

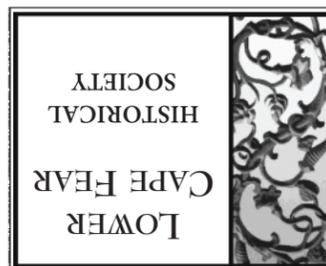
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Current Resident Or:

126 South Third Street
Wilmington, NC 28401




The Bulletin

A PUBLICATION OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF THE LOWER CAPE FEAR

Volume LVI • No 1 Wilmington, North Carolina May 2012

CAPTAIN JOHN WILLIAM HARPER: 1856-1917

By Catherine Harper Russell Stribling

Editorial Comment. This is not an ordinary Bulletin. It is not a detailed scholarly-researched lecture, but a family memoir/memory and story of a man who made important contributions to this area. His development of the area and great leaps in transportation changed the face of the Lower Cape Fear. His numerous family members – including grand-daughter Catherine Stribling - are still contributing and highly valued members of our society.

The first English settlement in Carolina dates to 1663 when King Charles II of England granted a charter denoting territory in the colony to eight English noblemen, naming them Lords Proprietors. The first settlers obtained title by going through a cumbersome process of making a request to the Royal Governor and Council, who then issued a plat of land which allowed the immigrants "head rights" that gave each family member 100 acres.

The Dobbs County 1790 census (now Lenoir County) listed William Harper. ¹ His son, William Riley Harper was born March 3, 1816 in Snow Hill, North Carolina, a town that got its name from the abundance of blooming dogwoods that covered the land during the spring. ²

In May of 1854, William Riley Harper and his wife Henrietta Lloyd purchased 250 acres for \$800 on Greenville Sound with money his father had given him. ³ There the Harpers built a house and started a dairy farm. Their youngest son, Johnny, may have fished and watched the occasional squadron of pelicans fly over. He dreamed of going to sea to follow his older brother James who had moved to Smithville (now Southport), where the Cape Fear River met the Atlantic Ocean.

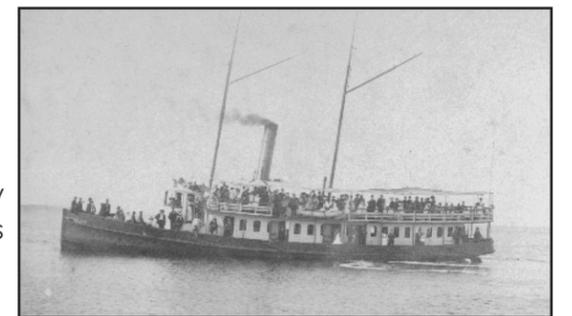
James Harper had purchased a small steamboat and made daily round trips from Smithville to Wilmington. ⁴ He built a thriving business carrying mail and assorted cargo, as well as an occasional passenger from nearby Fort Caswell, a permanent military installation there since 1826.



John Harper first served as captain on the steamer "Passport", pictured below.

Johnny had an inquiring mind and was a voracious reader,

so his father sent him to Miss Amy Bradley's school in Wilmington. He rode the milk truck in for several years. ⁵ One of his friends was a tall, shy young man called Tom who was preparing for studies at Princeton University, where his father, the minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, was to send him for his formal education. ⁶ Tom, whose full name was Thomas Woodrow Wilson, later became President of the United States.



The steamer "Passport", photographed c. 1900.

At age 16 John went to sea as a deckhand for his brother James, who was captain of the government steamer *Eastern*. He quickly learned from the experienced sailors who manned James's ship and after three years, got his master's papers and became captain of the passenger and freight steamer *Passport* in 1875. In 1881 John married Julia Foley, daughter of Captain R. F. Foley of Southport.⁷ They bought a house in Southport and became parents of three children: Louise, Fred and John Jr.

In 1883 John and his brother James formed the Harper Brothers Steamship Company, and ran routes between Southport, Fort Caswell and Wilmington, with an occasional trip to the massive breakwater dam that was built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers between 1875 and 1881.⁸ Captain John Harper called it "The Rocks" because it was constructed of large rocks wide enough for walking along the top. Fort Caswell was a major military installation on the southeastern Atlantic coast, and Harper Brothers received a contract from the U. S. Government to service the Fort and dredge the Bald Head Island channel. This brought business from other sources.

The Harper Brothers were quite successful in their joint ventures. In 1883, with a group of other businessmen, they founded a newspaper: the *Messenger*, in Southport.⁹ An advertisement in the *Messenger* August 14, 1883 read, "Moonlight Excursion! Steamer *Passport* to Federal Point, Tuesday the 14th. Music and dancing. Sheepshead supper at Mayo's, fare for round trip 50 cents. One hour at Federal Point. John W. Harper, Manager."

In 1888 Harper Brothers bought the *Sylvan Grove*, a double side-wheel craft with a wooden hull. In 1890 while moored at



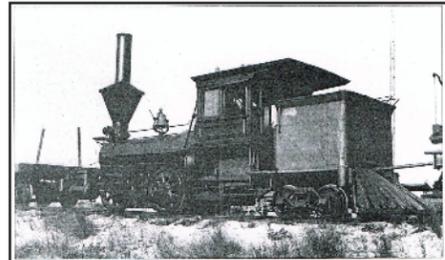
A postcard of the steamer "Wilmington".¹⁰

the dock in Wilmington, the *Sylvan Grove* burned to the water line, and the next year they went to Philadelphia for a replacement. The one they chose, the *Wilmington*, had served as an excursion boat between Philadelphia and Wilmington, Delaware.¹¹ The new and beautiful white steamer arrived at her wharf in Wilmington, North Carolina at ten o'clock in the morning of April 28, 1891, to the cheers of residents, and be-

gan her daily run to Southport. It was a capital occasion for the Harper Brothers Steamship Company.

Carrying passengers between Wilmington and Southport in the 1880s, Captain Harper would pass by the undeveloped pristine white sand area that was the future Carolina Beach. The land was mostly forest and sandy barrens, and very difficult to access. Harper saw the potential in developing it when he began taking sightseers to view the recently completed New Inlet Dam at Fort Fisher. Captain Harper envisioned a transportation system to allow public access to the lovely seashore, so he purchased extensive holdings of land to build a pavilion and bathhouses there. The plan was for beach visitors to travel from downtown Wilmington by steamer along the Cape Fear River to a point downriver near the ocean. From there they would travel two miles by train to a pavilion at the beach.

In 1886 Harper and his partners formed the New Hanover Transit Company. They constructed a pier and waiting room near Sugarloaf on the Cape Fear River, built a railway and bought a small train that was called the *Shoo Fly* to take its passengers to the beach. He also bought a 60-foot right-of-way running from the river to the head of Myrtle Grove Sound for the hefty amount of one dollar.



This engine was already an antique when Harper purchased it to pull the "Shoo Fly" train at Carolina Beach.

Visiting Carolina Beach, as the area was named, became so popular that many people sought to build summer cottages there. To eliminate the high cost, the Transit Company bought timberland, installed a saw mill and took building materials for free on the steamboats.

The Transit Company eventually owned the Oceanic Hotel, the first hotel on Carolina Beach, built in 1887, and the Carolina Beach Pavilion. With round trip fares from Wilmington costing only twenty-five cents, beach-goers could finally enjoy a beautiful spot on the ocean. With two trips daily, Captain Harper often took hundreds of visitors to the beach every day.

James Walker Memorial Hospital.

Captain Harper had been in poor health for the past several months and for several years his friends began to take notice that he was not enjoying the usual splendid, robust physique that had made him such a commanding figure on the river for so great a number of years. However Captain Harper stuck manfully to the command of his splendid Cape Fear steamer *Wilmington*, never missing a trip to or from *Wilmington* and lingering always at the dock after each trip to see that every individual passenger had been landed safely and that every detail of the steamer's business had been attended to with satisfaction to everybody. It was only his indomitable will power and his great solicitude for the interest and welfare of others that kept him actively at the helm of his steamer so long.

During the past summer, upon the advice of his physicians, Captain Harper went for a time to a sanitarium near Richmond, Va., where it was hoped that the rest and expert care received there would result in his restoration to health. While he was improved for a time, a complication of diseases had so weakened his constitution generally that it was seen that the improvement was only temporary and on Friday of last week it became necessary for him to go to the James Walker Memorial Hospital for an operation which did not result so favorably as expected.

He succumbed to a general breaking down, the end having come early yesterday morning. The funeral was held at his home at 311 South Front Street with last rites at the family plot in Oakdale Cemetery attended by hundreds of sorrowing friends, persons who have known and loved Captain Harper for years, with whom he had been associated in business, and persons who had enjoyed scores of trips down the Cape

Fear on the steamer that he had owned and other steamers under his command at the time of his death.¹⁷

A final editorial in the *Wilmington Morning Star* on September 19, 1917 was titled "By the Wayside."

Many a person far upstate today will learn with regret of the passing of Captain John W. Harper, master of the steamer *Wilmington* that for nearly two score years has carried Tar Heel excursionists down the Cape Fear and out to sea far enough to make the landlubbers all sick. Captain Harper himself had no idea how far his zone of acquaintanceship was flung. People away up in the mountains, many probably voyaging on the *Wilmington* but a single time, know about Captain John Harper and his steamer *Wilmington*. The old State Militia that many years ago encamped in the summer at Wrightsville Beach, remember the Captain to a man, and many of them will feel especial regret at the sad news. Captain Harper and the *Wilmington* have been an institution of Statewide interest, and have been known far beyond State lines. Throughout North Carolina there will be persons today who will speak a word in tribute to the noted river captain, John William Harper.¹⁸

Author Catherine Stribling finishes her article with the comment :

"One reason Captain Harper has been so badly overlooked was that there was no one left to pursue his memory. My Grandmother took the children and moved back to Salem with her mother so the *Wilmington* contacts faded away. When my Mother moved back to Wilmington in 1924 she was a newlywed and not interested in past history. Thus I am the only family member that has shown any interest in preserving his memory for history."