Early Salt Production in the Lower Cape Fear

By ISABEL M. WILLIAMS and LEORA H. McEACHERN

From the time of the early settlements, the people of the New World never wholly relied on imported commodities. If it was at all possible, they made what they needed, and undoubtedly salt was produced in the Lower Cape Fear long before there is proof that salt works existed.

Salt was made by two methods on the Carolina coast. One was by solar evaporation which necessitated the construction of a series of shallow reservoirs with clay bottoms and often with wooden sides.

The manner of producing what is here called Sound Salt, is by means of vats constructed with boards, into one of which Salt water is brought by pumps worked with wind. Three vats constitute one sett, and the sea water under evaporation, after having deposited the dredgy and slimy parts, is timely drawn from one reservoir into another, by which process the crystalized Salt becomes of the purest quality. The grain is of the size called hominy Salt, or larger . . .

Several letters describing this method were written in 1776 while such works were being constructed:

... I have been long in possession of Browning [Brownrigg] on salt, and have made it my study for many years, and have made it my business when in Portugal to go and view their salt marshes in Lisbon . . .

One mask, or marsh must be finished first and will, including the banks, be about 240 feet long and 150

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This Salt Boiler is on the A. W. King place, Edens Landing, Topsail Sound. It probably was built by William B. Sibbory who died prior to February, 1861, to make salt for his family.
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Meeting

Time: May 5, 1972, 8:00 P.M.
Place: Kenan Auditorium
Speaker: Dr. Lawrence Lee
Subject: Archaeology and its Relation to History

Dr. Lawrence Lee, a native of Wilmington, is a member of the faculty at The Citadel in Charleston, S. C. He is an acknowledged authority on the Cape Fear section of N. C. and is the author of The Lower Cape Fear in Colonial Days, Indian Wars in North Carolina, 1663-1673, and New Hanover County, A Brief History. He started the excavation at Brunswick Town and is largely responsible for its becoming a State Historic Site. He is married to the former Mary Borden Wallace of Wilmington and they have two children. The Lower Cape Fear Historical Society welcomes Dr. Lee home.

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Membership dues are payable now for the year 1972-73 and it will save your Society money and a great deal of effort if you will pay promptly.

Gifts to Latimer House

The Society acknowledges with gratitude the generous gift of Mr. Dan D. Cameron made through Television station WECT of two thousand, five hundred dollars ($2,500.00). With this sum and the cooperation of many others the Latimer house committee hopes to complete the decoration of the parlor floor and the Victorian bedroom on the floor above. It is planned to have an opening reception for the membership early in May.

Without the discounts given by the Sherwin-Williams Company, Robert Nash Cooper, A.I.D., and the unfailing interest of Mr. David Walker, it would have been impossible to complete the work with the money available. Also we are grateful to Mr. L. H. Reynolds and Mr. Homer Ward for the wiring and installation of antique gas fixtures.

The Society is grateful to Mrs. John O. Dunn, Mrs. William A. Perdue, and Mrs. Zach A. Bacon, Jr. for a mid-nineteenth century copy of Raphael’s Madonna of the Chair and a pair of gas appliances. These came from the 1850 Kidder drawing-room at Third and Dock and are given as a memorial to Mrs. Louis T. Moore (Florence Hill Kidder).

Carved and gilded wings which will be used as a valance in the back South living room of the Headquarters house have been donated by Mr. Samuel H. Hughes.

Furnishings and objects of art of the period of 1850 or earlier are desired by the committee and the appraised value of the gift is tax-deductible.
Early Salt Production . . .

(Continued from Page 1)

feet large; then finish another as long as the season promises any advantage from additional works . . . making the first division or marsh of 18 salt beds . . . We have reason to expect that every salt marsh of 18 salt beds will make between 25 and 40 bushels a day in hot, dry weather . . .

I brought my Circumferentor and chain down . . . went and laid off ten acres and 40 ps [square poles] on Gallant’s Neck, viz: 82 Po. on front and 20 poles back. There is good clay there but does not go so deep as I could wish. However, what we may want in depth I will add in the surface of my reservoir parts, and it will exhalate the faster . . .

. . . second division of salt works is all leveled for my salt beds . . . my ground timber is all sett and scarfe’d . . . it would be necessary to finish that work and lay on water this fall, that wood and soil may get saturated with saline particles against next summer . . . laid water on the first Salt Works . . . now Brine pits and salt pits are greatly saturated, to be ushered on the salt beds gently this evening.

The salt may be preserved in conical heaps, as I have seen that done in Portugal, until it is carried away, and it will not receive any injury from the weather, although exposed to the open air for three years . . .

The second method was by boiling the sea water, either by the simple procedure of hanging an iron pot over a wood fire, or by the more sophisticated system of using cast iron rectangular pans set in a brick furnace. Often the two methods were combined in order that the brine be fairly concentrated by the time it was put on to boil. This most efficient system was fully developed by the start of the Civil War.

Early in the Revolutionary War, the leaders of the rebellious colonies recognized that a scarcity of salt might weaken the determination of the patriots to break away from British domination, and they endeavored to make arrangements for its manufacture. Extracts of the Brownrigg article were printed as cheaply as possible that they might be distributed widely, and it was not long before salt works were being constructed along the sounds of New Hanover County, though the locations and owners of many are unknown. In October, 1776, Samuel Ashe wrote from Wilmington to the North Carolina Council of Safety:

The Humor of Salt boiling seems to be taking place here. I have seen some boiled here, the cleanest & whitest of any salt (I think) I ever saw in my life—every Old Wife is now scouring her pint pot for the necessary operation. God send them good luck.

One Revolutionary veteran stated in his pension application that early in the war he went “to Wilmington . . . stayed there a few days & . . . marched to the Salt Works on the Sea Shore.” In May, 1779, Timothy Bloodworth presented a petition to the North Carolina Assembly:

. . . from a number of the Inhabitants of New Hanover County, praying to have a part of the Militia, under the command of Gen. Lillington, kept up as a Guard over the Salt Works.

Among the many men who signed this petition was the owner of the only salt works in New Hanover County during the Revolution which has been documented. A will signed in 1779 by Jonathan Dunham left to his sister his “three largest salt pans,” probably brine reservoirs. The land on which these were located was just north of Crown Point on Masonboro Sound.

When the Revolution ended, ships once more moved freely in and out of the Cape Fear River, bringing cheap salt as ballast, or regular cargo, from Europe and the Caribbean. With the consequent reduction in price, the local manufacturer of salt was not as profitable, and salt making declined.

Twenty-five years later, salt making in the Lower Cape Fear had a marked revival, either due to the uncertainty of shipping preceding the War of 1812, or to the far-sightedness of some leading business men of the area. John R. London, Samuel R. Jocelyn and James W. Walker were among a group of men who approached Joseph Gardner Swift for information toward the establishment of extensive salt works on the sound near Wilmington. Swift was at that time a Major in the Army Corps of Engineers and had served as superintending engineer on the rebuilding of Fort Johnston. He wrote in his memoirs that in January, 1809:

At the request of J. W. Walker and S. R. Jocelyn of Wilmington, N. C. I examined the salt works at Dorchester [Massachusetts], and employed Thomas Mayo of Cape Cod to proceed to the Sound, near Wilmington, where he constructed similar vats for evaporation.

In 1810, Swift was appointed to command Fort Johnston and moved to North Carolina.

In April I accompanied John R. London and others to the Sound, on an excursion to see its adaptation to Salt-making. I gave these gentlemen the plan of the works on Cape Cod that I had received from Mr. Thayer of that place. No doubt that the ocean water in this shallow sound, not being freshened by rivers, and constantly receiving the tide from the sea, must afford a good surface for evaporation.

He added that “the plan was very successful.”

It must have been successful. An article, “On the Trade of Wilmington, N. C.”, written in 1815, stated that:

. . . the quantity annually produced, within eight to twenty miles of Wilmington, is already more than thirty thousand bushels.

The season for Salt commences in September, and continues through October, November, and December. Afterwards the demand slackens . . .

. . . while commerce was under restriction, and during the late war, sundry Salt Works were erected on the Sound, near Wilmington, which towards the last of the war, highly rewarded their several proprietors. But, since the return of peace, the price of home made Salt has, consequently, fallen to that of similar quality imported. Notwithstanding, the domestic works will be continued in operation . . .

The year before John R. London died, he wrote a dissertation on salt making for the purpose of gaining governmental support for the industry, entitled “Observations on the Manufacture of Salt, and on the Qualities of Different Kinds of Salt as Manufactured by Artificial Heat, or Crystallized by Solar Evaporation.”
During our revolutionary war, when our ports were closed against our accustomed supplies, our necessities compelled us, along our sea board, to the manufacturing of boiled salt, . . . and the inhabitants of the State, generally, flocked here, erected their temporary boilers, and returned home with their commodity generally inadequate to the wants. . . .

Their provisions suffered, as might have been expected, and an unjust odium has been entailed upon all salt of domestic origin. Subsequently, when the scarcity excited by the last war, suggested the idea of our present improved process, upon a large scale, it may have happened that a want of practical skill, and the incessant and insatiable demand upon our works might have rendered our vat salt short of its existing purity. But now, that experience has furnished its lights, and it is made superior in efficacy (as is admitted by all accustomed to its use), is it not folly, is it not madness, to send our funds abroad, when they might be expended among ourselves?  

The Salt Works where London and his friends gained their experience in producing salt by solar evaporation were located on what is now Myrtle Grove Sound, and was then Cabbage Inlet Sound. Cabbage Inlet was about halfway between Federal Point and the present Masonboro Inlet. Collins Creek, now Everett Creek, was near the Works. They are first mentioned in a mortgage deed of 1812 when the co-owners were raising money for the erection of further works. The collateral for the loan was the land where Samuel R. Jocelyn resides in the summer, and adjoining a tract of land belonging to John London, the law library of Samuel R. Jocelyn, some slaves and 9,000 bushels of salt. It also included land where John Garnier resided "on which the salt works are erected." The deed was signed by Samuel R. Jocelyn, John R. London, William B. Meares and John Garnier. Soon John R. London sold his land to William Harriss, and it is possible that not long after he began construction of works later mentioned as belonging to him on Wrightsville Sound. In 1812 they wished again to add to the works, and "in order to enable the said John Garnier to put up the new works," Richard Bradly endorsed the note at the State Bank and accepted a lien on the property. It lay between tracts owned by James Collins and William Harriss. The ten acres on which the new works were to be erected already had a "salt house." John Garnier was also given the right of water conveyance by pump to the new works. The land owned by James Collins was about "eight miles below Wilmington." In 1815 John F. Burgwin and Edmon Bridge were added to the names of the men who had an interest in these works. At this time the deed specified "six strings of works erected last year which were assigned to Richard Bradly," and "such salt works buildings and improvements which may hereafter be made." The last deed which mentioned these works was recorded in 1825 when Richard Bradly was the highest bidder on the land.

There is a connection between these salt works on Myrtle Grove Sound and a point on the Cape Fear River called "The Salt Landing of 1812." An "Old Salt Road" crossed the peninsula from the Salt Landing to a point on Myrtle Grove north of Collins Creek. In a deed of 1846 a reference is made to Bradley's Salt House near to a tract located between Barnards and Motts Creeks, close to the site of the old Salt Landing. Another salt works on Myrtle Grove Sound was already in operation in 1823, when Archibald F. McNeil mortgaged a 300 acre tract of land "together with the Salt Works thereon . . . all the Salt that may hereafter be produced . . . and the Salt that may be in the Town of Wilmington." This tract was bounded on the north by the land of John Averitt. In 1829 Archibald McRae was the highest bidder on two pieces of land belonging to Archibald McNeil. One was the salt tract on the sound, and the second was 192 acres to the west of the salt works. Early in 1830 Archibald McRae bought the 500 acres belonging to the late John Averitt, "known and commonly called the Myrtle Grove Place." This land was bounded on the south by the salt tract, and one point of the western line was "a pine near the Federal Point Road."

North of Myrtle Grove is Masonboro which lies between Purviance Creek (in early times called Cabbage Inlet Creek and presently Whiskey Creek) and Deep Creek (Hewlets Creek). In 1814 Archibald M. Hooper acquired land on Crown Point from his father, George Hooper. There may have been salt works on this land then. Hooper attempted to sell this land in 1826, and advertised twice in the Cape Fear Recorder, stating that there were 7000 feet of salt works, and that "these works possess great advantage of site, water and wind." Two years later the land, the salt works, and all the tools of every kind and description attached to the salt works" were mortgaged to Alexander Anderson, James F. McRae and Emanuel Bettincourt, who may have entered the salt making business. In December 1830 and January 1831, the property and salt works were again advertised, and finally sold to William Wilson. Wilson operated the works for some years, and sold them in 1838 to Joseph Smith, who sold them the next year to Nathaniel Fowler. He operated the works during the Civil War and owned the property until he died in 1865.

It is possible that A. M. Hooper may have owned a second salt works, or it may be the same salt works, if land mentioned in two 1824 deeds joined the Masonboro Sound land on the west. On February 14, 400 acres of land "whereon A. M. Hooper now lives" including the "salt works formerly the estate of Kingsley Thurber de'd" were bought by Thomas F. Davis. He sold the property to Hooper the next day. Kingsley Thurber had once mortgaged property, including 340 acres "lying on the west side of the main road to Federal Point and adjoining the north side of the plantation of S. Springs." Sedgwick Springs had land just north of Snows Cut. There seems to be no record of A. M. Hooper selling this land.

North of Masonboro, between Hewlets Creek and Lees (Bradley) Creek, is the sound property now known as Greeneville. In the middle of this section, opposite the Hammocks, there was one, and possibly, two salt works lying close together. Early in 1823 Gilbert Geer mortgaged land to Cabell Nichols. In April of that year, Elizabeth Scott sold land to Maurice Parker, bounded on one side by "the Salt Works now owned by Caleb Nichols." In 1826 reference is made to "the Salt Works erected by Gilbert Geer and now in the possession and occupancy of said Geer." Three years later when Maurice Parker sold his land, the salt works were "late owned by Caleb Nichols."

On Wrightsville Sound which extends north of Lees Creek, the possibility of erecting salt works was used as
an inducement to purchase land. In 1815 John Willkings advertised for sale his "summer residence at Wrightsville Sound...to a person desirous of entering the salt business, it furnishes an excellent stand for the erection of salt works." He joined land owned by John R. London on which he had a summer residence. In 1832, shortly before London died, this land was offered for sale, "including the salt works." Following his death, the executor of the estate offered the same tract for sale again: "summer residence...including seven thousand feet of Salt Works in complete order." Only small quantities of salt were made along the sounds of New Hanover County until the importation of cheap salt was again threatened at the beginning of the Civil War. Salt production then became a necessity and a profitable industry. By 1863 it is probable that there were very few over one hundred salt works in New Hanover and Brunswick Counties, producing a conservative two thousand bushels a day, and grossing over eight million dollars a year.

New Hanover County...

A Brief History

Dr. Lawrence Lee has authored NEW HANOVER COUNTY: A BRIEF HISTORY published by the State Department of Archives and History in late 1971. This is the third in a series of four short county histories made possible by a grant of the Smith Richardson Foundation. As Dr. Lee says in his Preface, this is not a history of New Hanover County but "rather, it is a historical sketch in which the major events and developments of the past have been traced in summary fashion". We are indebted to Dr. Lee for his astute observations and historical perspective of the many events in New Hanover County's history.

—K. E. H.

FOOTNOTES

1Joshua Potts, "On the Trade of Wilmington, N. C., May 1, 1815," Our Living and Our Dead, I, No. 1 (September 1874).
2William Brownrigg, The Art of Making Common Salt (London, 1748). It was widely known in America during colonial times.
3Probably the same as Gallants Point, a point of land in S. Cartaret Co., extending into the mouth of Newport River, separated from Beaufort by Town Creek—William S. Powell, The North Carolina Gazetteer (Chapel Hill, 1968).
6Ibid., 811.
7Ibid., 840.
8Samuel Ashe (1725-1813), representative from New Hanover County in N. C. Provincial Congress, member of Council of Safety, appointed Chief Justice of N. C. in 1777, Governor of N. C. 1796.
9Pension Records, General Services Administration, National Archives, Pension S. 17851 (S. C.).
10Timothy Bloodworth, representative from New Hanover County in General Assembly.
14New Hanover County Will Books, Office of the Clerk of Court, New Hanover County Court House, Wilmington, Will Book C, 73.
15Jonathan Dunbridge (1745/50-1785).
16Johann David Schoepf, Travels in the Confederation, 1783-1784, Alfred J. Morrison (Philadelphia, 1911).
17Saunders, Colonial Records, XVII, 409.
18U. S. Congressional Records, 22d Cong. 1st Session, Senate of the United States, February 16, 1832.
20Ibid., 88.
21Ibid., 109.
22Ibid., 602.
23Ibid., T, 362.
24Wilmington Gazette, 27 April 1815.
25Cape Fear Recorder, 25 July 1832.
26People's Press (Wilmington), 11 September 1833.
27Williams & McCaichem, Civil War Records, 1861-1865, Salt, 1863.