LOWER CAPE FEAR HISTORICAL SOCIETY, Inc.

BULLETIN

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WILMINGTON, N. C.

MAY, 1960

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

The fourth year of the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, Inc. approaches its end and with our final meeting it has been customary to summarize the activities and accomplishments of the season.

The collection of documents and pictures has benefited by valuable additions. The items will be listed in the report of the Archivist, Mrs. Ida B. Kellam, in detail. With the great number of interesting papers which the society was allowed to copy, particularly the Galloway collection of deeds and grants and the Carter-Avoca collection, it became apparent that facilities for the society to reproduce them mechanically would have to be acquired. The board of directors has authorized the purchase of an A. B. Dick photo-copy machine which will do in minutes the work it takes an individual weeks to accomplish. Consider the use of this machine will enhance the value of our archives both in quality and quantity. The society desires the ownership of the original items but in those cases where the owners prefer to keep them in their possession or donate them to another depository our archivist now has the means to copy them with ease. We again urge the members to notify us of papers of historical significance so they may be preserved for the future.

The committee on Historic Sites under the chairmanship of Mrs. Eric Norden has done excellent work compiling information on early houses still standing in Wilmington. Of particular note has been the contribution of Miss Elizabeth McCoy who has spent many hours searching titles in the Court House. The achievements of this committee will be covered in the report of the chairman. A number of houses have been fully documented and when the list is more complete the society hopes to have the histories published.

Regarding historic sites in this area the outlook is brighter than it seemed in October when the bond issue for the Historic Sites Program was defeated, largely by the indifference of the voters. In the April 1960 issue of the “North Carolina Historical Review” is the Division of Historic Sites report which states that “The Department has funds to commence a restoration project at Fort Fisher, beginning July 1, 1960. Present plans call for the clearing of brush from the earthworks of the fort during the summer of 1960. An accurate survey of this Civil War site will be made and a definite plan established for long-range development. Since the series of centennial observances of the War Between the States will begin in 1961 and continue through part of 1965, it is highly desirable that restoration of Fort Fisher begin as soon as possible. Among the major improvements needed is an adequate museum-visitor center to house exhibits depicting the history of the fort. It is most important that such a building be provided as the project is to be developed.”

It also says that Old Brunswick Town State Historic Site during the winter months had approximately 200 visitors weekly. “Old Brunswick Town is rapidly becoming known as one of the most interesting colonial archeological sites on the eastern seaboard. When a museum is built, the large collection of colonial relics found during recent excavation can be exhibited, making the project even more attractive to tourists.”

Another historic site has been reclaimed and restored not as a museum but as a residence. It is a matter of gratification to the society when the ancient sites of river plantations so wrapped in the traditions of the Cape Fear once again come to life. The society commends Dr. George M. Kosserub and Mrs. Kosserub for their interest and imagination in acquiring “Rock Hill” on the North East River. One of the first owners of “Rock Hill” was Jehu Davis, the son of Thomas Davis and Mary Moore, daughter of George Moore of “Morefields.” His will dated and proven in 1788 (Bk. C, Pg. 80 New Hanover County Courthouse), states: “My house to be finished at Rock Hill Plantation to be left to my wife or she may choose the Mulberry Plantation on the North West River.” Of great interest at Rock Hill is the family graveyard where are buried Thomas F. Davis and Sarah Davis, the father and mother of the Hon. George Davis, Attorney General of the Confederacy. Two other grave stones of historical interest are those of Mrs. Mary Watters, wife of Captain William Watters and daughter of General James Moore of North Carolina who died in 1854, age 81 and that of Mrs. Sarah Eagles, mother of Mrs. Sarah Davis who died in 1844, age 80 years. These are two venerable old ladies whose memories went back to colonial days. Also in the cemetery are other tombstones of the Davis and Poisson family. With the many other beautiful plantation sites on the North East River it is to be hoped others will follow where the Kosserubs have led and these lovely places, which although abandoned have never lost their identity, will once again become part of the life of our section.

The board of directors has gone on record as recognizing the value of two studies and the intention to combine and reprint them if the publication can be proven practicable. The first study is Cornelius Harnett, a Revolutionary Patriot by Andrew J. Howell, Jr. published in 1896, and the second is William Hooper, Signer of the Declaration of Independence, an Address by Edwin A. Alderman at Guilford Battle Ground, July 4, 1894. A committee has been appointed to investigate the possibilities of pre-publication sale and distribution. The reprinting of these scholarly and readable studies will prove feasible, we trust.

The February meeting on “The Preservation of Historic Sites Through City Planning” was inspirational. The following day a luncheon was arranged by Mr. Leslie N. Boney, Jr., Vice-President and Chairman of the Program Committee so that the guest speaker, Mr. Werner K. Sensbach, could be presented to members of the city government and members of Committee on Urban Redevelopment. Mr. Sensbach was impressed by the large area of old residences in Wilmington and considered that its preservation could well be the vitalizing force in a program of long range city planning. The civic leaders who heard him speak were receptive to his ideas. However, it has long been known that public opinion is the force which activates their representatives in public office and if the desired results are to be achieved members of the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society must make their influence felt. Wilmington has already a commission on redevelopment and a commission for city planning although as yet no professional city planner. Only the insistent demands of Wilmington’s citizens will ensure that cultural needs will be recognized and accommodated. In the published plan for the waterfront re-
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In Memoriam

Mrs. Walker Taylor (Fannie Grainger),
April 23, 1960.

GIFTS RECEIVED SINCE FEBRUARY, 1960

The Society gratefully acknowledges gifts from Mrs. Z. K. Bell, Miss Elizabeth McKoy, Henry J. MacMillan, Mrs. Eric Norden, Mrs. Catharine J. Pierce, Mrs. Stephen Provost, Miss Mary C. Warren, Stanley South, Mrs. Allen Jones of Charleston, S. C., Mr. Hector H. Clark of Elizabethtown, N. C., and Mrs. Taft Bass of Clinton, N. C.

BOOKS


Tales of the Cape Fear Blockade bears the subtitle: Being a turn of the century account of blockade-running told by the Hon. James Sprunt, formerly purser of the Confederate States Steamer “Lilian.” The book contains an editorial map showing the lower Cape Fear and coast of Brunswick County with plantations, places, fortifications, and wrecks of blockade-runners, 1861-1865. There are also a bibliography and an index.

TOUR TO OAKLAND PLANTATION

On May 22, at 2:45 p.m., members will leave the parking lot of St. James Church. Anyone who would like a place in a car may come there at that time. The Society will meet at Carver’s Creek Church on the Elizabethtown road at 3:30, where they will be the guests of the Bladen County Historical Society.

TOUR TO OLD BRUNSWICK TOWN

On May 29, at 3:30 p.m., members may assemble at St. Phillips Church for a visit to Old Brunswick Town under the guidance of Mr. Stanley A. South. This tour is planned as an extension of the meeting of May 20.

MEETING

Time and Place: May 20, 1960, at 8 p.m., at St. Andrews-Covenant Presbyterian Church, 1416 Market Street.

Subject: The Development of Old Brunswick Town.

Speakers: Dr. E. Lawrence Lee and Mr. Stanley A. South.

Mr. South received his B. S. Degree in Education at Appalachian State Teachers College, and his M. A. in Anthropology at the University of North Carolina. For two years he was an assistant archaeologist at Town Creek Indian Mound State Historic Site in Montgomery County, and for the last fifteen months he has been an Assistant Archaeologist in the excavation of the Brunswick Town Historic Site. Both of these projects are connected with the Division of Historic Sites in the Department of Archives and History.

Dr. Lee received his B. S. in Commerce from the University of North Carolina, after which he worked outside. After service in the Army he returned to the University for both the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in History with specialization in American Colonial History and Archaeology. Since September, 1956, Dr. Lee has been a member of the History Department of The Citadel.

OLD LETTERS OF INTEREST

Mr. Henry J. MacMillan, Society President, has supplied the “Bulletin” with two letters and with the introductions to them. Both letters have been shortened in the interest of space but the material left out is of a personal nature, and the intended dramatic contrast remains.

ANTE BELLUM WEDDING

This letter is from the Atkinson Collection and was written by Mrs. Phila C. Calder to her sister, Almira. Her description of the wedding of Miss Catherine Douglass de Rosset to Mr. Gaston Meares illustrates the extravagant social life and gayety in the years preceding the War Between the States. The reception was held in the great house built by the bride’s father, Dr. A. J. de Rosset on the northeast corner of Second and Dock Streets. The house may still be seen, although in a state of delapidation.

Wilmington, May 23rd, 1856

My Dear Sister,

How incredibly fast does time fly—Kate de Rosset and Gaston Meares were married on Monday night the 15th inst. commemorating at the same time her Mother’s wedding day—it was the biggest sort of wedding that has ever taken place on this side of the Atlantic I guess. There were 6 or 7 hundred invitations issued—the wardrobe and the entertainment of the most magnificent order. As they were invited (being one of Kate’s Sunday School scholars) I accepted the invitation for the sake of gratifying her, as she had never been at a wedding, but I was apprehensive of becoming both a jelly and a jam before I got home. There were seven rooms thrown open . . . I was favored with a bird’s eye glimpse of the bride while plighting her troth. She looked very pretty, very sweet and very happy, her dress very elegant . . .

Yours fondly,

P. C. C.

WAR

Nine years later the young bride had gone through the desperately trying years of conflict. Her husband, Colonel Gaston Meares had been killed at Malvern Hill in 1862. Her six brothers and two brothers-in-law also wore the Confederate Gray and some of them never returned. This letter was presented to the Society by Mr. William Green de Rosset of Sarasota, Florida. It was written by Mrs. Meares to her parents during the occupation of Wilmington by Union troops.

Wilmington, N. C.—March 28, 1865

It seems so strange to be here, as it were, in your places and you so far away, and yet, though longing for you with such intense desire, each day we thanked God that you had decided to go. The sense of captivity, of subjugation, even temporary as it may be, is so galling that I cannot see how a manly spirit could submit to it. But so far as we are concern-

(See LETTERS on Page 4)
OAKLAND PLANTATION HOUSE

With the pleasant prospect of a pilgrimage to Oakland on May 32, it is timely to present a brief review of its place in history and to note some features of the house which visitors may expect to find particularly interesting. Oakland is a part of the original Ashwood Grant. John Baptista Ashe came from England to the Colony of North Carolina in 1720. The first records of the land concerned are thought to have been destroyed by fire, but John Baptista Ashe patented a tract of six hundred and forty acres on the northwest branch of the Cape Fear River, and on November 27, 1790, he designated this as Ashwood. This land he left to his three children, Mary, John, and Samuel.

It is not known how or when Ashwood was conveyed to William Bartram. Bartram was the son of John Bartram, a famous botanist, and was himself a world famous naturalist and traveler. He built a dwelling, long since destroyed by fire, on the western part of Ashwood, and it is likely that he lived there for a while, but he eventually returned to Pennsylvania.

Bartram's two daughters divided his North Carolina lands by deed in 1776, Ashwood becoming the property of Sarah Bartram and her husband, Thomas Brown. Within a year Sarah was dead. Evidently her sister then disputed Thomas Brown's claim to his wife's property, for in 1777 the General Assembly of North Carolina passed an "Act to quit the title of Ashwood in Thomas Brown." Some uncertainty about the title continued, however, for General Brown procured a deed from Samuel Ashe of New Hanover County so late as March 2, 1803, for the land "now possessed by Thomas Brown." In 1781, Brown, then married to Lucy Bradley, had designated a part of Ashwood as Oakland and had begun to build the house which, with some changes, remains today.

General Brown lived at Oakland until his death at sixty-seven in 1814. The property continued in the Brown family until 1901. The present owner, Mr. J. A. Neisler, acquired it in 1941.

Oakland is the only plantation house on the Lower Cape Fear River which is standing in its original form today. The approach to the house is a wide avenue bordered by holly trees, twenty-five feet high, twenty on each side. This avenue widens into an immense circular lawn, and at the rear of the house is a magnificent grove leading to a precipitous bluff, eighty-five feet of sheer cliff, above the winding river. There is a picturesque ravine to the right of the house which provides an easy decline to the boat landing below. At the head of the ravine is a spring, with brick steps leading to it and to the brick dairy beside it. To the right of the house, hidden by large magnolia trees, are the barnyard and stables, and still farther on were the Negro quarters, for General Brown had several hundred slaves.

The house itself is built of brick. It is sixty by forty feet, with broad verandas upstairs and down, running the entire length of the house and supported by seven pillars. Originally the back of the house was an exact duplicate of the front, for in fact both were fronts, one facing the river and river landing, the other the avenue and carriage approach. All outside woodwork is put together with wooden pegs.

The entrance leads into a well-proportioned hall from which a graceful staircase ascends. On the left is the drawing room with a high ceiling, five deeply embrasured windows, and a typical colonial chimney-piece. The plastering is in an incredibly perfect state of preservation, not only in this room but throughout the house. All inside woodwork, too, is fastened with wooden pegs, and these are as firm as when driven a century and a half ago. The first piano ever brought to Bladen County graced this room, and it is now in the Wallis House in Wilmington, having been given to the North Carolina Society of Colonial Dames by the late Miss Carrie Moore. The right-hand room has a large fireplace, built-in china cabinets, and a trap door leading to the kitchen below. The china pattern of Oakland was an English etching of a castle. Some pieces are still preserved by Mrs. W. L. Hill of Warsaw and other descendants.

There are three large bedrooms, each with the unusual feature of a convenient closet. Fastened across the back of each closet are fifteen wooden pegs with nos at the end to keep the garments from slipping off. Upstairs also is General Brown's study. It has windows on two sides so that both the river landing and the avenue could be seen at all times. The rich color of the flooring adds to the beauty of every room; it is all of six-inch heart pine and is mared very little by use.

Mr. J. A. Neisler began to restore Oakland immediately after he purchased it. He built the wall and gate at the entrance. He added modern conveniences to the interior. It was he who commissioned the portrait of General Brown which hangs in the drawing room. A new kitchen and dining room were added and also the large game room, for Mr. Neisler entertains many guests at Oakland during the hunting season.

Engaging as Oakland and its setting are, still more interesting to some is the man who linked its history with the stirring events of those exciting times. Thomas Brown was born in 1747, and he had many years of military and public service and was a general by the time he was thirty-four years old. He fought against the Regulators with General Waddell in 1771, attended the meeting of the Committee at Wilmington in 1776, and, as Lieutenant-Colonel for the County of Bladen, he was with his command at Moore's Creek Bridge in 1776. The most brilliant exploit with which history credits him was in the Battle of Elizabeth-town in 1781. The Patriots had been driven out of Bladen County, their homes ravaged and burned. About sixty hid in the swamps of Duplin. Starved and in rags, exasperated to madness, they decided to drive the Tories from Elizabeth-town or die. They followed Colonel Brown through fifty miles of wilderness, forded the Cape Fear River, and, at night, when the darkness of the forest made it hard to see, attacked the Tory garrison in a furious assault. After a bloody resistance, in which the Tory commander, Colonel Slingsby, was mortally wounded, the Tories were routed. Many rushed wildly over every obstacle and leaped into a deep gulley, where they met their death. This gully has ever since borne the name "Tory Hole." This encounter ended the Tory power in Bladen County, and it was after this that Colonel Brown was made a general.

Thus did Thomas Brown take his place among the leaders of the American Revolution. But history has a place for him, too, as a master builder. He built at Oakland a noble house without compromising excellence of material or design, and because of this we may see it today, a tangible part of our American heritage.
LETTERS—(Continued from Page 2)

ed, we have much to be thankful for. Our house is singularly free from intrusion... The servants all remain faithful...

If we could only hear from you and get the truth of the Army movements; but not a line has ever gladdened us since you left us, and we do so long to hear... I wish I could send you an account of the two first days of your absence; Tuesday the evacuation and Wednesday the occupation of the town by the Yankees.

Darkness and gloom covered us as a pall. Those immense fires on each side of the town were fearful. Contrary winds blew the dense black smoke of both directly toward the town, and when the heavy black clouds met in the center, it seemed as if a dark oppressive girdle (typical of our future) encompassed the town. That was Tuesday, Armand Lamar wrote you, I suppose, of my walking with him to the bridge. The Yankees pressed them so closely that by the time I got home, their pickets were all over the town and by twelve o’clock, the whole Army had entered, but everything was orderly and I heard of no act of outrage...

What did you all think of the Union meeting? Do you know I have not yet heard of a Southern man who attended it! And this mendacious paper had the audacity to publish the names of one hundred and odd. Dr. Anderson, Rev. Mr. Repiton, and ever so many others were so outraged at their names going out to the Confederate lines in such connection... We go to the Confederate hospital quite often; Paddison is in charge. There are 25 or 30 patients. We ask no permission but nobody has interfered with us. I furnish them with the beds and bedding we have on hand; plates, cups, etc. They fare well and are very comfortable and not one has yielded to their tribulations to take the oath. Cato is nearly well; a nice fellow and devoted to us. You know Mr. [the Rev. A. A.] Watson baptized him some time ago. He is a perfect blessing to us all “going about doing good.” Last Sunday he administered the Communion in our dining room to about twelve of us. It was a great privilege, for the closing of the church is the hardest to bear of all. It seems like such religious intolerance to select the Episcopal Church alone for the exercise of their tyranny. Mr. Watson is very firm. He and Dr. Corcoran, Dr. Anderson, and Mrs. Van K. are the ones who determined not to take the oath under any circumstances. Spencer Van K. is still here; quite sick with this prevailing fever—a sort of typhus or ship fever, which is carrying them off by hundreds, and of which they have a wholesome fear. The weather has been very warm for a week or ten days, which, in doubt, has increased the number of cases. But they are being sent out of town very rapidly, and the town is being so thoroughly cleansed that I hope we shall be free from pestilence this summer.

You, of course, heard of General Whiting’s death. [General Whiting was wounded at Fort Fisher, of which he was in command... We have now staying with us a Yankee surgeon, Dr. Kronleven, 169 New York Volunteers, who has had Colonel Lamb under his care. [Colonel Lamb was associated in command of Fort Fisher.] This gentleman is the first applicant whom I have consented to receive... He leaves in the morning for the Front: is to report to Terry, and kindly offers to take this for me... Without in the slightest degree compromising himself, he has extended to us so many little courtesies since he has been in the house, that we can’t help feeling a great interest in him, as well as confidence. For myself, I did not suppose so much kindly feeling could have been drawn out for one of our mortal enemies. There is a sense of protection in having an officer in the house and our friends have often urged us to receive one, but I couldn’t consent until this younger came and walked into—I was going to say—our affection as well as our house. By the way, I was expecting daily to hear of our house being confiscated, in which event we shall have to pay rent to be allowed to hold it. Poor Mary Eliza Schenck has to pay $500 for the rent of the year for Mr. Nixon’s. Cousin Corrie Green and all occupants of abandoned houses will have to do the same. Whether or not we shall escape it, as part of the family, I can’t tell.

The cotton I have succeeded in securing; it has been sold and delivered, and though I haven’t the money in hand, it is all right—some $2000 in gold. I wish Pa could give his advice as to investing, but will fall back on my own best judgment. I hope this won’t get back here as it might get me into a snarl. Nothing has been done yet about the tobacco. It is still safe. The corn has almost supported our few daily wants. Milk sells readily at 25 cents: everything is higher than when our forces were here, on the comparable basis, I mean. There are thousands of fugitive slaves in town and a vast amount of suffering among them. The roads in every direction are said to be lined with them, trying to get back to their masters....

The vacant houses are almost all used as hospitals. The Wright [Cornwallis] House and Cousin Jack’s are the principal ones. Mr. Dickinson’s was Leefeld’s headquarters, has since been captured with these horrid refugees. Mrs. Anderson was soon turned into—ah, qts. Bellamy’s is Hanley’s... Grandpa’s house, the Cutler’s, Nate’s, and some others, are Negro hospitals and all are completely mixed...

God grant us power to cope with our giant enemy. I had no idea of the vast difference between our strength before now... above all, be assured of our unswerving affection for our country, friends, and our own loved ones...

Most tenderly yours,
Kate

MESSAGE—(Continued from Page 1)

development there is a glittering motel planned for a site only a few short blocks from two downtown hotels yet no thought or provision for a cultural center, a dire necessity. In spite of the constant pleas of every educational, patriotic and cultural organization in the city to relocate and improve the county museum absolutely nothing has been done. The excuse always is lack of funds and yet the county commissioners can afford other projects which they consider necessities. When the voters of Wilmington rise up in wrath and demand with all the force of their power at the polls that the educational and cultural life of this city be provided for then and then only will the government respond.

—Henry Jay MacMillan

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WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA