The Development of the Port of Wilmington

COL. GEORGE W. GILLETTE

"It may be said that my first sight of the Cape Fear River was in 1901, when I stood on the waterfront at the foot of Grace and Nut streets and saw the steamers of strange lands loading small 500 pound bales of cotton that seemed like bags of Dukes Mixture tobacco, after having gone through the compressors of the Champion Compress and Warehouse Company, squeezed from the bales of 60 cubic feet that our country cotton gins had made... The lad of twelve speculated where these ships would go when they sailed out of the mouth of the Cape Fear River. Maybe some day he might go on a long trip and see the other end of the journey: Liverpool, London, Bremen, LaHarve." Coming back to the present, he continued, "Within the past week, I have completed my third around the world trip and have seen again most of these ports and many others, always measuring them economically against our port and speculating on how ours might continue to move ahead and serve the economic needs of North Carolina."

Colonel Gillette stated that the early history of the Port of Wilmington and the "entwined Cape Fear River," as well as the part the port and the river played in the foundation of the city and county, has been studied and recorded by Mr. Andrew J. Howell, Mr. Louis T. Moore, and Dr. Lawrence Lee. In commenting on information found in their writings, he described the settlement of Southeastern and most of Central North Carolina as a life line, beginning with the footsteps of those who first landed on Cape Fear soil and stretching along onward and upward as they waded and paddled upstream, to pause and spread out and then resume the march. It is interesting to note that many people in distant states can trace their ancestry to these early settlers on the Cape Fear. Colonel Gillette formed friendships with several in Seattle, Washington.

"I can state positively that this is History of the World. People of foreign lands, seeking freedom of one kind or another, many adventurers, using the only means of transportation available, did the equivalent of what we do today via jet. They listened to talk of promoters and, leaning towards a life of freedom and opportunity greater than that afforded at home, took a chance. There were those of John White's Lost Colony, those at Jamestown with Captain John Smith, those at Plymouth Rock, and those of Old Town, Brunswick. The settlers that came to our land in those days, as in all other lands, came in the only mode of transportation known at the time: ships. And ships formed the life line back to the mother coun-

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LOWER CAPE FEAR HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.
BULLETIN
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DONATION TO SOCIETY ARCHIVES

Mrs. Patrick H. Winder of Victoria, Texas, has contributed $100.00 to our Society archives fund. Mrs. Winder, a descendant of Col. Thomas Hill and wife Susanna Masbon, is interested in preserving area history. We appreciate her interest and support.

ANNOUNCEMENT

The Bulletin Committee takes great pleasure in announcing that Miss Virginia Walsh has consented to be the Editor of the articles to be published in the Bulletin. Miss Walsh graduated from U.N.C. at Greensboro and taught for many years in the New Hanover High School and also at Wilmington College. She taught many subjects but her major subject was English. She is a charming and capable lady with whom we are delighted to be associated.

MEETING

Time: October 1, 1969, 8:00 p.m.
Place: Thalian Hall
Speaker: Dr. Arthur W. Cooper
Subject: Smith Island: It's Unique Natural History.

The Lower Cape Fear Historical Society is privileged to have Dr. A. W. Cooper as the guest speaker for the fall meeting. Dr. Cooper is the Chairman of the Coastal Research Program; Chairman of the Conservation and Legislative Committee of the N. C. Academy of Science; President of the Conservation Council of North Carolina. He is the co-author of Smith Island and the Cape Fear Peninsula, a Comprehensive Report on an Outstanding Natural Area, published 1964 in Raleigh, by Wildlife Preserves, Inc. in cooperation with the North Carolina Academy of Science. Dr. Cooper, Professor of Botany and Bacteriology, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, was in Wilmington in April 1966, when the Board of the North Carolina Department of Conservation and Development held a public hearing on Smith Island at the Blockade Runner Hotel at Wrightsville Beach, and those who heard and met him were impressed with his knowledge of the subject. It is felt that because of the widespread interest at this time in the future of Smith Island, Dr. Cooper's address will be of interest to many local citizens.

BOOK REVIEW

Captain James Wimble, His Maps, and the Colonial Cartography of the North Carolina Coast. By William P. Cumming. (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1969. 2 Maps, 34 pages. $1.00.)

This is a reprint of “The Turbulent Life of Captain James Wimble” that appeared in the Winter, 1969, issue of the North Carolina Historical Review. Included also are “Wimble’s Maps and the Colonial Cartography of the North Carolina Coast” and the two Wimble maps that were published in the Spring, 1969 issue of the same journal. Both articles were written by Dr. William P. Cumming, professor emeritus of English at Davidson College in Davidson. Dr. Cumming is regarded internationally as the foremost expert on the historical cartography of the Southeast. He selected the 15 maps for “North Carolina in Maps” issued by the Department of Archives & History in 1966, and also wrote the book which accompanied and explained the maps.

James Wimble was born in Sussex, England, and lived in the West Indies, Boston & North Carolina. He disappeared in 1743/44, probably losing his life “in some encounter with Spaniard, reef, or hurricane.” “Though an uneducated, plain citizen who suffered great reverses, Wimble built a ship and a great house, founded a family and helped to found an important city, fought a war and made a map, the best of its kind and of the region for many years.” The important city that he helped to found was Wilmington. In the Spring of 1733, Wimble, with John Watson, Michael Higgins and Joshua Granger, Sr. engaged in a real estate promotion that was to become Wilmington.

Part of one of the two maps included is being used as the accompanying map for Col. Gillette’s article in this Bulletin. It is interesting to note that on this map dated 1733 Wimble stated that he had “yaised [used] the Coast and trad [traded] this 12 yeare past.” This means that he was working on this survey in 1721.

This is a valuable addition to us who are interested in the history of the Lower Cape Fear and should be in every member’s Library.

W & M
A letter from the President

As we begin the Historical Society's fourteenth year of service, I am pleased to report to the membership that important activity is already taking place in several areas of interest.

(1) At a meeting held at the home of the President on August 7 the Board of Directors voted unanimously to reaffirm the resolution passed by the Society in November, 1965, urging the state of North Carolina to "acquire and preserve Smith Island (Bald Head Island) for purposes of a public park and to retain its historical significance" for the Cape Fear region. The Board instructed the President to convey its conviction concerning Smith Island to Governor Scott and the legislators representing New Hanover County. Accordingly, letters were written calling for the preservation of Smith Island as an "undisturbed natural and historical site" and supporting the movement to have the State purchase Smith Island in the interests of the public in North Carolina. In his reply, dated August 19, Governor Scott stated that "a great deal of thought and study will be given to the proposal." Furthermore, he is sharing the Society's letter with Mr. Roy Sowers, Director of the Department of Conservation and Development, "so that he also might know your (our) views."

In timely fashion, our Program Committee, chaired by Cdr. Johnston, has arranged for Dr. Arthur Cooper, Professor of Botany at N. C. State University and an authority on Smith Island, to be the speaker at our fall meeting. It is hoped that many members and friends of the Society will hear Dr. Cooper and use the occasion as a forum for discussing the merits of preserving Smith Island in its natural state. (See announcement of date, time, place and program for the fall meeting in this issue.)

(2) Work on the Old Town Plantation Archaeological Project, jointly sponsored by the Historical Society and the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, resumed on August 4 and will continue through the first week of September, according to Mr. Debnam, Co-Chairman and Chairman of the Society's Historic Sites and Archaeology Committee. During the first two weeks heavy rains made roads nearly impassable and greatly impeded progress in excavating the house site, on which work was begun under State auspices in April. Approval for continuation of the work was obtained from Dr. Christopher Crittenden, Acting Director of the State Department of Archives and History, with Mr. William Henry, former Assistant State Archaeologist, and Dr. Gerald H. Shinn, member of the UNC-W faculty, in charge. Both Mr. Henry (then employed by the State) and Dr. Shinn had assisted State Archaeologist Garry W. Stone last April when Mr. Stone undertook the dig at Old Town, as reported in the May, 1969, issue of the Bulletin. (In a memorandum noting his reservations about the resumption of the dig at this time Mr. Stone indicated he was unable to schedule a definite period for further supervision of the project, notwithstanding his professional interest in its potential.)

At the request of the Historic Sites and Archaeology Committee, the Board of Directors recently voted to allocate $300 of his year's budget to the Committee and authorized expenditure of any funds the Committee wished to commit to the Old Town Project. Currently, therefore, the Society is financing this work, including payment of the contract salary of $300 agreed upon with Mr. Henry. The Committee is especially grateful to Mr. Hugh MacRae II for his full cooperation in the project. Mr. Henry has had accommodations at Mr. MacRae's lodge on Old Town Plantation. Much appreciation also goes to selected students who have donated their labor and other services.

(3) A recent gift to the Society by Lt. Col. Charles B. Gault of Chapel Hill constitutes a major contribution to the Society's Archives. Col. Gault presented several items of historical and genealogical value, among them a fine, carefully-mounted collection (numbering thirty-one in all) of photographs of prominent figures in early families of the Cape Fear region. In addition he gave the Society a well-preserved copy of the 1861 Catechism of the Episcopal Church, copies of two issues of the South Carolina Historical Magazine and a photocopy reproduction of a pertinent biographical manuscript. These items were conveyed to the Society by Mr. Ludlow Strong who, along with the President, has been in correspondence with Col. Gault. They will be placed on display at the next gathering of the Society to be scheduled at the Latimer House, our headquarters. Mr. Strong is to be the Editor of the Society's new handbook to be issued during he 1969-70 year.

September 1, 1969

Walser H. Allen, Jr.
President

THE DEVELOPMENT
(Continued from Page One)

try to sustain them until they could sustain themselves. Thus it has continued until the present day. We have moved from the human cargo, arriving in a ship from England, drawing 4 to 6 feet of water, to the 300,000 ton bulk ship, drawing 60 feet of water."

"As I look back, I am stunned at the gap that exists between the time I first saw the tramp steamers loading cotton at the Champion Compress docks and what I see today at the State Docks and the industries locating above Wilmington. Now things do not just happen. Foresight and planning are necessary if we are to keep abreast of the rapidly moving times. We, in Wilmington and Eastern North Carolina, have been rather happy to retain the easy life of yesterday. In the early 1900's, the prosperous time of year in Wilmington was the fall, when cotton came in to be pressed into bales of 1/2 the size of the original ones that came from the country cotton gin. Labor was high at the compress, and jobs elsewhere were deserted for the $2.25 a day rate paid there. Some of the cotton going through the compress had probably been picked by me at $.35 per 100 pounds. I was never able to pick 100 pounds in a day from sun to sun. Today, there is proposed a minimum wage of $1.25 an hour. I am sure one could not get any cotton picked at that rate. Longshoremen, even then, enjoyed a better rate, about $2.00 per day. Now they are on strike in all South Atlantic ports. Their present pay is $4.00 an hour, and they are asking for $4.50 and $5.00. The strike affects the economy of the entire country. Locally, we are paralyzed. This is a segment of the gap between 1901 and 1969."

Moving on from his remarks concerning the economic history of yesterday, Colonel Gillette next spoke on the subject of The Development of the Port of Wilmington.

"The physical development of the Cape Fear since I first saw it, has been stupendous. Step by step the depth of the river to Wilmington has been increased from the original 7 1/2 feet as left by nature and reported prior to 1761, with little change until 1829, when the United States assumed active charge of the improvements."

"The Corps of Engineers arrived on the scene in 1829 to carry out an authorization by the Congress on March 2, 1829, to deepen the main bar channel by the construction of jetties and the closure of New Inlet."
“Records show that in 1761 'A severe equinoctial storm of four days' continued a breach, cutting off 6 miles of the river's length, forcing a new mouth to the river.' It was appropriately named New Inlet. And so, when the Corps of Engineers arrived in 1829, they had to cope with those three bar entrances. One is bad enough, but three are impossible economically. Solving the problem was a major one in the study of hydrology of tidal estuaries.

“New Inlet was closed in 1881 by a 3/4 mile rock jetty, connecting Federal Point and Bald Head, or Smith's Island. I remember two old sailors who had entered the Cape Fear with more water and less mileage to reach Wilmington through New Inlet, popularly called Corn Cake.

“Some have questioned the wisdom displayed by the Corps of Engineers in closing New Inlet, rather than the original, shallow inlet, the present mouth. The late Captain C. D. Maffitt was one. He talked to me at length about reestablishing Corn Cake Inlet. I dismissed the subject, with the knowledge that Frying Pan Shoals had been made over the centuries by waters from the Cape Fear River emptying through the present mouth, bucking Northeast winds and hurricanes, and forming the 25 mile shoals that today offer assistance in keeping the present entrance over the bar maintained at minimum cost.

“In 1874 authorization was given by Congress to increase the depth to Wilmington to 15 feet, and in 1890 a depth of 20 feet was authorized. From that time the river has been deepened step by step to the present 38-40 feet, in an effort to keep pace with the increased depth of ships. I happened to be the District Engineer and held hearings on and later approved projects for 32 feet and 34 feet; and I prepared, for the city, the data that enabled a justification for the present authorized depth of 38-40 feet from the ocean to the foot of Castle Street.”

Thus Colonel Gillette gave what he called a brief run down on some of the technical aspects of improving the Lower Cape Fear River. He then pointed out the necessity of a harbor's having docks, warehouses, and modern equipment for handling cargo and getting it to and from ship to shore. "This I call a bridge—a bridge to connect railroads and highways with ships of the world beyond. Like other industrial structures and equipment, docks, warehouses, and the accompanying plant must be modern to remain competitive."

Many native Wilmingtonians have grown up with some knowledge of the importance of 'tar, pitch, and turpentine' as exports of the early town; and illustrations of activities on the wharf at the time are familiar. They also remember the busy time of year at the compress and could probably recognize the whistle for the close of the day's activities if it were to blow again. Perhaps they have overlooked the fact that port facilities, such as docks, warehouses, and modern equipment to get the cargo to and from ship, were not good until 1954. From the early 1900's, there were wharves and structures along the city's northern riverfront serving the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, the Seaboard Air Line, Alexander Sprunt and Sons, and other businesses handling imports and exports. Then, in August, 1954, the State docks were opened at Wilmington and Morehead City. As Colonel Gillette explained it, "A new day had dawned for both ports. In the meantime, the Sprunt docks and warehouses, where fertilizer was stored, burned to the ground. Wilmington would have been a dockless port but for the State docks that had just been opened."

Keeping in mind the bridge at the water's edge, we realize that there is little chance of a port's developing to its full potential unless the bridge is connected with modern highways leading to the industrial and agricultural centers of the interior. That thought was expressed by Colonel Gillette as he continued.

“Wilmington is North Carolina's largest port. It is the only major port on the four big waterways, North, South, East, and West, not connected with the Interstate Highway System. That fact is tragic. It shows a complete lack of appreciation of the economic importance of our ports and waterways by past highway administrations.

"By the same token, this drawback may be extended to other fields than highways. If there is anything the master of a large ship dislikes, it is looking into the face of a drawbridge. Our port has been and still is bedeviled by bridges over the Cape Fear River and North East River. Our greatest future for industrial development lies on the upper Cape Fear River and the North East River, the Brunswick River and Eagle Island. The new industries recently located above Wilmington did not go there to grow pickles. They went there because of water deep enough to float ocean going ships. One of the great drawbacks in the development of the North East River is the 65 year old Hilton Railroad Bridge. I was assured two months ago that the green light was already signaling the passing of this antique. I ask you here tonight, even though it is in history your chief interest lies, make it modern history as well as ancient. Make it serve the purpose for which history is supposed to serve. Let it be a guide for the future, even on the development of the Cape Fear River.

"No mention could be made of the history of the Lower Cape Fear River without favorably commenting on the name of the first Civilian Engineer who planned and supervised the dikes and the rocks that closed New Inlet in 1876. He was a great engineer and the father of a great architect, the architect who designed the Lincoln Memorial. One of the largest of fleets of hydraulic dredges, formerly operating under the Wilmington District, was the "Henry Bacon." Another that followed and trained under Mr. Bacon was the late Mr. Robert C. Merritt. "Captain Bob" made a great contribution to improvements on our river, the largest to rise and fall in our state. Mr. Merritt's successor, a long time assistant, was Mr. T. J. Hewitt. Major Paul M. Snell, operations head, was the greatest hydraulic dredging engineer I have ever known down through the years since Mr. Bacon's arrival in 1876. These and others too numerous to mention here have been the most loyal and faithful servants that I have ever been privileged to work with."

Colonel Gillette next commented on the origin, development, accomplishment, and future of the North Carolina State Ports Authority and its facilities, stating the historical importance of its progress and giving a resume' of its origin.

"The North Carolina State Ports Authority was created without appropriations in 1945 during the Cherry administration. The members were: Mr. R. B. Page, Sr., publisher of the local paper, Chairman; Mr. A. G. Myers, textile and banking executive of Gastonia, vice-chairman; Mr. W. O. Huske, Fayetteville business executive, secretary; Mr. J. Harry White, tobacco executive of Winston-Salem; Mr. Cyrus Gibbs of Morehead City, real estate and insurance executive and chairman of the Morehead City Port Commission; and Mr. S. B. Frink, prominent lawyer of Southport. Mr. Gibbs was a member of the North Carolina Legislature. Mr. Frink was a senator. It was an able body of business and professional men. The act creating the authority was prepared by the late Mr. C. D. Hogue, Sr. It was modeled after that creating the Alabama State Dock at Mobile. The State Ports Authority had wide authority that would enable its members to work as members of any business should be able to work."

"In 1946, after my return from military to civil duty, I was approached about accepting the position as Executive Director,
At the time, I was in command of the South Atlantic Division, Army Corps of Engineers. This was about the largest and most important division, covering all South Atlantic States, Panama, and the Caribbean Island. I had not reached mandatory retirement age, although I had 30 years of service back of me. I loved my work. I was told by the Chief of Engineers that I was needed by him, and that ended the matter. In the meantime, I had been approached by a Florida delegation with a flattering offer for me to move South. I shall shorten the story by saying that the Chief of Engineers decided a year later that the Corps of Engineers would not fall apart if I retired. He had been kept aware of developments all along and knew that I wanted to go back to the Cape Fear River and to my North Carolina coastal friends and friends all over the state, and I wanted to work for my native state on the developments that I knew so well. On January 1, 1948, I assumed the office as Executive Director of the North Carolina State Ports Authority, with offices in the Trust Building. The battle for funds then began. We had no money, just enough to pay my salary, hire a stenographer, and buy a few stamps.

Since the story of the early struggles of the State Ports Authority would entail the telling of many facts, Colonel Gillette said that he had decided to tell the full story in a record of his life. He went on to comment on the present condition of the port facilities.

"In spite of troubles and vicissitudes of life and politics, today the North Carolina State Ports Authority is on its feet. It has as modern facilities as any port or ports in the world. The present director, probably, has his troubles; but for us the most important thing is that he is an able and experienced port executive. Let us keep him unshackled by politics in the future."

"You of the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society are engaged in a most important and worthy endeavor. This area is rich in history, and the state is rich in history that ties in with ours in its area. However, 'We do not seem to have done too good a job in recording it.' This is not my statement, even though I subscribe to it. You are making a worthy endeavor to pick up the strings and stimulate interest . . . I trust that I have made some little contribution here.

"History is prologue. It is an introduction to worthwhile discussions for the future. As I see it, there would be no excuse for the existence of this organization but for its ability to review what has gone before and to be stimulated by it to reach others with the message to use the past as a guide to the future."

The following was presented by Col. Gillette (long range projected needs) at the National Rivers and Harbors Congress at its national convention in 1968.

During the past few years there has been a great upsurge in the number of new industries locating on the banks of the Cape Fear River and its principal tributary, the North East Cape Fear. Beginning with the plant of Riegel Paper Company, located just above Wilmington on the Cape Fear, now the DuPont Company is building a multi-million dollar plant, while over on the North East Cape Fear, one of the most promising navigable streams of the state for maritime industries, there are the plants of the Ideal Cement Company, the Carolina Nitrogen Company (a subsidiary of the W. R. Grace Company) and most recently the Hercules Company and the General Electric Company. All in all, more than 200 million dollars in new industries are already located on the North East Cape Fear, or are now building. And in addition, the Superior Stone Company is locating on the upper area of the stream.

On the main Cape Fear River above Wilmington the Riegel Paper Company and the DuPont Company will have investments of about 250 million dollars when the present building and expansions are completed.

Thus, the present new industries that are built or building immediately above the Port of Wilmington totals nearly a half-million dollars. These industries were influenced in their location by deep waters for ocean-going ships, a fine State Dock system, and potentials for a modern barge system, to Fayetteville on the main Cape Fear River and the possibility of a barge canal on the North East Cape Fear to transport raw materials, particularly rock and marble from the upper reaches to plants below that are located on deep water.

Projects before you today that relate to the Port of Wilmington, North Carolina, and submitted by the Wilmington Port and Waterway Development Commission are three in number:

1213-R-3 North East Cape Fear River above Hilton Bridge
1404 Long Range Plan, Cape Fear River Basin
1405 Wilmington Harbor

Of these three projects, 1213-R-3 and 1405 relate largely to the improvement of the North East Cape Fear River. The Congress authorized both for review and study by the District Engineer at Wilmington. These two projects are most important. Industries previously mentioned need deeper water now. Two of these industries located where they are with two thoughts in mind. One was deep water for ocean-going ships and a barge canal that would be made available, and two, that there was unlimited fresh water on the North East River that was not available elsewhere.

The potentials on the North East River are great. It is a sluggish stream, easy to dredge and inexpensive to maintain due to it being a non-sitting stream. The area this river serves is rich in marl and limestone and in timber, all of which offers ideal cargo for barge transporting. Other natural resources suitable for barge traffic are believed to be in this area.

I ask that you give these two badly needed improvements your highest priority.

Turning to Project 1404, Long Range Plan for the improvement of the natural waterways of the Lower Cape Fear River Basin, and the development of additional barge and drainage canals, this represents a study that covers a period..."
of many years. The trends in the development of new ships, particularly large tankers, and modern shipping facilities, have been thoroughly studied from both operational and economical aspects. The authors of this long range plan for the Lower Cape Fear River Basin and the Port of Wilmington are convinced that the Cape Fear River is the backbone of the economic future of Southeastern North Carolina. Maritime industry is continuing to seek locations for plants on the banks and canals of improved and planning waterway systems. Thus we envision for a planned future.

There will be upon us in a short while the impact of traffic on the Cross State Florida Canal. We must meet the challenge. Our inland waterways and barge canals must conform to the standard of the Intracoastal Waterway system, i.e. 12 feet of water. Hence, the deepening of the Cape Fear River to Fayetteville, now only 8 feet, and enlargement of the locks are certainly a big factor in this over-all Long Range Plan.

I think it might be well to mention the new bridge now under construction and the beginning of the East-West highway. This plan, Project 1404, has been developed with these two state highway programs well in mind, particularly as the improvements of the Brunswick River deep sea channel and the barge canal, surrounding the important Eagle Island.

This is a forward look at a great economic potential of Southeastern North Carolina and the State of North Carolina as a whole.