



# THE WHITTLERS BENCH Southport Historical Society

PO Box 10014  
Southport, North Carolina 28461

Volume XXV, No. 1

January, 2001



The Southport Historical Society's Annual Meeting, Potluck Dinner, and 25<sup>th</sup> Birthday Party will all be held simultaneously on Thursday, January 25, 2001, at 6:30 PM at Trinity United Methodist Church on the corner of Atlantic Avenue and Nash Street, across the street from the Post Office in Southport. A program on shipwrecks off of Cape Fear will be presented by Mary E. Strickland, the Manager of the North Carolina Maritime Museum at Southport. We will celebrate with a special, giant cake so please don't bring desserts!

## President's Note

The Society's First Annual Christmas Tour of Homes was successfully completed on December 9, with 1,068 tickets sold – a tremendous event by any standard! Our special thanks go to the Co-Chairs of the Organizing Committee: Cathy Fravel and Kate Hardin. We hope they will continue their wonderful work and do it again in 2001. As an indication of the organizing and leadership skills required, individual name tags were issued to 167 volunteers!

The Society as it is presently constituted is much more successful in raising money than in spending it; how strange – our income has tripled since 1995, while our continuing lack of a leader for the Old Jail restoration project has resulted in a complete standstill on any spending for that purpose. Isn't there anyone out there who would like to organize the restoration of a historic building without having to spend his or her own money? We are ready for you!

Chris Suiter



As I look back to the night of Thursday, January 15, 1976, I can see the 19 history-minded people who gathered in the Southport Public Library's conference room to organize the Southport Historical Society. And I immediately focus on Eleanor Pancoast Potter Smith whose idea it was to have a Southport Historical Society. She happily presided that night as she saw her dream come true. She was elected as the Society's first president and set to work to make it grow into what it is today.

I now want to honor Eleanor by publishing in this column a fictionalized account, written by her, of how Smithville (now Southport) came into existence. She did not give it a name, so I'm just calling it "Our First Heroes".



"Our First Heroes"

by Eleanor Smith

The weather was abominable - cold, gray and dripping a slow, insistent rain. The horse and rider plodded along, trying to keep well to the side of the deeply rutted, muddy road. Both would be happy to reach their destination. It had been a long, dreary three days since they left New Bern with the important document, and there were yet more miles to be traveled. But at least the rider had good news for his friends in Wilmington and Brunswick County.

As he rode along in the rain he mused about how long he and his friends had planned for a new town to be erected around old Fort Johnston at the mouth of the Cape Fear. The old fort had stood there since 1745 and there were already some houses on the waterskirt near the fort, but the owners of these houses were either river pilots or people who worked at the fort.

His mind wandered back to 1786 when a young lawyer from Wilmington named Joshua Potts, who had served in the Revolution just as the rider had, had come down with a debilitating fever. Potts' good friend, John Brown, who was captain of a packet that plied between Wilmington and the fort and then on to Charleston urged him to take a trip with him from Wilmington to the fort, insisting that the sea air would help him recover. Reluctantly Potts had consented.

Their trip had been made in an open boat and was enjoyable to the sick man even though he was still weak. He had no appetite but Captain Brown had prepared what he called a "cold collation" and Joshua Potts managed to eat a little of the food. When they reached the fort they had to camp out for a few days and later Joshua had reported to the rider that the "salubrious" breezes off the Cape Fear had cured him and that he had returned to Wilmington perfectly well.

The rider remembered how vocal Potts had been in his praise of the area and had immediately wanted to set up a town around the fort. The rider could remember, also, how men in several areas of North Carolina were feeling the enthusiasm of being a part of the new nation - the United States of America - a democracy, something that had never been tried before.

Here the rider paused in his reminiscing and took refuge for the night in a little inn to get a bit of rest for himself and his horse. But once he was dry and sitting comfortably before the blazing fire drinking a cup of tea, his thoughts once again focused on why he was making this trip. When Joshua Potts had first mentioned the idea of a town around the fort to him he was then, as now, a member of the General Assembly of North Carolina, the representative from Brunswick County. He could remember how opposed he had been to the whole idea because it would mean that some of his friends who were pilots would lose their homes around the fort and thus their means of livelihood. He had refused to go along with the plan. Even now, he almost chuckled when he thought of how angry that had made old Mr. Charlie Gause of Town Creek. But his humor faded when he remembered that Mr. Gause had assured him that unless he did introduce the bill he would never serve Brunswick County again in the legislature. Soon he had been approached a second time to introduce the needed legislation, and with the necessary signed petition in hand, he had done so just a few days ago. This time he had been assured that the rights of his pilot friends would be protected.

Now it was early January 1793, and Benjamin Smith of Belvidere in Brunswick County was on his way from a meeting of the General Assembly in New Bern. On December 31, 1792, the act creating the town of Smithville had been passed and a charter issued. It was that charter that he was bringing to Joshua Potts, Charles Gause, John Huske and all the others who were so interested. Now that the charter was finally issued he felt an enthusiasm welling up in him. He was anxious for daylight to come so he could be on his way with the good news. It was only natural, he supposed that part of his excitement was because the charter said the town was to be known as Smithville. His colleagues in the General Assembly has facetiously insisted on the name because, as he knew, they secretly thought the town would fail. But he and the others would show them!

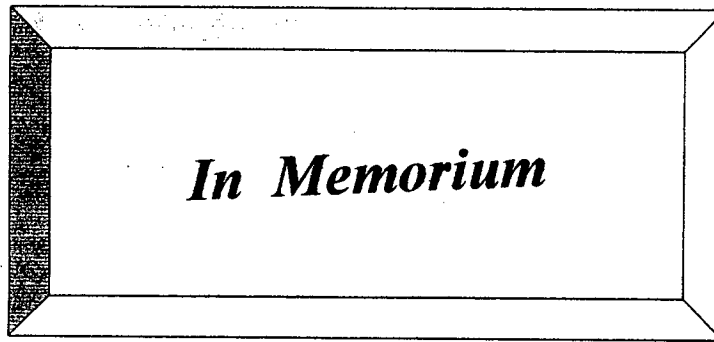
A few hours later, just as the sun rose on a dry and clear day, Benjamin Smith with his rested and well-fed horse were on their way. Soon they arrived in Wilmington and the special document was placed in the eager hands of Joshua Potts. The next stop was Belvidere and from there a messenger was sent immediately to tell Charles Gause.

The next few days were busy ones for Potts and Smith as they drew a map of the town with its 100 lots on a 150-acre tract on the west bank of the Cape Fear. In March a subscription was held in Wilmington in the house of Amaziah Jocelin, with the lots selling for two pounds each. No one person could subscribe for more than six lots. Deeds for the lots were to be signed by Potts, Smith, Gause and two other commissioners, Robert Howe, Jr. and William Espy Lord. The money for the lots, after taking out expenses, was to be paid to the University of North Carolina. Most of the people buying the lots were from prominent families in Wilmington and the plantations along the river.

Soon the new owners began constructing houses. Almost immediately the town began to grow as more and more people moved to Smithville to enjoy the salubrious breezes, especially during the long, hot summers. In 1887, after years of slow but consistent growth the name of the town was changed to Southport to better express the idea that the town might soon grow to become "The Port of the South" - with a railroad line and a great coaling station for large ocean-going ships.

Alas, that did not happen, but the dream was fulfilled in other ways and today we have a wonderful little town that continues to grow and where its citizens continue to enjoy those "salubrious" breezes that cured Joshua Potts of his debilitating fever.

Comment: How we wish Eleanor could share this 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary with us, but she is a patient in a Wilmington rest home, suffering from Alzheimer's disease. She was, however, active in the affairs of our Society for many of the years after its organization. I received permission from her children to use the article which she wrote about Benjamin Smith and Joshua Potts. My thanks to them.



It is with deep sorrow that we report the recent death of our long-time Society member, Mary Smith Gore. We extend our sympathy to her husband, Orie, and their children, and to Mary's brother, James (Bubba) Smith, who is also a member of our Historical Society.

Mary was active in the Southport Historical Society, especially in our early days when for several years she made the copies of Whittlers Bench and mailed them out to the members. She was faithful in attendance, helping in any way she could, as long as she was able. One of our fondest memories is that she could be counted on to bring the best collards in the world to all our Society potluck dinners!

Mary will be sorely missed by all who knew and loved her.

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Also, since our last newsletter, our long-time friend Bill Reaves has passed away. Miss Susie is working on a tribute to him.

#### **Southport Historical Society Officers and Directors**

President	Chris Suiter 457-6629	Directors	Ann Brown 457-6710
Vice-Pres	Peter Wyckoff 457-5599		Becky Felton 457-5302
Secretary	Pat Kirkman 457-0579		Dick Hughes 253-9877
Treasurer	Wolf Furstenu 278-4050		
Archivist	Susie Carson		

"The Whittlers Bench" prepared by Becky & Bert Felton, Pauline Swain, Marilyn Lessin

**SHS collects dues on a calendar  
year basis. ALL memberships for  
2001 are now due.**

*Annual Membership Registration*

Support the Southport Historical Society and  
receive the newsletter for a calendar year

individual \$10  
couple 15

student \$2  
(up to age 18)

business/organization \$15  
sustaining 25

life membership \$ 150

life membership for couple \$ 200

name (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

address \_\_\_\_\_

city, state, zip \_\_\_\_\_

telephone \_\_\_\_\_

e-mail \_\_\_\_\_

\* Put this entire sheet and your check

in an envelope and mail to:

**PO Box 10014, Southport, NC 28461**

*Thank you !*

## The Book Page

Southport Historical Society is actively engaged in publishing books dealing with the history of the lower Cape Fear. Works listed below are available for sale by the Society, and at book stores in the area.

*Architecture of Southport*, by Carl Lounsbury. Southport Historical Society, second printing 1966, 62 pp., soft-cover. \$15.00. The styles of old Southport homes are described and illustrated.

*Bald Head*, by David Stick. Southport Historical Society, 1998 reprint, 143 pp., ill., hard-cover. \$14.95.

*Cap'n Charlie and the Lights of the Lower Cape Fear*, by Ethel Herring. Southport Historical Society, fourth printing 1995, 120 pp., ill., soft-cover. \$10.00.

*The Cemeteries of Southport*, compiled by Dorcas W. Schmidt. Southport Historical Society, 1983, 94 pp., soft-cover. \$8.00. A unique reference book listing names of those buried in the cemeteries of Southport and environs.

*Fort Caswell in War and Peace*, by Ethel Herring and Carolee Williams, revised by Kelli Williams. Published by North Carolina Baptist Assembly. Second edition, 1999, 141 pp., ill., soft-cover. \$16.95.

*A History of Brunswick County*, by Lawrence Lee. Published by Brunswick County, Bolivia, North Carolina. 1980, 279 pp., ill., hard-cover, \$18.30.

*A History of Fort Johnston*, by Wilson Angley. Includes index. Published by Southport Historical Society, in association with the Division of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1996, 150 pp., ill., soft-cover. \$10.00.

*Guns for Cotton*, by Thomas Boaz. Published by Burd Street Press, 1996, 86 pp., ill., soft-cover. \$9.95.

*Joshua's Dream*, a history of old Southport by Susan S. Carson. First printing published by Carolina Power & Light Company in 1992, second printing published by Southport Historical Society, 1994. 168 pp., ill., soft-cover. \$15.00.

*Long Beach, A North Carolina Town: Its Origin and History*, by Wolfgang Furstenau. Published by the author in Long Beach, N.C., 1995, 2. printing 1997, 364 pp., ill., hard-cover, \$17.95

*Reminiscences of Wilmington And Smithville---Southport 1848-1900*, by Dr. Walter G. Curtis. Published by Southport Historical Society, 1999, 88 pp., ill., hard-cover, \$12.95.

*Southport (Smithville), A Chronology, Volume I, 1520-1887*, by Bill Reaves. Published by Broadfoot Publishing Company: Wilmington, North Carolina, 1978. Second edition 1985, 129 pp., ill., soft-cover. \$15.00.

*Southport (Smithville), A Chronology, Volume II, 1887-1920*, by Bill Reaves. Published by Southport Historical Society, Southport, North Carolina, 1978. Second edition 1990, 324 pp., ill., soft-cover. \$20.00.

*Southport, North Carolina, A Chronology, Volume III, 1920-1940*, by Bill Reaves. Published by Southport Historical Society, Southport, North Carolina, 1996, 248 pp., 46-page index, ill., soft-cover. First edition. \$12.00.

*Southport (Smithville), A Chronology, Volume IV, 1941-1970*, by Bill Reaves. Published by Southport Historical Society, Southport, North Carolina, 1999, 281 pp., ill., soft-cover. 16.95.

*Southport Secrets*, compiled by Donald K. Johnson. Published by Southport Historical Society, Southport, NC. 1998, 88 pp., ill., soft-cover. \$12.95.

Note: Membership entitles you to purchase these books from the Society at a 10% discount.  
Please include \$2.00 per book for mail orders.