



# NEWSLETTER

BRUNSWICK COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
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## SOUTHPORT

By  
Annie May Woodside

The history of Southport really begins with the history of Fort Johnston. Now Fort Johnston was built during the administration of Governor Gabriel Johnston and was built under the Acts of 1745 and 1748. Governor Johnston, Nathaniel Rice, Robert Holton, Eleazer Allen, Matthew Rowan, Edward Mosely, Roger Moore, William Forbs, Colonel James Innes, William Faris, Major John Swain and George Moore were appointed to erect the Fort. The Act stated that it should be called Fort Johnston and that it should be large enough to contain at least twenty-four cannon with barracks and other conveniences for soldiers. The fort was to be located near the mouth of the Cape Fear River on the bluff above the river bank. By 1748, the fort which occupied a square in the center of what afterward became the river front of the town, was completed. Inside the fortification was a blockhouse which was built some years before by the English Government to protect the people against the Indians.

The first officer to command the fort about whom there is any record was Captain John Dalrymple, who was appointed by General Braddock in 1755. In 1758, Captain James Moore was commander and from 1766 to 1774, the post was commanded by Captain Robert Howe.

In the time of the Revolution, this fort played quite an important part. Captain Collett was in command in 1775, and it was here that Governor Martin fled in the beginning of the conflict. On account of the rumors that Howe and a body of men were coming to take the post, Captain Collette hastily evacuated the fort. It was then that Governor Martin took refuge on the sloop-of-war "Cruizer", which was lying in the harbor. Howe with his men reached the fort and on the night of July 18, 1775, they took possession of it, and so far as they were able, destroyed it with fire. Next day the dwelling and outhouses of Captain Collett were burned.

In the Assembly of November 1777, an act was passed to repair the fort. After the Revolution the site of Fort Johnston became the property of the State and in December 1809, by an act of the Legislature of North Carolina, it was ceded to the United States Government.

Not until 1790 was there any attempt made by the citizens to make a settlement around the fort. Joshua Potts, John Huske of Wilmington, and Charles Gause were the men who first started the movement. The first petition to the Assembly which met in that year in Fayetteville was not granted. In 1792, the General Assembly was again peti-

tioned to the effect that an act be passed for the establishment of this town. This bill was successful and the town was to be called Smithville and was to consist of one hundred lots, with streets and squares. The streets of the town were named after prominent men. Accordingly, the town was surveyed and laid out by competent engineers into city lots, squares and streets. The site on which the town was built was given by Governor Benjamin Smith. Some of the lots were sold to prominent people who lived elsewhere. Many of those who purchased lots erected handsome homes and they with their families spent the summers in the new town.



Street Scenes in Southport, N. C.



STREET SCENES — in the early 1900's



Such names as Nash Street, named for General Nash; Howe Street, for General Howe; Moore Street after Judge Alfred Moore; Rhett Street for Colonel Rhett of South Carolina; and a public square after Benjamin Franklin. This square was to be devoted to public and charitable purposes. There is little known about this new town from the time of establishment until a number of years later, yet year by year it gained, although slowly, in population, and year after year more people spent their summers in this place. The only permanent inhabitants were pilots, fisherman and perhaps a few others. It is not definitely known who lived here in those days, but because of the homes which stood as late as 1848, we know that they were people of culture and refinement. Dr. Curtis has described the homes thus, "Although the architecture of their houses was of the simplest kind, still in every house were evidence of an aesthetic taste. Especially their taste ran in the direction of mantle pieces and staircases with carved balusters, for although the houses were of one story there were always finished rooms in the attic as was plainly evident by the dormer windows which existed in every house. A dining room of considerable dimensions and sideboard which had been imported from England, also chairs and tables of solid mahogany, of that celebrated maker, Chippendale, and sometimes there was a piano in the parlor manufactured by Broadwood of London, inlaid in the most beautiful manner with brass ornaments. By 1848, there was only one of these old colonial houses standing. This house was built by Governor Smith for his residence. After Governor Smith's death it was the home of Governor E. B. Dudley, who lived there in the summer of 1838. Finally, in 1858, this old home was torn down and a modern structure took its place.

Even the tombs and tablets are decayed and fallen into utter ruin and therefore the village cemetery can tell us little of the history of the town in its ancient day. There are no records to show that any attention was given to education by the people of Smithville until 1845. There are traditions of roving school teachers who traveled about from place to place teaching, but their work was of little consequence. In 1850, there was an effort made to establish a school. This effort was directed by Mr. Jeromiah Murphy who had moved there for the purpose of establishing a school. There was no schoolhouse, so their first work was for the erection of a house. The matter was discussed among not only the people of Smithville but also among the people of the entire county. It resulted in a liberal subscription by many of the prominent citizens of the county. The building was erected on Franklin Square under the direction of Mr. Murphy and Rev. J. H. Brent. From the beginning of the school until the Civil War it prospered greatly. At that time it was discontinued until a more peaceful period. The religious life of the people was not neglected and by 1850, there were two churches.

Smithville communicated with the outside world through Wilmington. This town which is about thirty miles north of Smithville was reached by boats. In the days when Wilmington was at the zenith of her glory, many vessels found their way up the Cape Fear, past the quiet little town of Smithville, up to Wilmington, there to unload their cargo, take a new one mostly of naval stores and cotton, and again pass by the town at the mouth of the river, on their way out to sea. The travel from Smithville to Wilmington was made on small sailing vessels. The boats had no regular schedule, consequently they ran when it suited the convenience of their owners. In this semi-tropical place there was scarcely any need for anything from the outside world. Practically everything needed could be raised in the fertile lands. The wants of the people were few and therefore easily



supplied. When at last a steamboat line was operated between Wilmington and Smithville it was only for the summer. This line was established by Mr. A. H. Van Boklen, one of the prominent distillers of turpentine in Wilmington. The steamer which ran on this route was called "Spray" and was soon burned after the summer season was over.

For a great many years this little town was almost forgotten by her neighbors, indeed, it seems that she also forgot them. Nothing is on record to show that anything of importance happened. The chief business of those who lived here was piloting and fishing.

In 1852, news reached Smithville that a company of United States troops had been ordered there. This came as a surprise to many because this little town was situated so far away from anything warlike. The troops that came were under the command of Major Bidgely. The coming of these troops seemed to have added new life to the people. Many improvements began to be made, not only on the Garrison grounds but also in the town. On the front a double row of cedars was planted, which soon gave a beautiful shade. A new church was built which was named St. Philip's after the old church at Brunswick. The chancel rail in the church being the one from the old church. The new church was consecrated by the Rt. Rev. Thomas Atkinson, Bishop of North Carolina. In 1852, the United States troops were ordered away and their places were taken by two companies of the Third Artillery who were under the command of Captain J. P. McCowan and Captain Getty. These companies were not permitted to remain long at Fort Johnston but were soon ordered away, the fort being left in charge of Ordinance Sgt. John Belzer. Still the principal business of the town was piloting vessels. It was a beautiful sight to see the twenty or thirty vessels under full sail brought up the river. These boats were conducted up the river by sturdy pilots, most of whom made their home in Smithville. In May 1861, a boatload of Union soldiers landed in Smithville. They at once marched to the Garrison and to the officers' quarters. To the soldiers who greeted them, the captain said that they had come to take possession of the Government property and asked that he surrender. Now Ordinance Sgt. James T. Riley was not a man to surrender just for nothing, but seeing it was useless to resist, they were given the keys to the storehouse. After placing sentinels to guard and to give notice if the enemy should come, the troops left Fort Johnston for Fort Caswell which is two and one-half miles away. After a brief stay these troops were sent away and the cloud of war seemed to look brighter.

At the beginning of the Civil War all business ceased, even the small boats which ran up the inlets found no work to do. Everyone was waiting to see what the war was going to bring forth. Soon the governor issued orders for all the able-bodied men to report immediately to the nearest enrolling office. By this order Smithville was deprived of almost her entire male population and companies were soon sent to the Fort. Among these were the Rowan Rifle Guards, commanded by Captain Hamilton Jones; the Duplin Guards under Captain Claude Denson; two companies from Cabarrus County, the "WCabarrus Black Boys", and two companies from Columbus, all of whom were quartered on the Garrison. Company G, 20th North Carolina and Garland's Brigade from Brunswick County under Captain John H. Brooks, were quartered on Franklin Square. Smithville was now full of soldiers and presented the appearance of a military camp. Boats were busy bringin recruits from Wilmington, but these troops were not allowed to remain in the town long, being sent to other places for duty.

An epidemic of yellow fever strated in Wilmingon in 1862 and all who could escaped from the city. Many of the refugees came to Smithville and with them came the dreadful fever which caused the death of many of the inhabitants. About this time the United States blockading fleet, which was to close up the entrance of the Cape Fear River, arrived. Blockade running

commenced in earnest and one by one the pilots, who were then idle on account of the war, were ordered to Wilmington to take charge of vessels which would make their way down the river and out on the ocean the first dark night. Amidst the impenetrable darkness, without lightship or beacon, the narrow and closely-watched inlet was felt for with a deep sea lead as a blind man feels his way along a familiar path, and even when the enemy's fire was raking the wheelhouse, the faithful pilot with steady hand and iron nerve, safely steered the little fugitive of the sea to her desired haven. At this time there was very little to do in Smithville. The greatest thing for those who remained at home to do was the welcoming home of a pilot or bidding farewell to one who was about to leave.

Smallpox made its appearance in the town in 1863. It was brought by a Confederate soldier from Richmond. Almost everyone in the town contracted the disease and a great number died. At this time the population of Smithville consisted of only a few men incapable of military service, a few pilots and the wives and children of soldiers who were away fighting for their land. There was also in the town one company of Confederate soldiers and the headquarters of the Commissary and Quartermaster departments. Major John Blount was in charge. For awhile those who were in the town, in spite of the terrible state of affairs, managed to have some amusement. Many evenings they would meet together and pass the time away with delightful music. Great was the anxiety of the people when the bombardment of Fort Fisher began. About nine o'clock in the evening of January 15, 1865, the bombardment ceased and a great display of fireworks announced to them that the fort had been captured. The next night all the forts in the vicinity were burned and all the soldiers left for Wilmington. After the soldiers left there were the "camp followers" and "bummers" and those did much damage. The formal surrender of Smithville was made to Captain Cushing and the United States flag was hoisted over the fort. Captain Cushing and the officers of the United States Naval Ship "Monticello" took possession of the Garrison building. After the surrender, when all of the officers were comfortably settled, the sailors were given liberty. They plundered most of the public buildings but spared the two churches. They even stole the jewels of the Order from the Masonic Hall. These were later returned by one of the officers who was a Mason. This vandalism lasted only for a short time as the sailors were soon relieved from duty and the 149th New York Regiment was sent to the town. This regiment was in command of Colonel A. M. Barney. At this time many of the soldiers from Smithville began to make their way home while others filled a nameless grave on some faraway battlefield. While these things were going on the Yankee "schoolmarms", army stragglers, carpetbaggers and bummers came, all of whom took great interest in the colored people and "taught them how to vote." The old blockhouse which was inside Fort Johnston, and which had stood one hundred and fifty years, was destroyed by the strangers who came and tried to take the law into their hands.

After the first terrible days were over the people returned one by one to their business. The pilots were again to be found on the sea in small boats waiting for ships to come that they might pilot them up the river. These pilots were exposed to great hardships as they cruised in small boats and often went for fifty or a hundred miles at sea. In 1877 several pilot boats went down and the crews were lost. One of the boats to go down was the "Mary K. Sprunt". The "Uriah Timmons", with a crew of four men, was caught in a terrific storm on April 12, 1877. The pilots who had seen storms all their lives had never seen anything to equal this. For three days it raged. The waves sent the "Timmons" leaping from one to another as if she were only a toy. This was terrible enough, but to the dismay of the

crew, the job-halyard parted, the jib hung like a bag below the bowsprit and at once the sea rushed upon it and held it down. The men knew something had to be done, if they could even hope to get home. Instantly they decided that the jib-halyard must be cut, but how and by whom was this to be accomplished? There was only one single man aboard the boat and it was he who gallantly volunteered to do this perilous deed. His companions watched him breathlessly as he crawled with a knife in his mouth to accomplish his dangerous mission. Several times he was nearly thrown off and only with the utmost caution was the deed performed. Even after this was done it was an equally hard task to get back in the boat. The boat successfully weathered the storm and in a short time was near Georgetown, South Carolina. This incident is given to show how fearless and courageous were the sturdy people of Smithville.

About thirty years ago the discovery of a new harbor in North Carolina was published in the leading papers of the North and West. A railroad was needed to develop the town. Many efforts were made and probably fifty charters have been taken out in the past thirty years to build a line to connect with the railroad at Wilmington. During this time many prominent capitalists and promoters visited Smithville, the best known of which is Mr. E. B. Stevens of Chicago who expended large sums of money to build the road, but was unsuccessful in this undertaking. One of the things he, with the help of others, did accomplish was to change the name of Smithville to Southport which was supposed to be in better keeping with the great commercial future of the port. It remained for Mr. J. B. Whitehead to build the long-needed railroad. On November 23, 1911, the first train entered the town over the track of the Wilmington, Brunswick Southport road. The dream of many years has been realized, but it remains to be seen how the town will use her opportunities. Surely great development will come with the opening of the Panama Canal.

- The End -

The article above was written by Miss Annie May Woodside while a sophomore at State Normal College (now UNC at Greensboro, North Carolina in 1912.

## BRUNSWICK TOWN

### HIGHLIGHTS OF 1972

Visitation at Brunswick Town State Historic Site reached another record high during 1972. A total of 110,216 was recorded for the calendar year, representing an increase of more than eleven thousand over the previous year. The guest register showed visitors not only from all fifty states, but also from 32 territories and foreign countries.

Organized groups throughout North Carolina and from neighboring states visited the site last year. More than five thousand school children made field trips to Brunswick Town in 120 separate groups, and 59 other groups, comprised of about five thousand people, also toured the site during 1972. Eleven organizations held meetings at the site, and off-site programs were presented to six other groups.

The Brunswick Town Visitor Center was accredited by the American Association of Museums and the certificate of accreditation is now on display in the lobby. Also, a bronze plaque was erected in the Visitor Center, recognizing the Sprunt family of Orton Plantation for their gift of the land on which Brunswick Town State Historic Site is located to the State of North Carolina. The Brunswick Town Nature Trail received a special honor, too, this year; the South Atlantic Region of the National Council of State Garden Clubs, Inc., presented a certificate of appreciation to the Garden Club of North Carolina, Inc. for "outstanding work in conservation" on the Nature Trail project.

Last spring was a very busy season at Brunswick Town. The Azalea Festival, Orton Plantation Gardens and the Easter holidays brought many visitors, and the site was open all day for three consecutive Sundays to accomodate these large crowds. The Southport Junior Woman's Club again provided costumed hostesses on weekends during this period of heavy visitation. On April 27, the 250 delegates to the Garden Club of North Carolina, Inc. convention toured the site and enjoyed a picnic sponsored by the three Southport garden clubs. The following Sunday, April 30, members of the N. C. Society of County and Local Historians met in the Visitor Center for registration and orientation prior to their tour of the Southport area. Also on that day, the Wilmington Episcopal Development Commission conducted services in St. Philips Church with more than five hundred people attending.

During the year, members of the Brunswick Town staff assisted with various projects at Somerset Place and Caswell-Neuse State Historic Sites and at Fort Dobbs. Assistance was also given to the survey team of the Office of Archives and History in locating and identifying features of historic significance in the Souport area. Other agencies requesting information included the Frying Pan Lightship Commission, the University of South Carolina, St. Mary's City Commission (Maryland), and the National Parks Service.

A number of individuals used research facilities at the site and many written requests for information were answered. Several Brunswick County high school students made a study of Brunswick Town for a history class project.

There was significant progress on the Nature Trail project last year. State Garden Club funds provided for the construction of a second bridge across Brunswick Pond, and several individual garden clubs donated materials for five new redwood picnic tables. The Nature Trail Committee also appropriated funds for printing fifty thousand copies of a completely revised and updated Nature Trail brochure. A new slide program which tells the

story of the Nature Trail project was prepared for the Garden Club of North Carolina, Inc., and will soon be available for showing. Any group or organization may borrow this program, free of charge, from the State Garden Club central office in Raleigh.

News media in this area gave excellent coverage of events at Brunswick Town last year. Articles and photo feature stories appeared in several local newspapers, and Brunswick Town was spotlighted in the "Carolina Crossroads" column of the Raleigh News and Observer. Local television stations filmed portions of the St. Philips church service for their area news program.

In September, information packets on Brunswick Town and other sites were prepared for Brunswick County teachers to promote school group visitation. Also, two departmental films were obtained from Raleigh for showing in Brunswick County schools.

Two new Brunswick Town State Historic Site highway signs were erected on NC 133 to direct visitors to the site.

Supplies of Brunswick Town and Nature Trail brochures were distributed to North Carolina Welcome Centers, several Chambers of Commerce, the Southport Boat Harbor and ferry terminals, the Southport-Brunswick County Library, the Brunswick County Welcome Wagon, the N. C. Fourth of July Festival Headquarters, and other public facilities throughout the state.

William G. Faulk, Jr.  
Historic Site Manager  
Brunswick Town



In February 1973 Newsletter there was an article by Margaret T. McMahan.

Her byline is familiar, and her articles have appeared in the Charleston News and Courier, Raleigh News and Observer, Presbyterian Journal, Fayetteville Observer, and other southern publications. These stories, sometimes accompanied by pen and pencil sketches, have won several awards, including two at the 1972 meeting of the North Carolina Society of County and Local Historians.

Mrs. Margaret Taylor McMahan is a native of Greensboro where she graduated from WCUNC, now UNC-G, with a major in English. She subsequently attended, among several other institutions, L'Ecole Francais in New York City, and taught school for several years in Canton, following her marriage in 1930 to the Reverend E. Donald McMahan, her time was divided between church work and historical activities.

Cumberland County and Fayetteville, where she now lives, provide her with subjects for numerous writings meticulously researched, though her interests have no geographical limits. Three of her published works have been John A. Oates and the Campbellton Children, Fayetteville Folks - Lines and Rhymes, and Presbyterians Anonymous - A Study in Character. Her current projects include a biography of General Braxton Bragg and a history of the Confederate Arsenal at Fayetteville.

Among the organizations that have attracted Mrs. McMahan is the Society of County and Local Historians, of which she has been secretary since 1967. Two years later her husband was elected treasurer of the same organization, thus forming an effective husband-wife team. They are a familiar pair at meetings of historical organizations, and both are avid readers and writers of history.

For her many years of research and promotion of historical activities, Mrs. McMahan deserves the accolade, "Friend of History."

#### MAY MEETING

Date: Monday, May 14, 1973

Time: 8 p.m.

Place: Camp Methodist Church Fellowship Hall, Shallotte

Program: Civil War in Brunswick County - Display of Guns and Artifacts -  
by R. G. Hobbs, Sr. and R. G. Hobbs, Jr.

#### SOCIETY OFFICERS FOR 1973

Mrs. Lucille D. Blake, President

Mr. Harold Aldridge, Vice President

Miss Helen Taylor, Secretary-Treasurer

Mrs. Harry Mintz, Program Committee

Mr. R. V. Asbury, Jr., Director and Editor of Newsletter

Mrs. Marie Rourk, Director

Mr. Harry Mintz, Chairman of Brunswick Town Preservation Committee

#### NEWSLETTER NEEDS YOUR ASSISTANCE

Anyone who has information concerning old documents, photographs, artifacts (Indian and Colonial) or other pertinent material which might be used in this newsletter, please send them to the address below. This is your paper as a member of the Society, and you are urged to contribute any material which would be appropriate and interesting for our readers.

R. V. Asbury, Jr., Editor