FROM SALTMARSH TO SUBURB:
THE DEVELOPMENT OF HARBOR ISLAND,
NEW HANOVER COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

By
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The growth of Harbor Island from a swampy marsh into valuable real estate in the 1920s resulted from businesses developing the region in response to an increased desire for middle-class luxury and beach recreation. The building of technological advancements such as the Wilmington Sea Coast Railroad and the Wilmington-Wrightsville Beach Causeway laid the groundwork for expansion. As a result, the landscape of the Shore Acres community expressed the values of the individuals for whom it was developed.

THE HAMMOCKS

In the mid-1800s, Harbor Island, originally known as either the Hammocks or the Hummocks, was a weekend or summer getaway for recreational fisherman who accessed the area by boat and erected tents and shanties. The island consisted of sand and dunes, surrounded by marsh and Wrightsville Sound on the north and southwest, and Banks Channel on the east. The name “Hummocks” refers to a wooded land higher than a nearby marsh. There is speculation that the name also refers to sleeping arrangements of the early squatters who fished in the area. Hammocks were convenient to carry and easily positioned between tent posts or the live oaks on the island. As early as 1888, B. P. Manning wrote to the editor of The Wilmington Messenger to complain that the correct name for the area, and the derivation of that name, was unclear.

In the nineteenth century, John Rutherford, J. Smith, and J.A. Smith owned the Hammocks. Rutherford owned the southern section, J. Smith, the center area, and J.A. Smith its northern end. No changes, however, were made to the island until 1876. At that time, a tree-lined road composed of crushed shells, near present day Wrightsville Avenue, allowed travelers in horse-drawn carts to journey from Wilmington to the Sound. In 1887, a group of Wilmington businessmen laid the groundwork for an eight-mile railroad from the city to the sea and they established the Wilmington Sea Coast Railroad. Its first rails were laid on April 7, 1888 and it began operating by June 16 of that year. The steam railroad extended to the island via a trestle over the sound and then over Banks Channel to Wrightsville Beach. The trestle allowed the train and its passengers to...
travel over the water but did not accommodate either pedestrians or carriages. The railroad company also erected a grand Victorian hotel on the far eastern edge of the Hammocks along Banks Channel. This edifice was dubbed the Island View Hotel because it looked across at the barrier island of Wrightsville Beach. The town of Wrightsville Beach became an incorporated entity in 1895.

In 1907, Hugh MacRae, a businessman who has been described as "Wilmington's Most Constructive Citizen," brought together a number of local firms, including the Wilmington Sea Coast Railroad, to form the Tide Water Power Company. Under MacRae's leadership the Power Company electrified the rail service to Wrightsville Beach. MacRae was also active in developing land surrounding Wilmington, including Wrightsville Beach, Castle Hayne, and the area around the present-day Oleander Drive.

In 1916, MacRae's Tide Water Power Company began to implement plans to improve the Hammocks as a resort community and thus raise its value. They dredged sand from the surrounding area to create solid ground, planning to fill as much as 500 acres of marsh land. One facet of their plan called for construction of an auditorium on the site that had previously held the Island View Hotel. The Auditorium, which was meant to hold both religious gatherings and secular conventions, was designed by Wilmington architect Henry E. Bonitz, whose other notable buildings included the Consolidated Market and Fire Engine House No. 3 on Wilmington's North Fourth Street and the First Baptist Church in Rocky Mount. Bonitz and Frank Mead, the construction engineer for the Tide Water Power Company, designed the Auditorium after having examined similar buildings at seaside resorts including Atlantic City and Ocean Grove, New Jersey. Bonitz outfitted the Auditorium with a stage to accommodate large choruses, orchestras, and theatrical productions. The building also possessed state-of-

Image 2: Building the Wrightsville Beach Causeway to the Hammocks. Courtesy of the Fales Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, NC.
the-art heating equipment enabling the facility to operate year-round. The Auditorium was the first major twentieth-century commercial building constructed on Harbor Island and ushered in further growth of recreational and residential development. By 1934, with business waning, the Auditorium was converted to a “talking picture house” before being demolished in 1936.11

DEVELOPMENT

Prior to 1925, the ten acres of Harbor Island experienced limited development. A one-story combination grocery store and service station, and the Harbor Island Auditorium were the only permanent structures on the island. The Auditorium was mainly utilized as a place to host large meetings or conventions. These small developments set the stage for entrepreneurs to capitalize on the financial boom years of the 1920s and create a landscape that met changing middle-class expectations.12

Abram E. Fitkin, a New York financier and philanthropist, gained a controlling interest in the Tide Water Power Company on February 25, 1922.13 Under Fitkin’s administration, the company advanced the development of the island by building a causeway from Wrightsville Sound to the Hammock so that access would not be limited to rail traffic. Fitkin, a native of Brooklyn, New York, gave up a career as a preacher in the Church of the Nazarene to work with securities on Wall Street, ultimately making a fortune estimated at $250 million.14 His wife, Susan Norris Fitkin, was a significant force for missionary outreach within the Association of Pentecostal Churches of America.15

With his acquisition of the Tide Water Power Company, Fitkin received Harbor Island and created the Shore Acres Company.16 He began building on the marshland by 1925 thus creating Harbor Island’s first residential community. Fitkin’s development of Harbor Island capitalized on the great growth in private ownership of automobiles which took place during the economically booming 1920s. With Fitkin’s activities, residents of shanties or makeshift lodges were informed that they had to remove their structures by October 1 of 1925.17

In 1926, at Fitkin’s behest, the Calkins Dredging Company of Norfolk, Virginia erected the Wilmington-Wrightsville Beach Causeway over the sound, allowing access to privately owned vehicles and thus assisting in the development of Harbor Island. At the time, one commentator noted that the new road “gives promise of increasing (property) valuation by hundreds of thousands of dollars.”18 John Leland Becton, a native of Wayne County, North Carolina, with degrees from North Carolina State College, worked on the causeway’s construction as the resident engineer in charge.19 The completed causeway, constructed from dredged material,
was eighteen feet wide and covered with gravel. Luxuries such as thousands of free parking spaces and avenues adorned with electric lights ran parallel and just south of the railroad trestle to the Hammocks. The Wrightsville Sound Causeway, totaling $138,000, was the most expensive road project in the state at the time. After parking their vehicles, motorists used a walkway in order to travel from Harbor Island to Wrightsville Beach.

In order to create more than 350 building sites, the Calkins Dredging Company placed 350,000 cubic yards of soil on Harbor Island at a cost of $400,000. The Shore Acres Company constructed strong, wooden retaining walls along the east, west, and south sides of the island near Grainger’s Creek (Mott’s Channel). In November of 1925, bulldozers began leveling sand dunes on the northern part of the island, then civil engineers mapped out streets, drives and sidewalks.

**SHORE ACRES**

In 1927, Fitkin sold the Shore Acres Company to Oliver T. Wallace, a real estate operator, and Richard L. Player, a businessman. The cost was $400,000 and included approximately 70 acres. Wallace later advertised himself as the president of the Shore Acres Company, while Player assumed the role of secretary-treasurer.

The *Wilmington Morning Star* advertised in 1928 that the new Shore Acres development had been built with the “highest quality” materials and offered “high-pressure water,” gas, electricity, concrete sidewalks and streets. Advertisements utilized the Shore Acres slogan, “A New Home at The Edge of The Old.” Also, Shore Acres was described as both the “Ideal Summer Colony” and a “Winter Haven” in the same announcement. The promotions sought to encourage year-round residency.

The Shore Acres development included what is currently Live Oak Drive, Lindy Lane, South Channel Drive, Cypress Avenue, and Island Drive.

The company built a model house, in a Mediterranean-revival Spanish style, on Live Oak Drive. The design of this building was part of an architectural movement in New Hanover County at the end of the 1920s which created a new tropical identity for the community distinct from its earlier Victorian or post-bellum incarnation.

The model house harmonized with the design of the new Babies Hospital that was simultaneously being erected at the base of the causeway on the mainland to designs by Charles C. Hartman, of Greensboro, North Carolina. Similarly, at approximately the same time, the Wilmington architectural firm of Lynch and Foard designed a Spanish colonial fire station for the City of Wilmington. This building was completed at the corner of Wrightsville Avenue and South 17th Street in 1931.

Encased in stucco, the Shore Acres model home included three bedrooms, a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, tiled baths, built-in showers, hardwood floors, front and back porches, and a garden. The Wilmington Furniture Company furnished the house.

The model home was featured along with thirty available lots during the Shore Acres Auction on July 2, 1928. Lots were sold at prices ranging from $1,600 to $3,000. Purchasers were enticed with offers of a free annual family pass over the causeway. At the end of the auction, fifteen lots had been purchased by B.B. Cameron; Fred Albert Matthes; Walker Taylor, Jr.; William Struthers, Jr.; J. O. Hinton; Mrs. John Snyder; John Leland Becton; Horace Pearsall; Clayton Giles; H. Lacy Hunt; E.T. Taylor; John R. Hanby; Herbert Bluenthenthal and Wayne Alexander Fonvielle.

This group included a number of Wilmington’s...
prominent young men of business and enterprise, many of them scions of prominent Wilmington families. Fred Albert Mathes, who had elevated himself through various industrial positions, came to Wilmington in 1922 to serve as the Executive Vice President of the Tide Water Power Company. Walker Taylor, Jr., a graduate of Princeton University, worked in the insurance business of his father, Colonel Walker Taylor, who for decades had been a bulwark of Wilmington's social and economic structures. John Leland Becton, a consulting engineer, worked on road construction and land reclamation, including projects related to Harbor Island. Horace Pearsall, the son of Oscar Pearsall, served as secretary of Pearsall & Company, Inc., a firm of wholesale merchants founded by his father. E. T. Taylor was president of the Carolina Building and Loan Association. Herbert Bluthenthal led the Bluthenthal Dry Goods Company and served as president of Wilmington's Temple Israel. Wayne Alexander Fonvielle, a graduate of Elon College, was President of the Moore-Fonvielle Realty Company and the Moore Insurance Company. Mr. and Mrs. Rye B. Page, Sr., who owned and published the Wilmington Morning Star-News, acquired the Shore Acres model home. Playing upon the building's architectural style, the Pages named their house “Villa Marguerita” in honor of their daughter, Marguerite Page.

These individuals did not plan to live in Shore Acres throughout the year. The lots, although located only eight miles from downtown Wilmington, were conceived primarily as locations for summer or vacation homes. In keeping with its identity as a resort, Harbor Island featured a hotel as well as private homes. Erected by Oliver T. Wallace, the President of the Shore Acres Company, the hotel was made of brick and opened in 1928 shortly after the auction. As part of the hotel's promotion, Wallace sponsored a contest to name the new hotel. Mr. A. Fred DeVere won the contest with the name “Harbor Inn.” As the winner, DeVere received a cash prize of five dollars. Wallace then leased the property to Tom and Frank Shepard who marketed it as an upper-class resort hotel.

Shore Acres' development of the island also included the concept of a private club. In April of 1929, the firm published a rendering of an elevated tropical clubhouse surrounded by porches designed by the local firm of Lynch & Foard. The Harbor Island Club was chartered in the summer of 1929. Members of the club included W.P. Sprunt, James Laurence Sprunt, Roger Moore, and George Kidder. The group promoted indoor and outdoor social activity among members and guests. The Harbor Island Club, Inc. purchased lots 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 of Shore Acres Development for $499.20 in October of that year. In 1931, the Harbor Island Club borrowed $6,000 from the Peoples Savings Bank and Trust Company. As a result of the loan going into default during the Great Depression, the Club went up for auction on September 9, 1940 and was purchased by Roger Moore, one of the club's organizers, for $5,000. Moore sold it to the Salvation Army in 1941 to be used as a United Service Organization (USO) Club to provide recreational facilities to the military during the Second World War.

On August 27, 1947 John S. and Beatrice Y. Adams purchased the former club and held it for several years. Adams utilized the building as a youth center of the North Carolina Methodist Church. Trustees of the Wilmington Methodist Church sold the property in 1955.
to J. Harris and Ollie H. Ligon who renamed it the “Harris Ligon Homeplace.” Mr. and Mrs. Ligon owned the property until 1995 when they sold it to Terry F. Turner and Robert S. Bridgers, Jr.\textsuperscript{46}

A casino, or public hall for music and dancing, was also located on Harbor Island. The Harbor Island Casino opened in 1932 and overlooked the Banks Channel. It included a dance floor 108 feet long and 64 feet wide.\textsuperscript{47} The presence of the Casino along with the Auditorium encouraged recreational activities for both residents of Shore Acres and visitors.

After a fire in 1934 on Wrightsville Beach, improved bridges were built between Harbor Island and Wrightsville Beach.\textsuperscript{48} The Tide Water Power Company divested itself of its rights of way, transportation, and interest in Harbor Island for $35,000.\textsuperscript{49} By 1939, the old street railway tracks were torn up, and the automobile age fully engaged both Harbor Island and Wrightsville Beach.\textsuperscript{50}

During World War II, Harbor Island experienced a growth spurt with the appearance of more small, one-story homes. Two churches were added to Harbor Island in the 1950s, one Methodist church and one Baptist church. Additionally, an elementary school was built.\textsuperscript{51} In 1965, the town of Wrightsville Beach annexed Harbor Island.\textsuperscript{52} The commercial and residential development of Harbor Island resulted from a cultural shift in middle-class culture and leisure activities. The creation of improved transportation such as the Wilmington Sea Coast Railroad and the Wrightsville Beach Causeway led to opportunities for development like the Shore Acres community. Harbor Island’s development highlights an early twentieth-century shift toward luxury and recreation within American culture. Today, this imprint on the cultural landscape is rapidly disappearing under new development.

Image 10: Design of the Harbor Island Club by the Wilmington architectural firm of Lynch & Foard. Published in The Wilmington Star on April 28, 1929.

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The Public History Program at the University of North Carolina Wilmington introduces undergraduates to the practice of history outside of traditional classrooms and prepares graduate students for positions in museums, historic sites and historic preservation.

Since the 1980s, the program has provided a vital link between UNC Wilmington and the Cape Fear region’s wide variety of institutions that preserve and communicate history to the public. Graduates of the program work for the State’s Department of Archives and History, at county-run institutions and for private historical non-profits. To learn more about UNC Wilmington’s public history program, please contact Dr. William D. Moore at moorewd@uncw.edu.
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22 "New Road on Harbor Island Open Today," Wilmington Star (April 28, 1929).


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34 Fisher, 63.

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36 Fisher, 161-163.

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43 For James Laurence Sprunt, see Fisher, 52.


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49 Johnson, 4.

50 New Hanover County Planning Department, 51.

51 Johnson, 4.

52 Johnson, 5.
Harbor Island circa 1928 showing improvements made by the Shore Acres Company. Note the developers’ model house behind the tree in the center and the automobile in the distance on the right. The new popularity of automobiles in the 1920s made possible the development of Harbor Island. Louis T. Moore Collection - Lower Cape Fear Historical Society.