

THE WHITTLERS BENCH

SOUTHPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

• SOUTHPORT, NORTH CAROLINA 28461

OCTOBER 22, 1979

Vol. IV, No. 4

FINAL MEETING OF THIS YEAR

Southport Historical Society will hold its regular meeting on Thursday, October 25 at 8:00 P.M. in the conference room of Security Savings and Loan. Carole Lee Williams, tour guide at Fort Caswell will present the program. This is the final meeting of the year, and the nominating committee will present its report for consideration by our members. All current members of the Society are urged to attend and the public is cordially invited.

* * * * *

ARCHITECTURAL STUDY TO BE RELEASED

Latest word from the printer confirms that delivery of Carl Lounsbury's "The Architecture of Southport" may be expected by the end of October. Most of the printing has already been completed and the remaining work is progressing on schedule. As soon as the book is ready, we will announce where copies may be obtained.

NEW BOOK HIGHLIGHTS SOUTHPORT HERO

Colonel Robert Howe, one-time commander of Ft. Johnston, is one of three Revolutionary heroes featured in a recently published historical volume entitled Harnett, Hooper & Howe. This trio of biographical sketches by three noted historians provides a fascinating account of important figures in the Lower Cape Fear during the Revolutionary period -- Cornelius Harnett, eloquent statesman and delegate to the Continental Congress; William Hooper, political leader and signer of the Declaration of Independence; and Robert Howe, fiery patriot and controversial military leader.

Much of Howe's life story remains a mystery. About his personal life very little is known. While some accounts depict him as a gallant, handsome man of intellect and social grace, others call him a rogue and a scoundrel. Son of a prosperous Cape Fear planter, Howe as a young man was appointed commander of Ft. Johnston under Royal Governor Martin but soon emerged as a dynamic rebel in the cause of American independence. His military ability won him the friendship of Gen. George Washington and carried him through a long and highly controversial

(continued, p. 2)

HISTORIC TOUR OFFERED THIS WEEKEND

On Saturday, October 27, all interested persons are invited to join with our Society for a guided tour of Fort Caswell, one of this area's most interesting but least publicized historic sites. The tour is sponsored by Southport Historical Society in conjunction with the N.C. Baptist Assembly. A member of the Assembly staff will conduct the tour using information compiled in a recent research project on the fort's history. Historical organizations from surrounding counties have been asked to be our guests for this unique adventure.

The tour group will meet at 10:30 AM this Saturday in Hatch Memorial Auditorium, which is located on the grounds of Ft. Caswell. Attendants at the entrance gate will direct cars to the auditorium parking lot. No fee is charged for the tour. Participants are advised to wear comfortable clothing and shoes suitable for outdoor walking.

Following the tour, a luncheon will be served in the Assembly cafeteria at a cost of \$ 3.50 per person. Luncheon reservations are required and may be made by calling 457-6118 (day) or 457-6940 (evenings). Additional information about the tour may also be obtained by calling these numbers.

Fort Caswell, now owned by N.C. Baptists, has played a long and varied role in the history of the Southport area. Named for Governor Richard Caswell, the fort was begun in 1826 and was the only fully casemated fortification in the Lower Cape Fear. Still standing today are extensive remains of the inner citadel.

(continued, p. 2)

TOUR . . . FORT CASWELL (continued from page 1)

During the Civil War, Fort Caswell's strategic location at the mouth of Cape Fear River made it an important link in the chain of Confederate fortifications known as the Cape Fear Defense System. In the last days of the war, victorious Union troops seized Caswell only to find its buildings burned, the guns spiked and the ammunition stores exploded by retreating Confederates.

A renovation program brought Fort Caswell back into service during the Spanish-American War of 1898. Many of the buildings seen today date from this period. The fort was actively garrisoned until about 1923. Then, declared as surplus property, the fort site was offered for sale. A Florida-based real estate company acquired the property but their plans for development died quickly in the era of the Great Depression. During World War II the fort once again came into military service, this time as an anti-submarine patrol base. In 1949 the property was purchased by the North Carolina Baptist Convention for use as a summer retreat.

NEW BOOK ... ROBERT HOWE (continued from page 1)

term of military service. Eventually Howe returned to the Cape Fear area and took up a quiet life as a planter and community leader until his death in 1786 at the age of fifty-four. In the years that followed, his son Robert became one of the five commissioners who founded the town of Smithville (Southport).

New research by Professor Donald R. Lennon of East Carolina University has uncovered much previously unknown or disputed information about the enigmatic Robert Howe whose brilliant career began here at Ft. Johnston.

BOOKLET DEPICTS SOUTHPORT IN EARLY 1900'S

"The Town That Found Itself,"* a booklet written in 1919, offers some amusing insights into the life of Southport people and the appearance of the town in World War I days. John R. Colter, author of this charming little essay, was obviously filled with youthful enthusiasm, and in writing about the successful work of his pet project, the Army and Navy Club, he is often prone to over-confident generalizations and exaggerations. In retrospect we can only smile at Mr. Colter's account of the little town that was altogether "socially poverty-stricken" until the Army and Navy Club came along to give the people recreational facilities and a reason to socialize with their neighbors. However, this young man clearly liked Southport. He speaks fondly of the local people, their legends and traditions, and their gracious way of life. And like so many other newcomers before and after him, he was impressed by the picturesque beauty of the quiet little town. He writes:

The town is Southport, North Carolina. I cannot call it a city even though it is that legally. It lies thirty miles south of Wilmington, on a beautiful elevated point of land above where the Cape Fear River flows into the sea. There are lovely grassy lanes (called streets) running between mighty live-oaks and merging in a magnificent common or broad public lawn which is itself hemmed by the giants which show green the year around. At dusk, when Southport might be at supper and the common and its great sentinels alone in their beauty, you would not be at all surprised to see a Druid of old step forth from the heart of one of the great trees and lift bearded face to worship. Folks sit on the porches of their old colonial homes and listen to sounds no more disturbing than the low of the cattle grazing in a nearby yard and the gentle moan of the whistling-buoy out in the river channel. "God did a lot for the town" they say -- and they are right.

*Copyright 1919, by Community Service Incorporated, New York, New York