



NEWSLETTER

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF SMITH ISLAND

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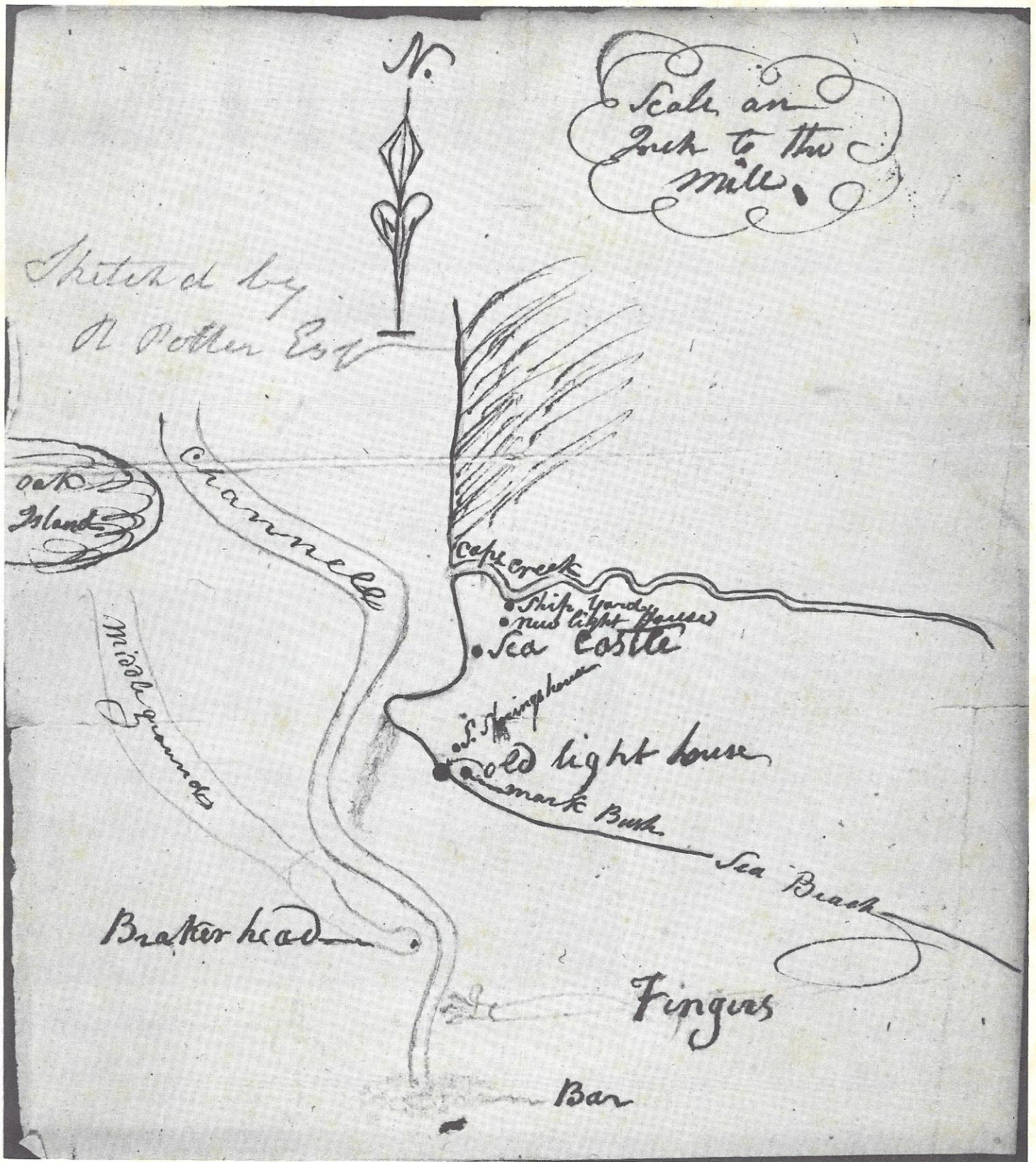
History is often believed to be an account of what man has done in a certain region. The contemporary historical significance, however, of Smith Island may well be attributed to what man has not done there. Perhaps because he has never permanently occupied the Cape Fear peninsula due to its inaccessibility and storm-swept character, Smith Island today remains more substantially as it was when first seen by the earliest explorers and settlers than any other portion of the North Carolina coast. For it has survived as a remnant of wilderness coming down to the ocean's edge, of waves breaking among palms and live oaks.

To recognize the unusual historical value a wilderness beside the Atlantic may hold for Americans today is not to denigrate the rich and significant role Cape Fear has played in the lives of past generations who have worked or lived, fought or died on its shores. Although man may not have changed the "face" of Smith Island by way of removing its forests or dredging its marshes, he has made use of the island for habitation, food, and defense and for establishing important navigational aids like lighthouses and maritime services. Indeed, the island's use by man has largely been related to our nation's military and maritime history.

The earliest sign of human civilization on Smith Island, or Bald Head as its largest upland is more familiarly known, is that exemplified by several Indian sites, which are not the remains of a large village but rather of small family groups. Since pottery was not being made by the comparatively primitive coastal tribes before 1500, these sites coincide perhaps with the island's first assumed discovery by Spanish explorers, probably deAyllon in 1526. Here at the entrance to the Cape Fear River deAyllon's expedition lost its capital ship and once in Southport Harbor held mass--both possible "firsts" of a recorded sinking and a Christian service for the eastern United States coast. Following more than a century of French and Spanish explorations in the lower Cape Fear, New Englanders in 1662-1663 attempted a settlement upriver but soon left, abandoning their cattle on Smith Island's riverside near Bald Head Point. Later in 1663 Barbadians founded, again upriver, a colony which by 1667 was abandoned. Pirates and Indian traders soon exploited the deserted lower Cape Fear region. One of the more notorious pirates, Stede Bonnet, was finally tracked down and captured off Bald Head in 1718. Thomas Smith, II, a South Carolina landgrave, was granted in 1713 what is today known as Smith Island in order to escape South Carolina regulations for Indian trading, in which he engaged. (The border between the southern and northern Carolina colonies was sometimes placed along the Cape Fear River and was not fixed at its present position until 1738.)

Use by man of the island complex continued to be intermittent. During the Revolution the British temporarily held Bald Head where from March through October 1776 as many as 5,000 troops foraged. With the cessation of hostilities, the new American nation soon considered its coastal defense and navigational system, and by 1796 a lighthouse had been constructed on Bald Head's southern shore. By 1817 its location had sufficiently eroded -- although records are unclear -- to cause the construction of a new light known today as "Old Baldy," which is now the oldest standing lighthouse on the North Carolina coast. During the Civil War Smith Island again assumed military significance, at this period largely through its strategic location between the two river channels then open. (New Inlet, which broke through the barrier beach south of Federal Point in 1761, was closed to navigation in 1875 by the construction of the stone levee known as "The Rocks.") Fort Holmes, on Bald Head Island's western shore, was hurriedly built in the fall of 1863. With the defeat of nearby Fort Fisher in January 1865, Fort Holmes was evacuated and the "lifeline of the Confederacy," which Cape Fear River blockade-runners had helped to maintain, was destroyed. Of North Carolina's earthwork forts situated on the ocean, Fort Holmes is today the least eroded and best preserved.





The above map was sketched by one Mr. Potter, Esq., around 1814.