

THE WHITTLERS BENCH

Southport Historical Society

501 North Atlantic Avenue
Southport, North Carolina 28461

VOLUME XIX, NUMBER 2

MARCH 1995

REGULAR MEETING

The March meeting will be a Potluck Dinner, to be held at 6:30 p.m., Thursday, March 23, 1995, in the Parish Hall of the Sacred Heart Catholic Church located at the junction of NC 211 and NC 133. Everyone should bring a covered dish and all of the family. The program will be given by Gehrig Spencer, the Site Manager at Fort Fisher State Historic Site, on what has happened there since the battle in 1865. (This is a very timely subject, since construction on the seawall is about to begin.) Gehrig knows as much of this history as anyone could; he is a Southport native and has been affiliated with Ft. Fisher since it was acquired by the state, more than thirty years ago. Hope to see you all there!

ENCLOSURES

With this newsletter are, in addition to our usual "History Page," copies of invitations for all of our members to the Old New Hanover Genealogical Society's annual picnic at Moores Creek National Battlefield Park, and for a Genealogical Research Trip to Washington, D.C. Also enclosed is an order blank for our Cap'n Charlie and Lights of the Lower Cape Fear.

ANNUAL DUES

Once again, we wish to remind everyone that 1995 Annual Dues are needed by May 1; here is another form:

1995 DUES

NAME _____	\$10	INDIVIDUAL
ADDRESS _____	\$15	HUSBAND/WIFE
_____	\$25	SUSTAINING
	\$150/200	LIFE
AMOUNT ENCLOSED \$ _____	\$ _____	DONATION

MAIL TO: Southport Historical Society
501 North Atlantic Avenue
Southport, NC 28461

ORAL HISTORY

The Society has been providing assistance to the Southport Maritime Museum in initiating a video-taped oral history program to interview and record long-time area residents. To date, nine individuals have participated, with wonderful results! The Museum and Society are planning and scheduling dozens more; if you or your family members are asked to help, we will greatly appreciate your cooperation. It is particularly important when individual subjects have health concerns--we all know of persons sadly missed! Volunteers will be accepted with enthusiasm--call Chris Suiter on 457-6629.

VJ DAY ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

Please note that the battleship USS North Carolina has been selected as a host site for the U.S. commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II on September 2, 1995.

PUBLICATIONS NEWS

Sales, and sales efforts, of our books continue to expand. Fort Fisher State Historic Site and the Cape Fear Museum in Wilmington are both now carrying the Cap'n Charlie book in their gift shops. Members Chuck and Sue Paty will represent the Society in selling our books at a genealogical convention in Salisbury, NC, in May 1995. On April 1, members Susan Carson, Debbie Suiter, and Paul Sweeney will be at Brunswick Town "Spring Fest" with a sales table of our books--bookselling and Susie-autographing!

MAY 1995 PROGRAM

The Society's program will be on the Swann family, the old Cape Fear Lighthouse, and their life and times. This will be another potluck as well!

"Looking Back" — The History Page

Susan Carson, Editor

MARCH 1995



It has now been a year since the Southport Historical Society staged its long-to-be-remembered commemoration of the sinking of the "John D. Gill" and its tribute to the survivors of that tragedy. I thought it would be appropriate, therefore, in this issue to give you the newspaper account of another similiar tragedy. This comes from the files of Bill Reaves. His source was the Wilmington News of 9/25/46 and 9/26/46. Our thanks to Bill for helping us keep The History Page going.

About four years after the tanker GILL tragedy, Southport was again to experience another tanker episode on September 25, 1946, when the 10,172-ton tanker BENNINGTON with six dead men aboard and another critically burned, steamed slowly into Southport's harbor in a severely damaged condition. While off the Carolina coast a terrific explosion rocked the vessel from bow to stern and the survivors had been through a night of flaming horror. The tanker was enroute from Seaward, N. J. to Norco, La. and was not carrying any petroleum cargo. Due to the cool direction of Capt. Eitzen, all hands rushed forward and started the battle against the flames. After a bitter two-hour contest the flames were brought under control. The cause of the explosion was not known until an investigation was made.

Harry Hayden, a Wilmington newspaper reporter, wrote the following:

"The quiet marine villagers of Southport, which yesterday saw six bodies brought ashore from the tanker BENNINGTON, all victims of a flash blast and fire in the fore-castle Tuesday night, today were silently repeating the epitaph that marks the tombstone reared to the memory of five other mariners who also gave their lives in going down to the sea in ships. The epitaph in the (old) Southport cemetery reads as follows:

The winds and the sea sing their requiem
And shall forever more.

Six soaring seagulls, trailing the limping tanker as she passed between Bald Head Island and Fort Caswell, the jaws of the Cape Fear River, seemingly sang the same requiem as the pilot, Captain William Styron of Southport, a member of the Wilmington Cape Fear Pilots Association, steered the death ship into the Southport harbor and dropped anchor for the delivery of the dead.

A buzzing Navy Catalina plane and several other swooping private aircraft may have disturbed the chanting of the seagulls, each a part of the life of the Americans whose lives had been snuffed out almost instantly by the blast that tore the fore-castle asunder and set fire to the fore-part of the 410-foot tanker. The fire burned for two hours and at one time threatened the lives of Capt. K. H. Eitzen and the thirty other members of his crew.

Crash boats from the Oak Island station of the U. S. Coast Guard and the pilot boat R. R. STONE NO. 1, piloted by Harry Weeks, met the limping tanker over ten miles off shore, where the doleful moaning of the whistling buoy seemingly bemoaned the passing of the mariners.

Smoke was seen by observers aboard the pilot boat at 9:55 o'clock yesterday morning after the pilot boat had waited more than half an hour for the sight of the tanker, which had been reported as scheduled to reach the mouth of the Cape Fear River at 8 o'clock.

Chief Engineer Weeks, who yesterday rounded out 20 years of service with the Wilmington Cape Fear Pilots Association, one of the oldest organizations in North Carolina, noticed that the limping tanker was off course. He used the blinker light in conveying this information to the master of the BENNINGTON, and the vessel's course immediately was changed into the right direction. Several airplanes, one operated by Carl Dunn and carrying Hugh Morton, a Wilmington photographer, were observed soaring over and around the stricken tanker, which was no longer afire. But she was badly smashed at the bow, with gaping port and starboard holes at the very prow of the big tanker, each opening measuring about 8 feet high and about 15 feet in width.

The pilot boat was placed into advantageous position from which Pete Knight, staff photographer for the Wilmington STAR-NEWS, took photographs of the limping ship, along which STONE NO. 1 soon warped in order that Capt. Styron could climb the Jacob's ladder up the ship's side and assume control of the vessel. Immediately after Capt. Styron took his post at the helm on the bridge of the BENNINGTON, whose home port is Wilmington, Delaware, the pilot's flag was raised, indicating that Capt. Eitzen no longer was master of his ship, but that Capt. Styron was the master of its destiny until he anchored the craft in the channel between Battery Island and the marine village of Southport.

Soon after the vessel was anchored, Brunswick County coroner, W. E. Bell, boarded and was taken to the area of the ship where he could view the remains of the six dead men. Two of the dead died from their terrible burns, another died from being thrown about 300 feet by the blast, and two others were killed by being trapped in the wreckage, and the other was torn to pieces. The flag of the tanker was lowered to half-mast as a mark of respect for the six dead seamen, and their bodies were lowered over the ship's side and into the Oak Island Coast Guard lifeboat. They were placed in three hearses of Andrews Mortuary and brought to Wilmington.

A pall was cast over the town of Southport by this tragedy of the sea and men and women in all walks of life gathered on the greensward of The Garrison and also under Southport's tri-tree open forum, The Whittling Tree, where many marine tragedies of the past have been told in the shade of the old gnarled cedar and two poplars. The latter two trees were planted during a presidential campaign and named for the late William Jennings Bryan and William McKinley.

The citizens recalled the sea tragedies of World War II, one of which resulted in the loss of 16 lives of American seamen as their ship was torpedoed off the North Carolina coast. Others recalled the epic stories of the sinking of the MARY K. SPRUNT, when Christopher Pinner, Robert Walker, Charles Doshier, Jr., Thomas Grissom, and Lawrence Gillespie, lost their lives. (This was April 13, 1877).

They also recounted the URIAH TIMMONS, which had a crew of four men, Christopher C. Morse, Joseph Weeks, Joseph Thompson, Jr. and Joseph Arnold, who battled out a storm for two days and two nights. As Capt. Tommy St. George, the late veteran pilot member of the Wilmington Cape Fear Pilots Association, used to muse:

'The winds and the sea sing their requiem
And shall forever more.'

Another newspaper account mentioned the following: When describing the damage to the tanker it was mentioned that they could "see daylight" through the big hole near the fore-peak. "It was big enough to drive a locomotive through," reported Mrs. James Harper, local newspaper woman. The fact that the empty tanker was riding high in the water is believed to have kept her from sinking as the hole was just above the normal water line when the vessel is fully loaded.

OLD NEW HANOVER GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY, INC.

P.O. Box 2536
Wilmington, NC 28402

Date: 4 March 1995

To: Presidents of Genealogical and Historical
Societies of Southeastern North Carolina

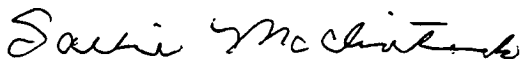
Subject: Invitation to Picnic and Genealogical Fair

The Old New Hanover Genealogical Society sends you greetings and extends to you, your members and their families an invitation to join us on Saturday, 29 April 1995 for our Annual Picnic. It will be held at 11:30 AM, in Patriots Hall, at Moores Creek National Battlefield Park. Drinks, plates, etc, will be furnished. Bring a covered dish and enjoy the day.

On Saturday, 20 May 1995, from 9 AM till noon, at the New Hanover County Public Library we will be holding a Genealogical Fair to which your members are cordially invited. Speakers will feature many topics including computer genealogy and bulletin boards, and will help you with your personal research problems. There is no cost for the fair.

We ask that you give us an estimate of the number you expect to attend both of these events from your organization, so we can make the appropriate preparations. A reply by 15 April 1995 in regards to the Picnic and by 6 May 1995 for the Genealogical Fair would be appreciated.

Sincerely,



Sallie McClintock, Secretary
Old New Hanover Genealogical Society

ROOTS & BRANCHES GENEALOGY

Sponsors

Washington, D.C. Genealogical Research Trip May 18 - 21, 1995 Thursday-Sunday

The price of the Research Trip includes:

- ♦ An orientation prior to departure.
- ♦ Transportation to and from Washington, D.C., via luxury Motor Coach.
- ♦ Hotel accommodations.
- ♦ Bus shuttle service to designated Research Areas.
- ♦ Dinner at Hogate's Waterfront Restaurant.
- ♦ Tax and gratuities.
- ♦ Research Packets-Research Forms, Brochures on Research Facilities, etc.
- ♦ The experience and guidance of a Professional Genealogist.
- ♦ Night Lights Tour of Washington, D.C.

Research Trip Prices

Double Occupancy \$320.00

Single Occupancy \$420.00

Payment must be received before April 7, 1995

Trip is limited to 40 participants on a first-come, first serve basis.
Rates are per person, based on double occupancy.

For information contact:

Becki Hagood

Roots & Branches Genealogy

315 S. Academy St., Cary, NC 27511

(919)481-4080

ROOTS & BRANCHES GENEALOGY

Washington, D.C. Genealogical Research Trip

Since each trip is limited to 40 participants, seats will be reserved only after \$150.00 deposit is received. Checks should be made payable to Roots & Branches Genealogy. Participant's canceling after April 7, 1995 will forfeit payment.

Name _____ Phone # (Day/Evening) _____

Address _____ Roommate Preference _____

Room Accommodations: (circle choices) Single Double Smoker Non-smoker

Mail Reservation to: Roots & Branches Genealogy, 315 S. Academy St., Cary, NC 27511

THE SOUTHPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY
IS PROUD TO ANNOUNCE A REPRINT OF

CAP'N CHARLIE
and
LIGHTS OF THE LOWER CAPE FEAR

by ETHEL HERRING

120 PAGES, INCLUDING MANY PHOTOGRAPHS AND ILLUSTRATIONS.

FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE YOU MAY ORDER BY MAIL

NAME _____

MAILING ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

Please send check or money order to: Southport Historical Society
501 North Atlantic Avenue
Southport, North Carolina 28461

PRICE: \$10.00 non-members --- \$9.00 Society members
(please include \$2.00 for postage and handling)

***ALL PROCEEDS FROM THE SALE OF THIS BOOK GO TO THE
SOUTHPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY***

ALSO AVAILABLE AT SOUTHPORT MARITIME MUSEUM AND
LITTLE PROFESSOR BOOK CENTER