NEWSLETTER

BRUNSWICK COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
BOX 874, SHALLOTTE, N.C. 28459

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BLOCKADE RUNNING
TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY

The Brunswick County Historical Society's twenty-fifth anniversary was celebrated June 7, 1981, at Brunswick Town State Historical Site. Members welcomed their guests, among whom where Charter Member Harry Mintz. Special recognition was given to Mrs. Marie Rourk, who had served the longest time as president of the Society, and to Miss Helen Taylor who had served the longest time as secretary and treasurer.

Much interest was shown in the display of artifacts arranged by Mrs. Gwendolyn Causey. Other displays included old maps of Brunswick County and some recent historical publications. Mrs. Lottie Ludlum presented a large book in which she had arranged previously published copies of the Society's NEWSLETTER.

Mr. William A. Faulk introduced the Staff of Brunswick Town State Historical Site and related some of the recent progress there. He also shared with the group the sad news of Dr. Stanley South's heart surgery and his loss of Mrs. South who died some time ago.

Guests and members enjoyed the concluding social hour with punch and a three-tier anniversary cake as planned by Mrs. Lottie Lublum with the assistance of Miss Helen Taylor and Mrs. Sarah Kopp.

BLOCKADE RUNNING OFF BRUNSWICK COUNTY

Ray Wyche

One of the most important battles in the War Between the States took place off the Brunswick County coast. It was a strange battle; it lacked the dramatic flair of the Monitor-Merrimac clash, yet its results determined to a great degree the outcome of the war. History books give it only a line or two, despite the fact that the battle had a direct bearing on the South's ability to field an army. It lasted four years but there was little bloodshed.

The battle, of course was blockade running.

From April, 1861, when President Lincoln issued the proclamation of blockade, until the fall of Wilmington in February, 1865, resourceful Confederate and English seamen pitted their wits and seamanship against the might of the U.S. Navy in an attempt to arm the South and to get the South's cotton to Europe's mills.

Cotton was king in the South just prior to the war. The eleven states comprising the Confederacy were unsuited for supplying an army. Industry and transportation were almost non-existent. The South's resources and energies went into production of cotton, the white gold which enabled the region to import the goods it saw no need to manufacture.

Lincoln's strategy in calling the blockade was a good one. If the Union could seal off the South from Europe's arms and supplies, the Confederacy would soon collapse.

But the Cape Fear estuary offered more trouble than the Yankees had anticaped. Wilmington became the favorite port of blockade runners due to the geography of the region. Baldhead Island and Frying Pan Shoals in effect provided two inlets into the Cape Fear, forcing the blockading U.S. Navy to double its guard of the area. The two inlets were Western Bar, guarded by Fort Caswell, and New Inlet (now closed, it was located just south of Federal Point), which was watched over by Fort Fisher, the world's strongest earthen bastion.

The developed procedure for getting Europe's arms into the South and the South's cotton to Europe's mills was to transship these items to the sea island ports of Nassau, Bermuda, and Havanna. The cotton and war materials were consigned to a firm, usually English, with offices in these ports. From these ports the supplies were transferred for the trip to Europe and for the final run into the Confederacy.

As the war wore on the U.S. tightened its noose around the South's ports, and it soon became evident that a special kind of ship was required to successfully get in and out of the South.

The classic blockade runner, which began to appear about mid-1862, was from 300 to 1,200 tons. She was extremely fast--some could sail at 18 knots--and were sidewheelers or propeller ships. The blockade runner was a shallow draft so as to run close inshore, painted a dull grey, and had telescoping funnels so as to better hide against the shoreline. (Much of the shoreline during the war was heavily wooded, providing the blockade runners with a backdrop against which to hide.)

Ships engaged in blockade running had a short life expectancy and were built accordingly. They were flimsily constructed and some of them even broke up in the heavy seas on the maiden voyages from Europe--many were built on the Clyde and Mersey Rivers of Scotland--to the Sea Islands. But the venture still attracted Europe's financiers and seamen; during much of the war a successful trip in and out of the Confederacy produced enough income to pay for the ship, the crew's expenses, and leave the owners with a profit.

Avoiding detection was the unarmed blockade runner's chief weapon. Normally the blockade ships were stationed in three concentric rings around Cape Fear, their line of guard ships reaching from Little River to Wrightsville Beach. To escape the watchful eyes of the Union sailors, the blockade runner usually made landfall from 10 to 50 miles north or south of Cape Fear and from these points sneaked along the shore, in the dark of night and with all lights extinguished, to New Inlet or Western Bar. Once in range of the guns of Caswell or Fisher, the blockade runner was safe because U.S. Navy ships were reluctant to come within range of the powerful forts.

Once discovered by the Federal ships, the blockade runner made all haste to get within Fisher's and Caswell's protection. The Union ships fired upon the runners they discovered but sometimes reluctantly; if a runner and cargo could be captured intact, it was sold at auction and some of the proceeds went to the Yankee captain and crew. So in their efforts to capture rather than destroy the blockade runners, some Union sailors failed to halt the flow of supplies into the South.

If it appeared that capture or destruction was inevitable, the blockade runner captain usually ran his ship aground. This maneuver enabled the confederates to salvage some of the cargo, protected by the horsedrawn artillery batteries of Caswell and Fisher. Some of the cargo of the Ranger, which was run aground off Holden Beach, was salvaged; some residents a few years ago remembered hearing their parents talk of wearing clothes made from cloth salvaged from the Ranger.

A pilot familiar with Cape Fear was an absolute necessity for blockade runners, and reportedly sixty of these pilots at one time lived in Smithville (now Southport). Since there was no chance to transfer the pilot after crossing the bar, these men spent considerable time in Nassau and Bermuda, awaiting the next run to the South. The pay at one time in the war for a pilot for each successful trip was $2,000.

The skilled pilots earned their keep; the final run in was a cat and mouse affair. There were no channel markers and the pilot depended upon his memory for a successful trip. Soundings were taken with a lead line covered with tallow; from the color and texture of the sand adhering to the lead line, the pilot was able to tell at what position the ship was in.

Once under the protection of the forts, the blockade runner showed a faint blue light to let the Confederate gunners know that a friend was approaching.

The South offered a ready market for all manufactured goods, and the profits in trading in cotton and war materials were astronomical. Shipowners turned to merchandise which fetched the highest profits--millinery, perfume, hoop skirts, liquor--until the Confederate government outlawed the importation of any commodity other than war supplies and food.

In the non-industrial South, everyday items were precious during the war. Simple objects such as sewing needles were extremely scarce and sold for outlandish sums. The lure of high profits led many of blockade runner crewman to stock up on needles, hatpins, and other small items to peddle in the streets of Wilmington for his own profit.

As is usual in wartime, the cities directly connected with blockade running changed drastically. Money from the huge profits and high salaries was spent lavishly. Many of the finer families of the city moved to the country for the duration of the war to get away from the rowdiness which prevailed in the streets, renting their homes to ship captains for large sums.

The presence of about half of the U.S. Navy off its shores during the latter stages of the war had its effect on Brunswick residents. Small fishing boats and inland traders were captured if found away from protection of the forts. Local salt works, consisting of large flat pans heated with wood fires to produce salt by evaporation, were favorite targets for Union ships.

Runaway slaves, labelled "intelligent contraband" by the Union sailors, often escaped to the Federal ships via small boats.

The day of high profits--and profits more than patriotism was the driving force behind blockade running since most of the ships were owned by English interests--ended, of course, with the fall of Wilmington. General Lee had said that his armies could not exist for 30 days after the fall of Wilmington; Appomatox came shortly after the Cape Fear was sealed.

Records of blockade runners are non-exisitent or poorly maintained, partly to evade the rather hazy issue of England's neutrality in America's war. Names of ships were changed frequently upon new ownership, and names of lost ships were reused on newer vessels. For example, there were three Kates mentioned in official records and it is thought that two of these vessels began life with different names.

It has been estimated that there were over 1,800 violations of the blockade of the South during the Civil War. Documented figures show that about sixty-five vessels were sunk attempting to run the blockade into the Cape Fear. Some thirty-eight of these lost vessels have been located and several of these wrecks have been visited by divers. The state museum at Fort Fisher has numerouse artifacts recovered from blockade runners.

Some of the wrecks off Brunswick's shores can be seen today at low tides. The Ranger of Holden Beach was run aground January 11, 1864, and burned. Much of her cargo was salvaged. The Vesta, located under the fishing pier at Sunset Beach (until covered by the sand) was run aground the same day after running out of fuel. The Bendigo (formerly the Milly), the U.S. Iron Age, and the Elizabeth are all in Lockwoods Folly Inlet. The Iron Age ran aground trying to salvage the grounded Elizabeth, and the Bendigo, thinking the wreck of the Elizabeth was a blockade ship, ran aground trying to avoid it.

The Georgianna McCaw went down on June 2, 1864 on Western Bar, and the Spunkie came to grief on the same spot a few months earlier. The Antonica (formerly Herald) was sunk off Frying Pan Shoals in December, 1863.

Other wreck sites are the Dare, off Sunset Beach, and the Arabian and the Petrel off Baldhead.

NEXT MEETING - CONCORD METHODIST CHURCH, Supply, N.C.

MONDAY AUGUST 10, 1981 - 8 PM