The greater Wilmington area contained vast amounts of local wood but the re- gion never developed as a place for ship construction. Wilmington merchants generally relied on shipping companies based in northern cities be- cause buying there was cheaper than constructing their own ships. One of the first sailing ships of nota- ble size that was built in Wilmington was the 316 ton oak-built Eliza and Swann, built in 1833 by John McIl- henny at his sawmill. McIlhenny’s next and last in- volvement in ship construction was through a contract from the federal government simply to pro- vide the timber for the USS Pennsylvania.

The first successful shipwright business on Eagles Island was the Beery Shipyard (initially known as Commercial Mill and Shipyard), founded on June 20, 1848 by Samuel Beery. The shipyard was supported by a blacksmith shop, log cabin, a workshop, and an engine house, all owned by the Beery family. Two of the earliest ships produced at the yard were the 250-ton brig John Dawson in 1849 and the 100-ton schooner Eliza the following year. At the outbreak of the Civil War, the shipyard was renamed The Confed- erate Naval Yard by the new owner, Captain Benja- min Beery, and promised to produce ships for the Confederacy. The first ship built during the war was the privateer The Mariner for Captain Beery’s personal command. The ship was a converted steam tug, armed with one 24 lb, forward-mounted gun and two 9 lb. guns, the original voyager of the Merchant yielded one confirmed prize and a possible second. Captained by Joseph Price, the next assignment for The Mariner was to serve as a guard boat on the

Sources

4. Sprunt, Tales and Traditions, 139-143.
production of one of the two Wilmington shipyards. Several newspaper sources claim that the submarine was built on Eagles Island but very few records of its construction or service life exist. In late December of 1863, Robert Dunn, one of the engineers on the Hunley, went to Wilmington to provide his expertise on the construction of a “torpedo boat,” a term used at the time interchangeably with submarine. Sources focus on the towing portion of the business instead of the construction or service life exist. In late December of 1863, Robert Dunn, one of the engineers on the Hunley, went to Wilmington to provide his expertise on the construction of a “torpedo boat,” a term used at the time interchangeably with submarine. Sources focus on the towing portion of the business instead of

The Cape Fear Towing Company after 1999, and the company presently operates under the name Moran of Wilmington. The company reorganized into the Tidewater Power Company, and by 1925 brought electricity to all of southeastern North Carolina. In 1934, the Grainger family sold three acres of land on Eagles Island (a fraction of what they owned to the Tidewater Power Company to build a power substation. In 1952, Carolina Power and Light (now Progress Energy) bought Tidewater and to this day owns the Eagles Island substation. Despite the decades of naval stores, rice plantations, and maritime trade history on Eagles Island, the Battleship North Carolina is a famous attraction in itself that draws tourists to the island from across the country. Beginning in 1961, the state of North Carolina purchased land opposite Wilmington, north of the old ferry depot, and dredged out a permanent cove for the World War II battleship USS North Carolina. The purpose of the North Carolina is to serve as a naval war memorial for the State’s World War II veterans, to educate visitors through a series of special programs. There have been numerous efforts by local politicians and developers to utilize Eagles Island for other purposes throughout the latter half of 20th century. The location is ideal for development because of the proximity to Wilmington and the scenic beauty provided by the Cape Fear and Brunswick Rivers, but the marshy environment has long stymied such efforts. In 1948, then county commissioner Mike Vaughan proposed running a cable car from downtown Wilmington to a proposed running a cable car from downtown Wilmington to a proposed running a cable car from downtown Wilmington to Eagles Island into the everyday lives of both the residents and visitors of Wilmington.

Conclusion

The Civil War saw Wilmington and Eagles Island transition from primarily a naval stores hub “to a fortified entrepôt for goods of all descriptions entering the Confederacy,” meaning that by 1860, the city became an established free trade zone serving as a transshipment point for a diverse assortment of commodities. This trend continued after the war, as evidenced by the increased importance of cotton, fertilizers, and petroleum in Wilmington’s maritime trade. Wholesale merchant warehouses cluttered the land directly across from Wilmington but slowly faded after 1915. The land beyond the west bank of the Cape Fear was used principally for cultivating rice, but this ended shortly after 1900 due to various labor, environmental, and market problems. The land south of the railroad tracks and north of the river access, outdoor theaters, education about the area and possibly food and art venues. While these plans have yet to exceed the planning phase, these ideas demonstrate the desire to incorporate Eagles Island into the everyday lives of both the residents and visitors of Wilmington.

The plan was ultimately rejected by the New Hanover County Planning Board for four reasons: the land is within the limits of the 100 year flood plain, zoning restrictions only allow 2.5 units per acre of land, insufficient water and sewage lines exist in the proposed area, and only 7 of the available 16 acres are suitable for development. In 2008, Eagles Island was nominaled in a newspaper editorial as a rival site for the vacant lot north of the downtown Hilton for the city’s new convention center. The article’s author argued that the island would be an ideal site because it would expound the Cape Fear River as the focus of Wilmington, but acknowledged that difficulties would arise from insufficient sewer and electrical lines on the island. Currently, the groups forming the Eagles Island Coalition plan to develop the island into an area for eco-tourism. This includes amenities such as walkways, river access, outdoor theaters, education about the area and possibly food and art venues. While these plans have yet to exceed the planning phase, these ideas demonstrate the desire to incorporate Eagles Island into the everyday lives of both the residents and visitors of Wilmington.

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Map of current Eagles Island land owners. North Carolina. In 1934, the Grainger family sold three acres of land on Eagles Island (a fraction of what they owned to the Tidewater Power Company to build a power substation. In 1952, Carolina Power and Light (now Progress Energy) bought Tidewater and to this day owns the Eagles Island substation. Despite the decades of naval stores, rice plantations, and maritime trade history on Eagles Island, the Battleship North Carolina is a famous attraction in itself that draws tourists to the island from across the country. Beginning in 1961, the state of North Carolina purchased land opposite Wilmington, north of the old ferry depot, and dredged out a permanent cove for the World War II battleship USS North Carolina. The purpose of the North Carolina is to serve as a naval war memorial for the State’s World War II veterans, to educate visitors through a series of special programs. There have been numerous efforts by local politicians and developers to utilize Eagles Island for other purposes throughout the latter half of 20th century. The location is ideal for development because of the proximity to Wilmington and the scenic beauty provided by the Cape Fear and Brunswick Rivers, but the marshy environment has long stymied such efforts. In 1948, then county commissioner Mike Vaughan proposed running a cable car from downtown Wilmington to a proposed running a cable car from downtown Wilmington to Eagles Island into the everyday lives of both the residents and visitors of Wilmington.

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