Cape Fear,” provided an artifactual exclamation mark. Along with the ruins of the William Dry House, over the course of the summer, Lee located 36 building foundations and reopened several of the old unpaved streets.

On August 15, 1958, a state committee invited a number of civic leaders, historians and public officials to Brunswick Town. For the first time in history, automobiles drove on the old, freshly cleared roads. “Having come to see, they lingered to absorb the natural beauty of the site with its sweeping view of the Cape Fear. They breathed the atmosphere of the past that now hangs so heavy over the once bustling seaport village. In the history of the town, this was an occasion of moment. It was

91996 interviews. 1999 interview with Frances S. Lee.
10 Lee Collection, Lower Cape Fear Historical Society.
also - we felt - a fitting climax to an interesting and satisfying summer's work."

Not only had Lawrence Lee given the state of North Carolina a valuable gift, he had also done what few people actually do: lived out a childhood dream of what he wanted to do when he "grew up." It was no accident that Lee was fascinated with the story of Heinrich Schliemann, the German archaeologist who discovered the ancient city of Troy. Lee spoke of dreams and discovery in a speech he delivered to the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society in Wilmington, May 5, 1972. "Schliemann's childish attention was drawn to an illustration of the ancient city. One day he dreamed he would find its ruins and reveal them to the world. As he grew to manhood, however, his dreams gave way to reality, and Schliemann was, of necessity, drawn into the world of business. There, a keen instinct for trade brought him success and fortune, and with the freedom that wealth can bring, he retired in his middle years and turned to a life of scholarship. His dreams of Troy were revived. By the time his work had been completed, he had dug the ruins of nine separate cities. To Schliemann, the most important result of his work was the fact that one of the cities was Troy."12

Though much work was left, the most important thing to Lawrence Lee was that he had found his beloved Brunswick Town. When the State of North Carolina began financing the project, they offered the position of site archeologist to Lawrence Lee. Satisfied that he had accomplished his mission, he declined, returning to his teaching post at the Citadel. "I was an historian, not an archeologist. I suggested Stanley South, whom I had known in graduate school, for the post. He was working on an Indian ruin at the time, but he quickly learned colonial period archaeology."13

Stanley South was at Town Creek Indian Mound at Mount Gilead when the new job reared its head. "When I got there, it was still pretty rough," Dr. South reminisced, in 1996. "We killed 23 copperheads the first year. Dr. Lee was very conscientious and restrained. He knew he was not a professional archeologist. He located many of the

11 Lee Collection, Lower Cape Fear Historical Society.

12 Lee, Lawrence. "Archaeology and History.”
13 1996 interviews.
foundations and marked them carefully, but stopped short at doing the digging.”

Soon after returning to Charleston, in the fall of 1958, Lawrence Lee’s attention was diverted again to North Carolina. An archeological mystery drew him to Greensboro to investigate the location of the David Caldwell Log College, a project for which Governor Luther Hodges would award him the 1960 Cannon Cup. The site had been donated to the North Carolina Society for the Preservation of Antiquities. Tradition was the only thing that tied the land to the Rev. David Caldwell, a minister, teacher and doctor of medicine who lived to be 99. Buffy Stevenson Ives, Adlai Stevenson’s sister, was aware of Lawrence Lee’s work at Brunswick Town and wrote to him in Charleston requesting his aid. In December 1958, Lee, Jim McClamroch and Mr. Fry examined the site. They found little except a few stones and a natural spring.

Lee interviewed an 87 year old woman, Mrs. Mary Hancock Hanner, who proved to be a valuable source of accumulated local oral history. Then, turning to the printed word, Lee dug for historical documentation while Jim McClamroch and Mrs. Wilbur Roberts of Salisbury searched area deeds. Finally, it was determined that David Caldwell had probably owned the property. After studying the facts and tales, Lee concluded that the property had indeed been owned by David Caldwell and contained a smoke house, an outdoor oven, probably a separate school and other buildings. Lee recommended exhaustive research and a thorough excavation of the property, but he himself returned to Charleston, to teach, to learn and to check out another ruin.

By the summer of 1959, Lawrence Lee was involved in a second Brunswick Town-type project. Just south of Charleston, he “rediscovered,” procured and did the groundwork for Fort Dorchester, the ruin of a New England style village on the upper Ashley River. This time, his labor force was primarily made up of young cadets he taught at the Citadel, but their professor, now undeniably in middle age, kept up the pace. Col. Charles Clifton Martin, a Citadel colleague remarked on Lee’s astonishing physical capacity. “I am a former weight lifter,” said Col. Martin in 1997. “I was always much larger than Larry. However, I went out to Fort Dorchester with him one day and became exhausted simply watching him work. He dug there in the hot sun for two or three hours without stopping. It didn’t bother him at all.”

Dr. Lee was pleased when the Raleigh News and Observer published an article on his work at Dorchester, on February 22, 1959, but his pleasure was short lived as hundreds of visitors and collectors descended upon the ruin, picking and digging through the brush. On March 8, 1959, the Charleston News and Courier ran their own story on the Congregational settlement and the gentleman scholar.

“A quiet, somewhat reserved college professor leaned forward yesterday. As he did, a cautious

Lawrence Lee spearheaded the excavation of Fort Dorchester, in 1959, and was surprised by the steady stream of publicity it generated. “I didn’t see your name in the paper today,” said one of his Charleston neighbors, “so I thought I should inquire about your welfare.”

(Photograph courtesy of the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism.)

14 Interview with Stanley South, by Susan Block. November 9, 1996.


smile broke on his face. ‘So much has happened in the past ten days that it’s difficult to believe. We’ve got to educate the public and until then we can’t do the first bit of clearing. Some person could go in there and unintentionally destroy a whole month’s work. This business of archaeology is meticulous, time consuming work. If you do it right, you don’t go in there with shovels. Rather, you uncover with hand trowels each spade of dirt and each artifact you find, you brush it off with a fine brush.’”

He prevailed and persevered and today, Fort Dorchester is operated as an impressive 325-acre South Carolina state park. The attractions include a circa 1757 tabby fort, the tower of St. George’s Parish Church, and a small outdoor kiosk that highlights the history of Dorchester. A plaque reads: “June 20, 1969 - The people of South Carolina received as an outright gift from Westvaco Corporation... the deed to 76 acres of land which encompasses the site of the town of Dorchester, established 1696...”

In 1962, Lawrence Lee and Stanley South had one more mutual archaeological investigation. “I got a call from Lawrence Lee,” said Stanley South. “He had seen something on the campus of the Citadel which intrigued him. Would I come down and check it out. I went to Charleston and sure enough, the ridge of bricks he had spotted was the foundation wall of a building that I dated 1690-1720.” Indian Hill, believed by some to have first been a Native American burying ground, was located near the mess hall and in the midst of an obstacle course. It yielded brick foundations, pipes, pottery, the neck of a rum bottle and a pewter spoon.

Though rare in later years, his speeches were popular in southeastern North Carolina, where his books are standards in home libraries and in tatters in public ones. His red hair had long since turned to a mane of white and he looked the part of a distinguished professor emeritus. He dressed impeccably and spoke in a silvery voice, enunciating in the mellow and increasingly rare style of the old South. Throughout his life, he retained a taut, almost military posture and a lightning quick wit.

In 1988, Dr. Lee was awarded the Society Cup by the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society for a lifetime of achievements. On July 1, 1989, he gave his last speech, the keynote address on the occasion of Wilmington’s 250th Anniversary. A widower since 1987, he moved back to his beloved hometown a few years before his death. “I have always considered myself a North Carolinian by birth - and a Wilmingtonian by the grace of God,” he said. In the last year of his life, surrounded by his books, papers and family memorabilia, he dictated his memoirs and assisted in editing them.

He died peacefully, on October 18, 1996, at the age of 84, leaving Wilmington one more great character short. On October 22, 1996, Lawrence Lee’s funeral was conducted at St. Mary Catholic Church - 30,957 days after his baptism there on January 20, 1912. He was buried at Oakdale Cemetery. However, his words and actions go on in the books he wrote and the projects he conceived and propelled.

In many ways he defied definition, but as for archeology, his first history love, Stanley South described his legacy well: “Lawrence Lee was an intensely focused historian, but also a dreamer. He dreamed of developing sites that would give the public a clearer view of history. I admired Dr. Lee very much. I especially admired his recognition of the role archaeology plays in the knowledge of our heritage. Not all distinguished scholars recognize how important excavation is to knowledge. He helped to create living history.”

18 Interview with Stanley South by Susan Block, November 9, 1996.
19 1996 interviews.
20 Stanley South interview.
In later years, Lawrence Lee occasionally reminisced about his youth: the Saturday he spent eight straight hours at the Bijou; the time his mother discovered his father had burned Major Reilly's Civil War uniform; the day his brother, Henry, was born. "Dr. Graham came walking out of mother's bedroom with a satchel in his hand. I was three years old and thought he was taking my baby brother away. I wouldn't let him leave the house."

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Recapitulation
By J. Rush Beeler

Lawrence Lee was one of the founders of the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society in 1957, and a faithful member for the rest of his life. At General Meetings he frequently lectured on his specialty - the history of Wilmington and the Lower Cape Fear. Upon retirement from his professorship at the Citadel, he donated to the society his research library of a thousand volumes on the history of North and South Carolina, along with maps and illustrative prints. His final contribution was made after his death by his sons, Lawrence Borden and James Reilly. This important collection was accompanied by his voluminous notes on pirates, a subject that had interested him since childhood.
Here, Mary Borden and Lawrence Lee tour Seville, in 1969. World travelers, the couple spent a portion of most summers abroad. All total, they spent two years in London where Dr. Lee researched colonial Cape Fear from the British perspective. (Lee Collection)