Note to readers: This Bulletin is a departure from the traditional publication you usually read. You will not find the exact research and foot-noted scholarship, but rather detailed personal stories and families that are such an important part of Lower Cape Fear History.

Nineteenth Century documents reveal that Wilmington contained a large segment of African-American artisans and workers. Oral histories in the archives of the Historical Society of the Lower Cape Fear provide ample evidence that this presence continued throughout the Twentieth Century. It is important that we recognize how our culture has been enriched by African-Americans working together in landmark occupations while sharing love, ideas and support among family members and friends.

Smaw’s Wilmington Directory (1866–1867) in its section of Colored Persons listed more than 100 individuals with occupations. The 1918 Wilmington City Directory listed business occupations for more than 90 African-Americans. The thriving rice plantations, large-scale produce and meat/fish markets, peanut and cotton suppliers, rail, ship, and maritime activities, and Southern eating establishments form the context of the work done by African-Americans and their descendants during these times. Oral histories offer insight into memories that are quickly fading as we progress into the Twenty-First Century. These recollections tell us how the African-American families provided a working and supportive culture that enabled the families to succeed during the sometimes wrenching changes brought about by wars, economic depression, civil rights conflicts and changing technology that marked the Twentieth Century.

Agricultural Activities

Clarence Jones (b.1908) lived on land his grandmother farmed. She worked as a midwife and made medicines from herbs and plants.

When his grandmother butchered 4 or 5 hogs or when her fruit trees were full, she shared with needy families. Orton Plantation, built in 1735 by “King” Roger Moore, was known for its rice production. Clarence Jones worked at Orton Plantation in the rice fields from the 1920s until 1931. For over 60 years after this Clarence Jones headed up a grounds crew of over a dozen people at Orton. Clarence was famous for establishing and maintaining the exquisite formal gardens known for their azaleas and camellias.

Truck farming was a big business in Wilmington supplying vegetables to the north by the 1890s.

James Peoples (b.1921) remembers working for Andrew Lorek in Castle Hayne seven days a week in the 1930s. They grew vegetables and flowers. Pearsall Fertilizer Co. mixed fertilizer to secret specifications for the “growingest stuff” in Castle Hayne. During the winter, oil lanterns were used in outdoor hot beds. During the summer two mules, a tractor and as Peoples remembers, “lots of elbow grease” were used to cultivate the fields. In June they began cutting lettuce and greens and gathering squash, cucumbers, and turnips. All were washed and readied for market. Vegetables were put in round four or five peck wooden baskets, tops wired down, and Lorek’s stamp applied. His boxcar for produce, located at the Castle Hayne Railroad Station, was loaded over a four day period. One layer of baskets had the top up; the next
layer had the top down. These were covered with ice and the pattern repeated. When the boxcar was full, extra ice was put on the top to keep produce fresh for New York markets. Lorek ordered railroad cars as needed to ship produce during the summer. Smaller farmers of the area shared box cars. Later, James Peoples was an Army mess sergeant and a cook in the hospital food service. About 1956 he started working for Orville Kersey at the Wilmington Packing Co. in Cas- tile Hayne. For over 11 years he butchered hogs and cattle and also ground up fresh beef, hog jowls, hog preserve for winter. She soaked fish for Fish Bake. Mullet crabbing, on Hewlett’s Creek. He got in was born in Oyster shells were in 1907 a Maritime Pursuits

Before the first bridge was built across the Cape Fear River in 1929, ferries carried passengers, animals and vehicles from the foot of Market Street to Eagles’ Island. Both the grandfather and father of Clarence Jones ferried boats between Wilmington and Brunswick County. In 1907 a gasoline-powered ferry was put in service.

Maritime skills, including fishing and peddling fresh fish and oysters, of African-Americans navigating North Carolina waterways were perfected before the Civil war and continued into the Twentieth Century. Harrell Franks (b.1924) rowed or poled a boat to catch shrimp during low tide on Hewlett’s Creek. He got in the water, sometimes up to his neck, with a 75 foot long rope with the seine. His father had the other rope end around his waist pulling the seine and poling the boat as he came around in a half moon netting a quart, a bushel, or more shrimp. They worked on a big wooden table. Smoke pots around the shade tree kept the flies away from the shrimp while they broke off the heads and removed the shells. Shrimp for 50 cents a quart were delivered iced weekly to families, restaurants and even to Robert’s Market on Wrightsville Beach. May, June, and July were best shrimp months.

For crabbing, Franks used a finger width rope with an anchor every 3 feet to hold the rope on the bottom; tied fish heads to the regular trial line two feet apart; waited 10 minutes, and used a crab net to lift the crabs up. Meat from boiled crabs, including the back fin meat, was picked. Franks worked in a seafood house with stainless steel tables and sink as specified by new health regulations [see photo above]. Regular crab meat was 40 cents a pound; Deluxe Crab, 75 cents a pound; and in 2010 about $25 a pound.

Franks’ father sold spots from a truck in the 1930s. Bear grass, stripped to hold 8 or 10 fish, sold for 15 cents a string bunch. Late morning, two bunches sold for 15 or 25 cents. Hanna Nixon’s dad sold pig fish, spots [jimmies], and popeye mullet. Charles Fisher’s grandmother salted spots and mullets in layers in a wooden bucket to preserve for winter. She soaked fish over night to get the salty brine out, then fried in a hot skillet. They were eaten out of the skins. John Brown Mac started the traditional Indian Fish Bake. Mullet were gutted, scales left on, and placed in a frame in a circle around the fire. The hardened outside became the platter.

Oysters have been a part of many African-American lives to earn money, to feed the family, and to enjoy time together. George Spicer’s grandmother gathered oysters, clams, and crabs from the Sound as her money crop to sell in the market and town streets. They poled a boat out to the oyster bed and cracked off the oysters. Hanna Pierce Nixon shucked oysters for her father on Friday after school. Fishermen and “courting folks” came to the farm for oyster roasts. Bunnie Winn’s family went to Wrightsville Sound at low tide to get clams, crabs, oysters and fish for family meals.

Harrell Franks was among the first hired at the shipyard in World War II to lay ship keels. Cornelius Nixon sold oysters at the shipyard before starting his state of the art oyster business.

Hannah Pierce Nixon (b.1916) was born in Porter’s Neck. Her father had 4 or 5 fields of peanuts - about 2 acres per field. In the winter, oyster shells were piled on top of wood, burned to make lime plaster, and sprinkled over the peanuts. Peanut harvesting started in September. To harvest, peanuts were stacked on a long pole with 10 or 12 stacks in each field looking like scarecrows. After walking three miles home from school, Hannah went to the crib and picked off stored peanuts. Peanuts and sweet potatoes (good served with bacon grease) were banked over night to get the salty brine out, then fried in a hot skillet. They were eaten out of the skins. John Brown Mac started the traditional Indian Fish Bake. Mullet were gutted, scales left on, and placed in a frame in a circle around the fire. The hardened outside became the platter.

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Cornelius Nixon (b.1921) began buying oysters from local people. In his early 20s Nixon rented a crab house and converted it to an oyster shucking house. In the 1950s he constructed Nixon’s Oyster House on Market Street - a state of the art food building pioneering refrigerated storage to hold oysters during hot weather. He bought oysters from people in the Sound and hired workers to shuck them. He sold oysters to 20 stores and fish markets in Wilmington, nearby areas, and the A&P. In 2010, people still buy oysters by the bushel from Nixon, especially on holidays.

**Food Preparation and Sustaining Community**

The Champion Cotton Compress and Warehouse compacted cotton to one-third its size. The Cotton Exchange was operated by the Sprunt family from 1879 through the 1930s. **Charles Fisher’s (b.1922)** mother and her sister sold food from a wagon at the cotton press - dinners, chicken or ham sandwiches, and slices of cake and pie. Many customers charged their meal and paid at week’s end.

The Wilmington and Weldon Railroad began in 1855. Lines were consolidated into the Atlantic Coast Line (ACL) by 1900. Charles Fisher started working for the ACL in the 1950 on the Bulletin learning to cook the dinner menus following ACL Cook Book recipes. Fisher became the chef on a private car planning menus which changed daily - orange juice for breakfast, scrambled eggs/egg omelets, sausage/bacon, waffles, coffee - seldom grits. Cornish hens were cooked with sherry, wild rice, and asparagus. Everything was done in a very “elegant” manner. Joe Hills, the butler, served the food, cleaned the silver, and made the beds.

Seabreeze in Federal Point was created by the Freeman family beginning in the early 1900s as a premier location for African-Americans to spend vacations. **Corine Freeman and her husband Bruce Freeman** opened Bruce’s Tavern at Seabreeze in 1945 or 46 when he returned from the army. For 25 years they were open between Easter and Labor Day. Men, women, service men, and children came on week ends from everywhere – even as far away as New York. They had a pier over the Intracoastal Waterway near Snow’s Cut where people danced and had fun.

The menu was fried chicken, crab cakes, clam fritters, fried oysters, and shrimp with crackers and potato salad or coleslaw. Bruce Freeman bought shrimp and clams, plus chicken and fish; cleaned, prepared and iced everything down for Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Corinne Freeman peeled, cooked and cut 60 to 100 pounds of potatoes and mixed with mustard, mayonnaise, salt and pepper, and a little pickle for potato salad. Slaw was also made from scratch. The Freemans had a gas stove with 4 burners, a grill, and two fry baskets. It was very hot when everything was turned on with only two windows and no air conditioning. Clam fritters sold for 25 cents; 25 years later, a dollar; and in 2005, 3 or 4 dollars.

**George Spicer (b.1919)** worked for 15 years with School Food Service at New Hanover High School retiring in 1969. He served 200 or 300 lunches a day at New Hanover and Williston. Lunches included items such as turkey, ham, hamburger; greens, beans, milk; baked breads, buns, rolls, pies, cakes, and cookies; and government subsidized rice, cheese, and butter.

**Theresa Walker (b.1921)** worked at Hemenway School in her teens in the 1930s as a cafeteria cook and in the National Youth Administration program (NYA) in Williston High School. The Cape Fear Men’s Club established in 1866 is the oldest men’s club in the South. The manager, Mr. Leroy Oakley, asked Vernell Boynton to help with parties of 200 people. She made 400 or 500 biscuits at one time. He offered her a steady job in the 60s. She retired in 1994.

An excellent example of how food and religion combined to build community is the Family and Friends Day, a typical church gathering, which is celebrated yearly by St. Mathews Church on the third Sunday in October with many family, friends and former members. **Bunny Winn** (above) and **Brenda Williams** help serve familiar home made foods – pig’s feet, ham hocks, smoked turkey, clam fritters, shrimp fritters, ham, cabbage, collards, potato salad, candied yams, pasta salad, spaghetti noodles, cakes,
pies, peach cobbler and banana pudding. The church and members also serve food for funerals, weddings, and other family events. Vernell Boynton helps yearly with Family and Friends Day at Warner Temple AME Zion and with their Missionary breakfast. Willie Mae David planned three day family reunions with picnics and boat rides at the church where her family was raised; and later at homes of the families. She also caters weddings and carries dishes to family funerals.

The early 18th century Market House in the middle of Market Street was reconstructed in 1880 at 120 S. Front Street. Hucksters came to the market with their wagons on Saturday morning and stayed till night. They sold butter beans, black-eyed peas, snap beans, corn, okra, collard greens, and turnip greens. Some sold hog head cheese, hog haslets (organs connected by the trachea -the heart, liver, lights/lungs, melts/spleen), chittlins, liver pudding, and sausage. At Christmas people bought hog jowls sliced like bacon in big, thick slices.

Hanna Nixon’s father drove his cart and mule 3 miles from Porter’s Neck to the highway and about 10 more miles to Saturday Market taking quart, peck, and half bushel measures to sell peanuts. He also sold quart jars of shucked oysters. He bought groceries before returning home. Charles Fisher’s mother helped cousin Rose at market, took her liver pudding or ham sandwiches for lunch, and brought vegetables home in return. Corinne Freeman had a vegetable stand on the road side at Seabreeze selling collards, tomatoes, and watermelons from her husband Bruce’s garden.

These recollections and oral histories give an excellent look into the lives and habits of these coastal Carolinians. It assures us that our rich and varied seafood and lush farm crops have sustained the community, thanks to the hard work of some of these very people.

Information is based on interviews and reports of local African-Americans for the Historical Society of the Lower Cape Fear. The interviews expand the story of hard work and family togetherness. Additional historical information can be located in the following or in other books of local interest. Appreciation is extended to Marian Hills, Lu Ann Mims, and Blonnie Bunn Wyche for their help with interviews, research and transcription.

Bibliography

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