



# NEWSLETTER

BRUNSWICK COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
BRUNSWICK TOWN, P.O. BOX 356, SOUTHPORT, N.C.

Vol. XVII, No. I

FEBRUARY 1977

## UNCOVERING BRUNSWICK COUNTY'S MARITIME HERITAGE

Richard W. Lawrence  
Underwater Archaeologist  
N. C. Department of Cultural Resources

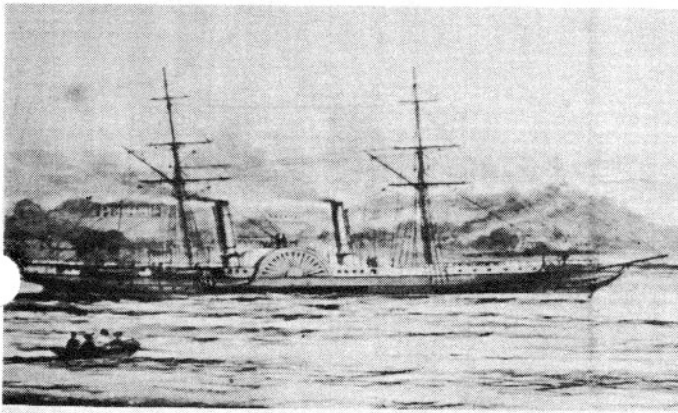
The coastal waters and rivers of Brunswick County today serve as an important economic resource and recreational outlet for the people of southeastern North Carolina. Fishing and shrimp boats take advantage of the abundant marine life in the area while cargo ships and tankers sail along the coast and up the region's main river, the Cape Fear. During the summer months thousands of tourists come to Brunswick County to enjoy the coastal beaches and the wide variety of recreational activities that the ocean has to offer. In addition to these obvious resources the waters of Brunswick County contain a unique record of the history of this area in the form of shipwreck sites and other submerged cultural remains. By examining the recorded accounts of shipwrecks in the area it is easy to see the significance their location and scientific investigation can play in understanding and interpreting the history of Brunswick County.

Most people, when they think of shipwrecks, envision sunken galleons, covered with marine growth, inhabited by schools of fish, and of interest only to the treasure hunter for the cargo they contain. This, however, is not always the case. In North Carolina, for example, there are very few recorded instances of ships going down with a treasure aboard, and a salvager would have a hard time making a living on the countless hulks that dot the state's coastal shores and waters. But a shipwreck contains a great wealth of information far beyond the physical remains of the vessel and its cargo. To the student of marine architecture, shipwrecks often represent the only way to determine how ships were designed and built in the past, as few shipbuilding records were kept until very recently. To the historian, the material associated with a shipwreck can provide

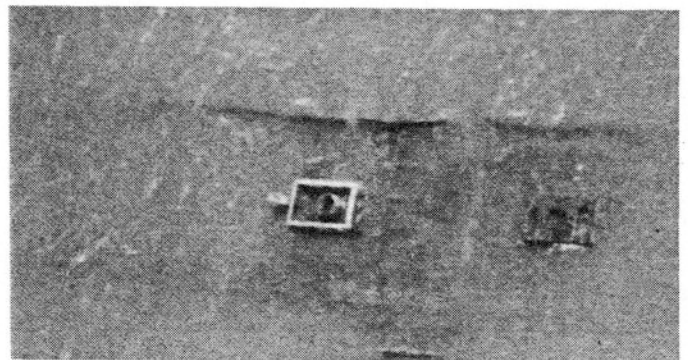
insight not only into shipboard life but also into patterns of trade and world economics. A shipwreck can also serve to confirm, disprove, or add to our understanding of a historic event. Finally, a shipwreck that has been properly excavated, recovered, and preserved can provide a visible and meaningful link to an important aspect of our cultural heritage — man's eternal relationship and struggle with the sea.



WHALER



Blockade runner VENUS was a typical Clyde River Steamer.



Aerial view of sunken blockade runner BENDIGO.

Since the earliest voyages by Europeans to the New World in the 16th century there have been accounts of shipwrecks in the Cape Fear area. The first reported shipwreck was in 1526 when the Spanish explorer, Lucas Vasquez de Ayllon visited the region. Ayllon had with him some 500 men and women from the Spanish West Indies, who were searching for a suitable region in which to form a colony. While attempting to enter the Cape Fear River, or the "Jordan River" as it was called by the Spaniards, one of Ayllon's ships and all its provisions was lost. The colonists landed on the Brunswick County side of the river, and quickly began work on a replacement vessel. The ship they built was the first to be constructed by Europeans in the New World. Dissatisfied with the swampy region in which they found themselves, the colonists sailed down the coast and founded a settlement on Winyaw Bay. This settlement was also abandoned due to the lack of provisions and the loss of many lives to disease. Ayllon returned to Santo Domingo in the winter of 1526 carrying with him only 150 of the original 500 colonists.

The next serious exploration of the Cape Fear area came in 1662 when Captain William Hilton sailed to the region on behalf of a group of settlers from New England who were searching for land to form a colony. These New Englanders did settle in the area but the colony was short lived and was abandoned in April of 1663. In May of the following year John Vassall entered the Cape Fear River with settlers from Barbados and established a colony along the Brunswick County side of the river. Other colonists arrived from Barbados and New England, and Vassall was named Governor of Clarendon County as the area was then called. Vassall's successor was Sir John Yeamans, appointed in 1665. Yeamans sailed from Barbados to Clarendon in October of 1665. This was the new Governor's first trip to

his colony and aboard his ships he carried the long awaited supplies that the settlers desperately needed. But as in the case of Ayllon the treacherous waters at the mouth of the Cape Fear proved too much for the vessels and Yeamans lost his main ship and all of her supplies. This was the first of several mishaps that were to befall the colony and by summer of 1667 all of the settlers had left the area.

The first permanent settlement of the Cape Fear River came in 1726 when colonists from South Carolina and the Albemarle Sound region of North Carolina arrived along the river's western bank. The first of these settlers was Maurice Moore who founded the town of Brunswick on his property. Moore picked his site for its suitability as a port, accessible to both small and large ships. The site was chosen well and in 1729 when the British Crown incorporated the area as a formal colony- New Hanover Precinct, Brunswick Town was made the county seat as well as the precinct's official port.

In 1748 one of the area's most interesting shipwrecks occurred in the river adjacent to Brunswick Town. This was the last year of the war between England and Spain known as "King George's War". The Spanish had been seizing ships entering and leaving the Cape Fear River, and in September of 1748 two Spanish privateers, the FORTUNA and the LORETTA, accompanied by a captured sloop, began shelling Brunswick Town. The surprised townspeople fled, and the Spaniards proceeded to pillage the town. Meanwhile, the colonists regrouped and under the leadership of William Dry, III, attacked the Spaniards with a force of some eighty men. The surviving Spaniards returned to their ship and renewed their bombardment of the town. The colonists returned fire with a small cannon, but after the first round the tube burst. While the colonists pondered their next course of action they were startled by a huge explosion from the river. When the smoke cleared the people of Brunswick Town were greeted with the sight of the FORTUNA sinking slowly beneath the water.

The cause for the explosion of the FORTUNA to this day remains a mystery. The LORETTA, having ventured further up the river, heard the explosion, returned, and commenced firing on the town. The LORETTA soon left, however, and Brunswick Town was never again directly attacked by the Spanish. After the Spaniards had left the colonists reportedly salvaged some of the material from the FORTUNA including anchors, guns and sails. It is also reported that a painting of Christ, Ecce Homo, was recovered from the wreck and is the same painting which today hangs in Saint James Church in Wilmington.

Although Brunswick Town soon lost its importance as a major sea port and eventually died out as a town, southeastern North Carolina continued to grow. An important part of this growth came about as a result of commercial shipping and trading. The region was well known for its production of tar, pitch, turpentine and other naval stores. Throughout this period the forces of nature continued to take a heavy toll of ships both attempting to enter the river and those trying to skirt the hazardous Frying Pan Shoals off the tip of Cape Fear. It was not until the Civil War that this region of North Carolina was again to witness naval military action.

During the Civil War national attention focused upon southeastern North Carolina more than any other time in its history. The one major reason for this was blockade running. The unique geography of the Cape Fear region, coupled with the strong Confederate defenses constructed in the area made Wilmington an ideal port for the ships attempting to run President Lincoln's blockade. Added to this was the fact that a railroad ran from Wilmington to Petersburg, Virginia; so the supplies badly needed by Lee's Army of Northern Virginia could easily be transported from Wilmington. As the war progressed and the Union Navy was able to bring more steam powered vessels into blockade duty off the Cape Fear coast, the men engaged in blockade running had to change their tactics. Instead of sailing ships, they began to use steam driven vessels to run the blockade.

The preferred type of vessel was a paddle wheeled steamer commonly known as a Clyde River Steamer. These ships, named for the Clyde River in Scotland where they were built, were designed with a sleek raked-back profile. They were built to have a shallow draft, and great speed to avoid capture by the larger, slower Union ships. A great many of these blockade runners were successful and tremendous profits were made both on the incoming and outgoing voyages. However, a large number failed in their attempts, and were either captured or destroyed by the Union vessels. Along the Cape Fear coast at least fifty of these blockade runners were sunk or run aground. In addition, both the Union and Confederate fleets lost ships in this area. At least fifteen of these Civil War wrecks occurred in the waters of Brunswick County.

Lockwood Folly Inlet was the scene of a number of shipwrecks during the Civil War. One of these vessels, the BENDIGO, was a side wheel steamer that was attempting to run the blockade and enter the Cape Fear River on January 3, 1864. While hugging the coast so as to avoid detection, the BENDIGO hit the bar just north of Lockwood Folly Inlet and ran hard aground. The crew set the vessel afire to prevent its capture and rowed to safety in the ship's boats. The following day the USS FAHKEE spotted the BENDIGO and sent a party to investigate. It was found that the BENDIGO was only partially burned and that there was seven feet of water in the hold. The Union officers decided to attempt to pull the BENDIGO off the bar. On January 9, 1864, the USS MONTGOMERY, the USS DAYLIGHT, and the USS IRON AGE attached lines to the BENDIGO and slowly inched the blockade runner off the bar. Suddenly, the main hawser connecting the USS IRON AGE to the BENDIGO slipped and the Union ship was accidentally run aground. Unable to free either ship, the Union officers decided to destroy them both. Soon the Confederate blockade runner and the Union gunboat were ablaze while the remaining Union ships shelled the two wrecks to complete their destruction.

Following the Civil War southeastern North Carolina recovered slowly as did all the South. Shipping continued to play a major role in the area's economy, and as in the past, many vessels were lost in the treacherous waters around Cape Fear. In 1874 the United States Lifesaving Service was expanded to include the coast of North Carolina. A total of 20 stations were established along the North Carolina coast. Two of these stations, Cape Fear Lifesaving Station located on Bald Head Island adjacent to the lighthouse, and Oak Island Lifesaving Station, which is still in operation today, were located in Brunswick County. The men on duty at these stations kept a constant watch for ships in distress and would patrol the beach for signs of a shipwreck. The fact that shipwrecks generally occurred in the worst of weather made their job that much more difficult. Yet the records of these life saving stations are full of accounts of men risking their lives to save the unknown seaman in distress along North Carolina's shores. David Stick in his book, Graveyard of the Atlantic, tells the story of one of these lifesavers; Dunbar Davis, keeper of the Oak Island Lifesaving Station. From August 28 to August 30, 1893, while a hurricane battered the coasts of North and South Carolina, Dunbar Davis assisted in the rescue of 28 men from five different ships in trouble off the Brunswick County coast. During this same hurricane, eight other vessels and their crews were lost off the coast of North Carolina, never to be heard of again.

In recent years the number of vessels lost off the coast of North Carolina has been drastically reduced. This is due to modern technological advances; such as stronger and more powerful ships, improved navigational devices, and more accurate means for predicting and broadcasting the weather. Mariners still, however, have a healthy respect for the waters of North Carolina.

The ships mentioned here are but a few of the hundreds that have been lost in the Cape Fear area. The number of shipwrecks in all of North Carolina approaches 2,000 and may well exceed this number. These sunken vessels represent

a vast storehouse of information concerning North Carolina's past. Unfortunately, many shipwreck sites are being threatened by the activities of man. Coastal development such as dredging and channelization endangers many submerged archaeological remains. In addition, many scuba divers thoughtlessly destroy sites by removing material, either for its monetary value or as a \*souvenir of their exploits. The North Carolina Legislature recognized the need to protect the state's submerged cultural remains and in 1967 passed a law to this effect. In addition to making state property all material that has been in state waters for more than ten years, this law called for the creation of a professional staff to locate, identify, assess, and protect these shipwreck sites and other underwater cultural remains. Since this time the underwater archaeological research unit has located over one hundred sites in the state. Some of these sites, such as the BENDIGO and the ELLA, are in Brunswick County. Many other Brunswick County shipwrecks have been researched and a few, as in the case of the FORTUNA, have been the subject of search and survey activities. But more is needed than this. The people of the state of North Carolina must be made aware of the significance of the state's submerged cultural resources, and the role that their discovery and systematic investigation can have in interpreting North Carolina's history. This is particularly true in areas such as Brunswick County where history has been tied so closely with the sea and many sites remain, dating from the earliest periods of European exploration up to the present time.

XX

FEBRUARY MEETING

DATE: March 14, 1977      TIME: 8:00 pm

PLACE: Brunswick Town Visitor's Center

PROGRAM: "History of Brunswick County Library Services"  
 Mr. Phillip Barton, Director of Library Services, speaker

The following transcription; a Confederate letter written at Fort Anderson, is on display in the Exhibit Area of the Brunswick Town Visitor's Center.

Fort Anderson N.C.  
January 21st 1865

Dear Kate:

Yours of the 13th met me retreating from Bald Head: We evacuated on the 15th burnt everything that would Burn and came over to Smithville remained there but a short time before we received marching orders. We are now garrisoned at Fort Anderson. Don't know how soon we may be compelled to leave. There are several vessels of the Fleet in the river below us. Gen'l Hoke is on the other side of the River opposite us. we hear their pickets and sharp shooters every hour in the day - sometimes it seems to me that it is more than picket firing Dan, & John were both at Fisher from Friday night until the fort was reduced which was at 11 oclock Sunday night- I am anxious to hear from them I am afraid both are killed the assault was made on the Fort at 3. o'clock and report says the Yankees threw down their guns and took their bowie knives and cut the throats of the wounded even. We heard that 3 Companies. E. G. & D. did not surrender until the last man was killed I can't believe this tho, no, one would be so foolish as to make an effort to resist when over powered. I don't see how they could live at all when there was 150 shells bursting at them every minute for 28 hours. It was a fearful sight to be at a distance from it. How much more fearful to have them hurled toward us. There was one Reg't of Hokes Brigade in the Fort Don't know which one. It really seems that we are a whipped people we get the worst on every side- I think Fort Fisher would have been in our hands to, day had Gen'l Bragg let Gen'l Hoke attack the enemy when he asked him to do so. Bragg has had bad luck wherever he has been, and always will he is too fond of retreating or too fearful of being taken by the enemy. I heard today that the prisoners captured at the Fort were on Bald Head. I also heard that they embarked on Monday for point Lookout which is true I think, as the news came by a negro who made his escape on Monday night, he had to crawl about half a mile by the pickets after passing the Yank pickets he had to run the Blockade by Hokes lines Our men have very rough times here they eat sleep and drink in the trenches and by their guns in the Fort. It has been raining and blowing ever since yesterday I am writing now in the gov't stables at Anderson which are my Head Quarters any place to keep the rain off - I slept in the Stables last night & night before - I cant say when I'll go home not soon tho: I am so uneasy about Dan, & John. I can't feel in the spirit of writing I will write you again when I get to a place where I can seat myself and have time. I keep my horse saddled day and night. Direct to Fort Anderson.

as ever yours