



# NEWSLETTER

BRUNSWICK COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
PO BOX 874, SHALLOTTE, NC 28459

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## MISSION STATEMENT

To collect, preserve, study, evaluate and publicize the history of Brunswick County, NC. To devote meetings to presentation of materials about Brunswick County and the Lower Cape Fear through lectures, slides, and discussion. To publish a newsletter which contains news of the Society's activities, research papers and articles that pertain to genealogy.

## Society Officers

For the 2016 & 2017 Term

President: Richard Hollembeak  
Vice-President: Sally Robinson  
Secretary: Roberta Brady  
Treasurer: Bob Armour  
Directors: James Robinson  
Jim Marlowe  
Dave Lewis

Newsletter Editor: Dave Lewis

## BCHS Website

[www.bchs1764.org](http://www.bchs1764.org)

Webmaster: Jimmy Green



## FEBRUARY MEETING TO BE HELD AT BEMC IN SUPPLY, NC FEBRUARY 12, 2018 7:30 P.M.

The next meeting of the *Brunswick County Historical Society* will be held on Monday, February 12 at the Brunswick Electric Membership Corporation Building, 795 Ocean Highway West, Supply, NC. The meeting begins at 7:30 P.M. We always meet the 2nd Monday in February, May, August and November.

The February 2018 issue of the *NEWSLETTER* began the 59th Volume. Volume I, Number 1 was printed September 1961. A complete set of the Newsletter from September 1961 to November 2017 can be found in the Wilson Library at UNC-Chapel Hill, NC and at the New Hanover County Public Library North Carolina Room in Wilmington, NC. There were no publications of Volume 17, #3 & 4 (1977) and Volume 18, #1 (1978).

## Program

Mr. Richard Powell from Southport will return as our guest speaker for the evening. Richard holds a Bachelor's and Master's degree from MIT and is a noted historian researching the lives and events which took place before, during and after the founding period of America. His topic will be: "Washington City Afire: The British Take Revenge". A story reflecting the burning of Washington DC, August 1814.

## Dues Dues Dues

*DUES are now payable unless you are a Life Member.* The annual dues are \$15.00 for an active member or \$150.00 to become a Life Member. Checks may be mailed to the *BCHS* in care of Bob Armour or bring check or cash to the February meeting. Use the membership application found on page 7 for contact changes. Make checks payable to the *Brunswick County Historical Society*.

*Happy Valentines Day*

## Captain Thomas Mann Thompson

*Editors note:* Letters from our ancestors leave us a record of their lives. As genealogists and historians we are looking for more than their birth, death and marriage dates. Letters will give us insight to their life during a time years long ago. Here is a letter from Capt. Thompson to his daughter Lilly giving us a glimpse into his character and into the lives of local blockade runners, pilots and seafaring men.

This letter is the property of Cecil North Thompson of Orlando, Florida. He is the GGGrandson of Joseph T. Thompson, Capt. Thompson's brother.

Capt. Thomas Mann Thompson, Jr. was born about 1831 in Brunswick County to Thomas Thompson, Sr. and Rebecca J. Rogers. He married Mary Eliza Mintz November 5, 1854 in Brunswick County. He died March 22, 1907 and is buried in the Old Smithville Burying Grounds in Southport.

Transcribed as written.

Southport N. Caro.  
Tuesday, Nov. 24, 1896

Dear Lilly,

You have asked me to tell you something that seems more like a dream than a reality. I have forgotten nearly all about my blockade career. As well as I remember I began running the blockade about the last of Feby. 1864. Left here on Str - (steamer) "Emma" as passenger for Nassau. When we arrived there I was employed as a pilot on her. Made three trips in and out making seven times I ran the blockade on the "Emma" including the time I was a passenger. I then joined the str "Flora" made two round trips on her. Joined the str "Florie" came out from Bermuda - sprang a leak returned - joined str "Thistle"- ran blockade one time on her. Then joined str "Atlanta" ran eight times on her - then joined str "Armstrong" ran three times on her - joined str "Let Her Be" ran six times on her. Joined str "Coquett" ran blockade one time on her. Joined str "Index" ran three times on her. Went on str "Elizabeth" and ran blockade one time on her. I ran blockade from Feby. 24, 1864 until a few days be-

fore the fall of Fisher. Made thirty four trips and was fortunate enough never to have been captured. I came in on the "Atlanta" once when there were thirteen of the Yankee blockaders in sight all lying around the bar in about two hundred yards of each other. I picked out the widest space between them and came full speed between them. They fired at us but did no damage. Another time I came in by one of them that was anchored in the channel on the bar so that I had to come within about five feet of her and never a sound did I hear from her. I thought at first I would run into and sink her - but saw that I could pass a few feet of her without running ashore, so thought better to get by if I had room, than to take the chance of disabling our ship and being captured by the enemy's launches. Once, we were fired upon by a ship and the ball passed between the Captain and myself. We were standing upon the bridge about four feet apart. It staggered both of us- but it was spent ball or it would have stunned us. It fell about fifty yards beyond the ship. Another thing happened - I came in by the blockade squadron in the day time and all this took while I was running on the steamer "Atlanta". There is one thing I wish to mention, not on myself, but on one of old Smithville's bravest of boy's. It was on the steamer "Armstrong", from Bermuda- bound to Wilmington, N.C. We had a heavy northern gale blowing - the ship was laboring very hard and we had to carry a heavy pressure of steam and our steam pipe bursted. The engineers, firemen and all left the engine rooms and ran up on deck. We were then left to the mercy of a heavy wind and sea. I had just gone down to my room when I heard the squealing of the steam and ran up to the deck, the leadsman coming for me. He said Capt. wished to see me. As I went into the pilot house he said "what is best to do - she will roll herself to pieces". I said - host the jib and get the ship before the wind. We did so and all this time she was steam from stem to stern. The engineers and firemen began to look around to see if any of the men were missing, if so they were scalded to death - all were found but the Smithville boy- he had disappeared. When they did return down, they found the oiler, the Smithville boy at work with his white lead and canvass. He had the pipes nearly ready to get steam up again. It was not his duty to repair the damage though he took in the situation and knew that the pipe must be fixed at once to save the lives of all



trade and was in Bermuda out of work. We had a full number of engineers – so I prevailed up the Capt. to give him an Oilers place. This brave boy was George Price. After we got steam up we had to go under a light pressure and by this time the wind had moderated. We sighted the land next morning to the southward of Charleston. We came along slowly until within about fifty miles of Cape Fear. We got close to the beach and came to anchor so that we could do a little more to our steam pipe. Just before anchoring we saw a signal just at the point of the woods on the beach. It was Federal soldiers seven in number who had been captured by the Confederates and had made their escape and reached the coast thinking that they could get to a Federal ship. They were nearly starved. We showed them the Confederate flag – they came down the beach and waved us to take them on board. I took a boat and crew and brought them to the ship where we both fed and clothed them for they were nearly naked. We gave them all they wished to eat. We also had seven of our own soldiers on board who had been captured by the Federals and taken north and made their escape to Halifax and thence to Bermuda, two lieuts (lieutenants) and five privates. We fitted out with a weeks provisions and landed them with our mail. This was done for fear of being captured on getting into harbor. Of course the Federals were held prisoner until turned over to Gen. Whiting in Wilmington which was done three days after landing. We got steam and passed on way and crossed the bar half hour before sundown. The brave boy who faced the steam and repaired the broken pipe when it was the duty of others, and I were home before dark. One other incident – a little chase when on the steamer “Let Her Be”. We crossed the bar about eight o’clock on night – sighted a blockader in hot pursuit of us – lost sight of her in about an hour – we thought she had given up. Our ship was very deeply loaded and there was quite a sea – so that we were all awash from stem to stern. We slowed down so that we could go a little dryer. Next morning just as day began to show I walked aft with my glasses and took a look astern. There was the blue-jacket crawling along after us about two miles astern. We had to go full speed again and there was a much larger sea than when we were inshore. I think Capt. Nemo must have been along with us on that ship and that was the “Nautilus” that we read

of – for we were as much under water as above it. I think that fellow wanted to capture us for he did not give up the chase until about four o’clock that afternoon. By that time were six or seven miles from him. He gave us sixteen hours of chase of about one hundred and sixty miles!

### *Captain Thomas Mann Thompson*

Cecil Thompson writes, “when war broke out, both my GGGrandfather, Joseph T. Thompson and his brother, Thomas Mann Thompson, made a living piloting ships through the northern blockade. Many pilots were captured and many ships lost trying to evade the blockade squadron. Since there was no place for these pilots to disembark after crossing the bar and evading the blockaders, they had to remain on board till the ship reached its destination. The pilot then re-employed on a ship returning to their home port. Pilots took control of the ships only during the transit over the bar going into or coming out of port. Most of the blockade squadron kept at anchor between the bar and the mouth of the river, just out of cannon range of Forts Fisher and Caswell. Once over the bar seaward bound it was up to the Captain to evade or out run the blockade squadron.”

### **John Mercer**

A letter written by John Mercer of Brunswick County to Alfred Galloway who moved from Brunswick to Madison County, Mississippi.

Lockwoods Folly  
30 September 1854

Dear Friend:

As it has been a long time since you wrote me and since I have heard from you, I have concluded to avail myself of the present opportunity of writing you a few lines calculating you would occasionally like to hear from your old and long enjoyed native land and also from your relatives and friends. Myself, wife and six children are at present all in the enjoyment of reasonable health. My old mother and father are yet in the land of the living but as a matter of course, very weak and feeble, not able to get about half their time. Your relatives on here are at present, so far as I know, all well and doing well.

Some already in good circumstances and others getting rich. There has not many of the citizens of Brunswick died since my last letter to you. June last Mr. Charles V. Fullwood died after a long and painful illness of some five months, leaving five minor children.

Times have greatly changed since you were in North Carolina. Though the State is old and to some extent abandoned, her resources are but begun to be developed. Since the spirit of emigration has abated new energies, new enterprises and renewed zeal seem to have taken place. We have a new court house about completed, costing above \$10,000, and a new Academy 40 ft. square costing \$25 to \$30, all in Smithville. Considerable improvements are going on in Smithville in the way of building and in other ways. Wilmington has improved rapidly for the last ten years, and since the railroad from Wilmington to Charleston has been put in operation additional prosperity to the town and adjacent country may reasonably be expected.

On account of extreme dry weather the past Spring and part of the summer, some exceptions a general thing throughout the Union.

We have recently been visited by a severe gale on this coast resulting in the destruction of a great many vessels and valuable lives. The gale started and was at its worst about the 8th and 9th of September. The Schooner, John Potts Brown, was wrecked and came ashore on the beach at a little west of the mouth of Lockwoods Folly. The crew and passengers were 14 in number and but one was saved. I name this because it was here among us.

I must not omit telling you that we have had considerable excitement in this State last month in regard to the election of Governor, members of the Legislature, etc.. There never was so much rejoicing in old Brunswick at any result before as at the defeat of the Whigs by the Democrats. The Whigs brought out Russell and we, the Democrats, ran Col. Gaston Meares, son of William B. Meares, deceased. Though we have been in the minority for the last ten years, we beat 25 votes, we also beat 19 votes for Governor in Old Brunswick. So you see that Brunswick is again right side up and we hope so to remain for all time. Thomas Bragg, the Dem-

ocrat, beat Gen. Dockery, the Whig, about 2400 votes in the State. We have some 22 majority in the Legislature on the ballot.

I could write for three hours more, but as it would be neither profitable nor interesting will close with a request that you soon write and please let me hear something from yourself and family and our Brunswick acquaintances, the Locks, the Portevants, Thomas A. Smith and family, and others you may think of.

Respectfully your friend and humble servant,  
*J.W. Mercer*

*Editors Note: The above letter was transcribed by Ida Brooks Kellam for the Stamp Defiance Chapter, D.A.R. in 1937. Thousands of North Carolinians left for parts south during the antebellum period. They were looking for new cheap farm land and the untouched stock of trees for tar, pitch and turpentine. Former southeastern North Carolinians can be found everywhere, but especially in Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Mississippi and Texas.*

## **Gentlemen Pilots of the Cape Fear**

*Source: Article first appeared in the Wilmington Magazine, October/November issue 1995. Written by Gary Keaton.*

A unique group of area residents stages, without fanfare or special announcement, one of the Cape Fear River's most majestic events. They have been doing it officially since 1751-unofficially for as long as ships have sailed across the bar and into the mouth of the Cape Fear.

The Cape Fear River Pilots bring the great ships that call on our port to the docks safely and without incident and return them again to the open sea. In the earliest days of commerce in this area, what could not be grown or produced locally was imported by ship. It became evident that captains without benefit of experience on the currents or recent knowledge of the Cape Fear's shifting channel, were tragically ill-equipped to navigate safely. As early as 1666, it was written in "A Brief Description of the Province of Carolina" that, ...the



river, now called Cape Fear River...is barred at the entrance, but there is a channel close aboard The Cape that will convey in safety a ship of three hundred tons, and as soon as the ship is over the bar, the river is five or six fathoms deep for a hundred miles from the sea. This bar is great security to the colony against a foreign invasion, the channel being hard to find by those that have not experience of it, and yet safe enough by those that know it."

So it fell upon local captains, familiar with their home waters, to meet the incoming ships and guide them into port and back out again.

The attraction of making a living on the river where they had grown up and had come to know as well as you could know a river as spirited as the Cape Fear, was too much to ignore. It wasn't long before the mouth of the river was teeming with crews rowing about in search of a ship. The race to board a ship was fiercely competitive since to the winner went the spoils of piloting and to the losers the frustration of hard work gone unrewarded.

Pilots soon discovered they could secure more ships by forming alliances with other crews. Top crews were able to buy bigger and faster boats, stay out in search of ships longer and rotate schedules in order to have fresh crews on the water at all times. This made for saver passages up river as more rested and alert pilots secured an increased number of ships. Once this system was in place, many independent "outsider" pilots not allied with other crews, soon quit for lack of work. Established groups now had more time to train younger pilots through apprenticeship programs and less time to worry about competing for ships. These groups eventually consolidated to become the Association of Pilots.

To bring further order to piloting on the river, the Colonial Congress, in 1751 and again in 1764, set guidelines and created a system under which pilots would be governed by the Board of Commissioners of Navigation and Pilotage of the Cape Fear River. The Board recognized the need for full time pilots, conscientious training and 24 hour a day availability. Up until this time, the river might have been swamped with pilots on a clear spring or summer day, but often, during winter's harsh days, a ship's

captain might have difficulty securing a pilot. To ensure the needs of the river where met, the Board certified twelve qualified pilots. Only through attrition could other pilots be certified. This system has been maintained to the present, through fine tuned over the years.

During the Civil war, Pilots were crucial to Blockade Runners in the Cape Fear. At times up to 34 Federal ships sat in and around the mouth of the Cape Fear River on both sides of the bar. Blockade runner ships, with the aid of a Cape Fear Pilot, would slip out of the river in the dark of night on their way to ports of supply. Sometimes they went undetected by the blockade ships. Often, however, they went under a barrage of Federal fire. As one pilot remarked, he would often get his bearings on the darkest night "by a taste of lead."

The successful pilot was well paid for his blockade running duty and because of the devaluation of Confederate currency, crews demanded and were paid in gold, up to \$3000.00 in gold to be split among pilot and crew. Southport saw prosperity in the midst of the hardships of war because many pilots spent their gold as freely as it was earned. Beautiful homes were built by pilots on and around the Southport waterfront, and those that haven't fallen to hurricanes and fires remain today as an elegant testimony to the area's connection with the past and with the river. The Wilmington-Cape Fear River Pilots Association was formed in 1921. Soon after its formation, the Board of Commissioners asked the Association to submit fourteen names for approval and pilot certification. As it happened seven were named St. George; some brothers, some cousins, some uncles, some not sure if they were related but with the same name none the less. Independent hopefuls cried foul and the retort, "You have to be born into piloting!" can still be heard today.

While the Board later added an article to the Provisions of Pilotage designed to prevent nepotism, professionalism is still the bottom line.

Although you can't be "born into" piloting, it may be about that difficult to become certified. Vacancies only come open through attrition and, thus far, no pilots have quit, except to retire. Approved ap-

plicants must participate in the Cape Fear Pilots Apprentice Program, which can last up to four years. During the apprenticeship, the future pilot becomes familiar with the channel of the river, different types of vessels, water movement, tides, weather, ranges, meeting and passing and the thousands of other details that a pilot might face with only seconds to respond. The only fatal passages for any river pilot occurred in the 1870's, when ten pilots lost their lives. The Cape Fear River Pilots have been respected for years for having the best safety record in the country on the hardest river that pilots have to work.

## Fort Caswell Rifle Range

*Source: Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range, Inc. website.*

The United States War Department proposed the construction of a rifle range on January 21, 1918, adjacent to Fort Caswell, NC, for small arms training of soldiers "in view of the immediate necessity for instruction of men destined for over-seas duty" in World War I. After World War II, the rifle range was declared surplus and sold. Since then the elements have taken a toll on this piece of history.

On December 31, 2013, the Fort Caswell Historic District and the dis-contiguous Rifle Range Target Pit was officially added to the National Register of Historic Places.

*The following is copied from the National Register of Historic Places:*

Rifle Range  
Fort Caswell Historic District  
Brunswick County, North Carolina  
N. side of Foxfire Trace, between Pinehurst Drive and Bunker Court, Caswell Dunes development  
1918  
Contributing Structure

A World War I rifle range, also called a rifle pit or rifle butt, which was part of Fort Caswell is located a little over two miles to the west-northwest of the west boundary of the main historic district. The structure is located in a vegetated dune area in a residential section of the Caswell Dunes resort.

This land was formerly part of the Fort Caswell military installation. The long concrete structure is mostly below grade and is composed of three sections that together measure a total of 184 feet in length. It is open on top and the north wall is taller than the south wall so that the side walls slope from north to south. From the interior the north wall is 9 1/2 feet tall and the south wall is 6 1/2 feet tall. The outer walls range from about 8 inches to 1 foot thick. The structure's width varies among the three sections.

The easternmost portion, which served as a storage room for target supplies and tools, is 10 feet wide and about 14 feet long. This portion originally had a roof but it is gone. A square opening pierces the east end, while a doorway on the west end leads to the center section. The center section is 4 1/2 feet wide and 76 feet long and served as the walkway between the storage room and the target area at the western end. The westernmost portion is nearly 14 feet wide and 94 feet long. A door opening connects the center and western sections. "May 20th, 1918" is inscribed in the south wall of the middle section.

During World War I, the military used the rifle range for target practice. A soldier-operated mechanism that held the targets was located in the westernmost section. Armed soldiers, who were several hundred yards north of the structure, would attempt to shoot the targets, which were moved up and down by range operators in the pit.

## For the Brunswick County Historical Society January 2018

*From: Norma Lee Eckard*

The Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range would like to thank the Brunswick County Historical Society for the opportunity to share the history of the 1918 Fort Caswell Rifle Range located in Caswell Beach. The rifle range was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2013 and a non profit was formed in 2015. The mission of the Friends of Fort Caswell is to stabilize and then preserve the target pit structure for future generations.



In November, 731 names of Brunswick County veterans from WWI were posted on the website at [www.caswellriflerange.com](http://www.caswellriflerange.com). After that our Historian/Writer, Amy Eckard, began profiling veterans and posting stories about their experiences in France. So far she has profiled Susan Adkins Williams, born and raised in Southport, who was one of the first forty nurses selected to serve in Brest, France, at the naval hospital. Then, there were three African Americans designated for combat duty, Robert Bollie Stanley and William Frederick Brooks of Shallotte and William James Gordon of Southport.

As the 2018 Centennial year progresses we will be adding more posts to the website. We welcome all of you to read about the Brunswick County veterans and consider honoring a veteran or sending pictures and stories of family members that served in the Great War. Thank you for your interest.

Website: [www.caswellriflerange.com](http://www.caswellriflerange.com)

Email: [ftcaswell@gmail.com](mailto:ftcaswell@gmail.com)

### Odds and Ends

Mr. Louis A. Galloway, who was recently appointed postmaster at Southport, was in this city (Wilmington) yesterday, and received his commission. He is a Republican and was the postmaster when Cleveland's administration began. The Democratic postmaster was removed.

Source: *Wilmington Messenger*, May 8, 1889

The Wig Party of Brunswick County met in the Court House in Smithville on 22 October 1839 to appoint delegates, etc.

A.D. Moore, Stephen Hall and Etheldred Bosman were appointed delegates from Brunswick to the State Convention in Raleigh on 12 November next. Nathaniel Potter was appointed a delegate to the meeting in Wilmington to select a delegate from the district for the said convention.

The Wigs of Brunswick also decided to appoint District Committees in their own county to convene to the people in their districts a regular periods, addressing them to give information about the national political scene.

Waccamaw District, Etheldred Bosman, Daniel Ross. Shallotte District, Samuel Frink, Wm. Gause. Lockwood's Folly District, Randall Hewett, Ulysses Rourk, Moses Hewett. Smithville District, S.B. Everett, F.J. Hill. Town Creek District. R.W. Gibbs, Miles Potter. North West District, W.R. Hall, D.A. Fleming. Samuel Potter chaired the meeting and Nathaniel Potter was Secretary.

Source: *Wilmington Advertiser*, November 1, 1839

### Area Events

**February 24 & 25, 2018:** Moores Creek National Battlefield, Patriots Hall Cr., Currie, NC. Come and help celebrate what is considered to be one of the first Patriot victories of the American Revolution and see history come to life.

### Membership Application ... Invite a Friend to Join Brunswick County Historical Society

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail \_\_\_\_\_

New: \_\_\_\_\_ Renewal \_\_\_\_\_ Amount Enclosed \_\_\_\_\_

Receive *Newsletter* by email: Y N

Annual Dues: Individual \$15 Life Membership \$150

Mail this form with your check to: P.O. Box 874, Shallotte, NC 28459