

THE WHITTLERS BENCH Southport Historical Society

501 North Atlantic Avenue
Southport, North Carolina 28461

Volume XXIII, No. 2 March 1999

POT LUCK AND PROGRAM - Thursday, 6:30, March 25, at Sacred Heart Catholic Church at junction of NC 211 and 133 (Doshier Cutoff). History of the Southport Woman's Club, presented by Ms. Margaret Harper of Southport.

PRESIDENT'S NOTES

from Chris Suiter

Mark your calendars for Saturday, May 1, for our big Spring event--our second Cape Fear River boat cruise. This one will be somewhat different from the September 1998 one, with the subject matter being "The History of the Lower Cape Fear." The presenters, all SHS members, will include Chris Fonvielle from UNCW, Bert Felton from Brunswick Town State Historic Site, and former SHS President Don Johnson; you will receive more details at the March meeting. The Southport Maritime Museum will be selling tickets at \$30.00 per person (same as 1998, with proceeds going to the Old Jail project), and they will take MC/VISA and telephonic orders (457-0003) for later pick-up. Call me at 457-6629 if you have questions or suggestions on the cruise.

We are very pleased with the new SHS reprint of David Stick's book entitled Bald Head; it is a hardback identical to the original 1985 edition long out of print, and member's price is \$13.45. We'll have some at the meeting.

Key players in the success of our organization are the Committee chairmen, and we have three dynamic new ones:

- A. Historic House Plaques - Jim McKee
- B. Old Jail Restoration Project - Bob Wojda
- C. SHS Representative on the Southport 2000 Board (a new position) - Ann Brown

These representatives will be pleased to hear from anyone who has an interest in or can assist in these projects.

I want to take this opportunity to express our thanks and congratulations to one of our current dynamic chairpersons: Marilyn Lessin for the huge success of the Southport Coverlet sales. She will give us exact numbers at the meeting, but suffice it to say we are planning a new order after only six months of availability.

Sunday coverage of the Southport Visitor Center by the SHS closed for the winter when the Ft. Fisher ferry went over to their limited schedule. However, Spring is coming and the full schedule resumes on March 24. We will start Sunday service again on March 28, and I will be calling all of the usual "suspects"--if you want to be on that list, let me know. Visitor Center service is so much fun that it is competitive!



Robert E. Marlowe, the sailor mentioned in the following article, was a classmate of your editor. He and I, and his wife, Mary Catherine, were all old Southporters and graduated from Southport High in the Spring of 1937. Now you can guess how old we are! Robert and Mary Catherine live in Wilmington. After the war he worked for Sears many years and retired from there. Robert does not know I am running this article, but I don't think he will mind. He's a great guy. And I have another interesting article about him and Mary Catherine and I expect I will run it one of these times.

Please let me know if you have suggestions for "Looking Back" or for my new column "A Bit of History" appearing weekly in the Wilmington paper.

Susan Carson

(1944) Local Man Receives Bronze Star For European Action

Q-master First Class Robert Marlowe Receives Star Medal With Citation

WAS WITH INITIAL ASSAULT FORCES

Proved Himself Valuable Member of Crew of Navy Ship
Wife and Baby Live in Southport

Quartermaster first class Robert E. Marlowe, United States Naval Reserve, son of Mrs. J.R. Marlowe was awarded on May 23rd the Bronze Star Medal with citation for meritorious service during the initial assault on the coast of France from June 6 to June 23, 1944.

Marlowe, who was in Southport with his wife and small baby on a recent leave, served aboard the ship since August, 1943. In a letter to the Pilot from his commanding officer, Lt. E.C. Darnell, Marlowe was described as a "valuable member of the crew."

The citation reads as follows:

"For meritorious service as a member of the crew of U.S.S. YMS during the initial assault and subsequent sweeping of enemy mines off the coast of France June 6 to June 23, 1944. The initial sweeping operation began five hours before H-hour and was completed two hours after that hour under the light of enemy star shells. As dawn broke, his squadron was recovering starboard gear as it turned to port toward the beach to form up prior to widening the support channel for the invading forces. Enemy shore batteries at the St. Vaast opened fire resulting in many near misses and the spraying of shell fragments on the decks throughout this phase of the operation. Marlowe, by cool performance of his duty, and by showing courage and determination to complete an assigned task inspired his men to accomplish a totally successful operation.

The leadership, courage and tireless devotion to duty displayed by Marlowe throughout this entire period were in keeping with the best traditions of the United States Naval Service."

Brunswick Boy Writes of His D-Day Experiences

Tells How Vessel Preparing Way For The Landing of Troops
Had Many Hours of Uncertainty

(The following story of D-Day and the other invasion days, was written by Robert Marlowe, son of Mrs. J.R. Marlowe, of Southport. With his brother Ed, Robert is aboard a mine-sweeper. His vessel was one of those assigned to clear the path for the invasion forces. Last month their ship was a year old and the crew had a birthday party for the vessel. For this party members of the crew were asked to write a theme on some interesting experience. Robert wrote on the invasion and his theme was read at the vessel's birthday party. It rated the Brunswick boy a 48-hour leave in London.)

June 3, 1944 "ANCHORS AWEIGH," and the immortal song of the United States Navy, "Anchors Aweigh," played on a portable phonograph with its heart thrilling notes sounding out through battle speakers, sent us on our way to the most victorious invasion of history.

As we passed through the gate of our English port into the storm tossed seas of the English Channel, the excitement, which had been as electricity, became serious meditation, and the crew settled into the working machine which it had become in the many months of strenuous training. We were on our way to France, to take or be taken. The day we had waited for so long had arrived. What would the 'morrow bring?

The words of Capt. Darnell passed once more, slowly and seriously through my mind. "Well, men, this is it. All of the papers, books, pamphlets and pictures, concern the invasion of the French Coast. I will try to give you a mental picture of our task. You may look through some of these things, but I can tell you much quicker. It would take you two days just to read through all of this and we haven't time for that."

To get us in a more serious state of mind, and down to reality, he let us put our military talented minds to work in solving the question, "Where are the invasion forces going to strike?" We had planned an invasion of France many times; that was an easy one. We pointed out various places on the chart, each of us sure of a near miss anyway. Well, we were so wrong it was funny. Then the Capt. Became serious as he went through the minute details of the invasion.

I remember well the words, "Here on this point," and he touched the chart with his finger, "are heavy enemy gun emplacements; that is the place that will probably give us the most trouble." "But," and he began tracing with his finger, "there are well protected gun batteries every few hundred yards along here." Then he began tracing the route of our operations, explaining the task as he went. My thoughts followed our various courses along the beach. We are going to make circles right under the very muzzles of those guns practically sweeping the very breakers on the shore. We will never make it in there, and if we should, I know we can never get our ship back out through the hail of lead and steel that the scores of Nazi guns will pour on us. It's crazy, suicidal, and above all, impossible.

We will be there with only a few sweepers and a couple of PT boats for escort several hours before H-hour.

The Capt. continued, "When we finish our operations the invasion convoy will be here. We will sweep out to them, and then, probably sweep an anchorage for the big ships." When we get through the sweep out! "Captain, do you think we're coming out of there?" My heart was slowly becoming a frozen ball in my throat. "Yes, we must go in, we must commence, carry out, and complete our operations, and I know that we are going to do just that. Yes, we are coming back out." Hmmm! I wonder how calm he will be when the Heinies open up on us.

"Left fifteen!" through the voice tube from the flying bridge; left fifteen Sir! I was back to my job; we were actually on our way. We maneuvered slowly up the English Channel, through the mist from a sulky sky and the pounding of a confused sea. We anxiously watched for some sign of a break in the wet, rough weather. It was the most undesirable weather for soldiers, packed with their equipment in the close, stale air, smelling of impregnated clothing, sea sickness, and of the landing craft.

June 4, 1944

Our hopes of good weather were lost. The sea hadn't moderated in the least, if anything it had increased some. Ahead we could see our point of rendezvous. Our friends were not there. What had happened? Had the other ships been delayed? We reached the rendezvous point at the time designated, only to be turned around, proceeding through the very water we had just come. We were over half way to the Normandy coast. We could not vary from the schedule given for our appointment or H-hour would be delayed. How would we fit in the invasion plans if we were off schedule? Our course was again set, not for our Destination, but for the port of departure !!!

We reached the guard net of our British port about the same time of day we had departed. We didn't enter the gate, but again reversed course, passing scores of ships that had gone through the same maneuver as we had.

H-hour had been advanced twenty-four hours. Once again we were on our way to France! This time our friends were at the point of rendezvous at the scheduled time. The formation was complete as it changes course sharply to the right, and like a mighty arm, stretched out from the shores of England to deliver a crushing blow to the Festung Europa.

June 6, 1944

At 0100 we streamed our mine sweeping gear, and under the cover of a heavily clouded sky and dark night, we slipped into the Baie de la Seine, France. German ack-ack and rocket fire, the dazzling green crystals of target markers for our bursting bombs, and giant flames leaping as if from a forge, high into the air, lit the shore and the sky. It was as if there had been a great back drop of light, streamed with brilliantly colored ribbons shimmering as if in a gentle breeze. The din of the bombing was deafening, and the urge of fear was almost overpowering. We were thankful then for the cloud laden sky. The moon was full, and if it should come through the clouds we would stand out as performers in a great amphitheatre.

Dawn was nearly upon us. Our operations were nearly completed, and not one Nazi gun had fired at us. Remarkable, incredible, it was too good to be true! H-hour was

close at hand. We were heading back out and a pleasant feeling of security flowed through my veins, lending strength to my tired body. We were going back out!

A deafening, soul shaking, vibrating explosion that caused the very bulkheads to shiver burst close on our port quarter, jarred us back to the reality of our task and its ever present dangers. Another shell, with a loud explosion and hurling shrapnel, burst close aboard our starboard bow after passing over the ship. That was close! The next one may – Wham! “All ahead one thousand,” came the Captain’s voice down the tube from the flying bridge. His voice was steady and deliberate. I knew he was calm and collected. I wondered if any of the shrapnel had hit the flying bridge.

Thruueeue – Wham! Another shell passes over us, bursting close aboard another sweeper. Another near miss. We were very soon doing flank speed ahead and gradually drawing out of the range of the Nazi guns. A plane was skimming the water, laying a protective smoke screen. Suddenly it nosed up a little, and just as suddenly nosed downward and plunged exploding and burning into the sea. One of the Nazi shore batteries had done its job. Another plane quickly resumed the screen laying.

The forces were moving in toward the beach. H-hour had arrived. We were out of range of the guns. We had completed our job. We were back out, and without a casualty. We were pleased and happy, for when the cry “Cookie, what’s for Chow” ebbed out of a few weary throats, it was evidence that the diarrheic, nervousness which had sapped strong young bodies of their appetite, had passed.

cut here and send form with your check

New Membership Registration

Join the Southport Historical Society and receive the
newsletter on a regular basis

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 _____

send to: 501 North Atlantic Avenue, Southport, NC 28461

The Final Voyage of the *Mary K. Sprunt*

by Jim McNeil

[The story of the loss of a Smithville pilot boat in a storm in 1877 is continued]

On Monday the sixteenth, the Revenue cutter *Colfax* left to look for the missing pilot boats and other vessels which might need assistance. That same day Captain Hall of the schooner *Nellie F. Sawyer* came into port and reported that he had seen the two top masts of a vessel protruding from the surface at a point north by northeast of the lightship. The captain thought that the vessel had sunk during the storm.

The next day the *Timmons* arrived in port. At 11:30 that morning she sailed across the harbor bringing cheers from the townspeople lining the shore at Smithville. As they looked at the vessel they could see remarkably little damage. One hatch was missing. Both of her skiffs were still aboard, to the surprise of everyone, although the larger one had its bow stove in.

As the exhilarated townspeople talked to Kit Morse and the other pilots about their ordeal and the fate of the *Mary K. Sprunt*, the story began to unfold. Kit said that as the storm worsened he had to take in all sails except the foresail. The waves "rolled mountain high, the winds blowing so fiercely as to sometimes flatten the sea."

One account by Colonel A.M. Waddell told of a gray mist shrouding the sea and sky, the wind shrieking as the *Timmons* rode the heaving waves. Lashed to the cockpit was Julius Weeks. Late in the morning, Julius, dead tired after thirteen hours at the helm, saw the jib halyard part. As the rope broke, the jib fell to hang, bag-like, below the bowsprit. Water filled the sail.

The *Timmons* struggled on. But the pilots knew that she could not long survive. According to the Colonel Waddell's account, one exclaimed, "We are lost. Unless we can cut that jib stay we are certainly gone. A man can't live there but it is our only hope." Volunteering for this task was the only unmarried man aboard, young Joe Arnold. Joe had relieved Julius Weeks at the wheel. He shouted: "Hold on men. You are all married and have families; I am a single man; let me try it and if I go overboard it will be all right." Joe Arnold drew his sheath knife. With the boat pitching in the driving rain, Joe slowly crawled forward along the deck, knife clinched tightly in his teeth. He managed to reach the foremast as the *Timmons* nearly capsized. Joe clung to the mast as the little schooner slowly righted herself. Then he resumed his efforts to reach the bowsprit.

Joe finally grasped the bowsprit, just as the *Timmons* buried her bow into the sea. Joe disappeared beneath the seething water. Moments later, the bow rose. The crew could see Joe straighten himself into a sitting position, the knife still clinched in his teeth. He inched forward along the pole. Again and again the *Timmons* plunges her head beneath the waves. Still Joe Arnold clung on. At last, he reached the bow stay. He took the knife, and with a powerful stroke, severed the rope. As Joe inched back down the bowsprit, the winds continued to howl and the waves crashed over the little vessel. But the schooner had regained control. The men aboard the *Timmons* knew the worst was over.

As the storm raged and darkness approached, they lost sight of the *Sprunt*. Kit said the last time he saw her was Thursday evening, when she stood considerably to leeward of his vessel. After the *Timmons* rode out the gale, Kit found that they were far south of Cape Fear and put onto Georgetown. The next day they ran up the coast to Cape Fear and saw a vessel lying off the bar awaiting a pilot. After putting one of the pilots aboard, Kit brought the *Timmons* home.

As people listened to the story, hopes mounted for the *Sprunt*. But then word reached Smithville that the coroner had examined the body of a black sailor that had been discovered washed up on the beach at Federal Point the day before; it turned out to be the steward from the *Sprunt*. In the days that followed, hopes for the missing pilots faded. On April 24, a Wilmington newspaper carried a letter from the mayor of Smithville, Dr. Walter Curtis. He began by putting into words what had become evident to those who awaited news of the *Sprunt*: "There seems little doubt the pilot boat *Mary K. Sprunt* is lost with all aboard." Dr. Curtis suggested that the paper help raise money for the families.

The same day that people were reading the words of Dr. Curtis, they learned that Kit Morse had discovered the wreck. Kit had been cruising in the *Timmons* about seventeen miles southwest of Bald Head light when he saw the figure head of a vessel sticking above the water. He knew it was the *Sprunt*. Kit moved the *Timmons* in for a closer look. He could see the stump of the foremast and bowsprit. He took some of the hoops from the foremast back to Smithville and passed along the dreaded news.

On April 29, sixteen days after the storm, crewmen on the *Henry Westerman* found floating nine miles at sea the body of Thomas Grissom. They lowered the skill, took the body onboard and brought it back to Smithville. From bruises on the chest they concluded that Thomas had been at the *Sprunt*'s helm, lashed to the cockpit. The remains of the other pilots on the *Mary K. Sprunt* were never found. One of the Cape Fear pilots who visited the wreck said that she lay in water so clear that he could look down and "see her white sails shining and torn into ribbons, the shreds floating gently with the motion of the sea."

In May of 1879, a monument to the pilots on the *Sprunt* and those who died in the 1872 storm was erected in the Smithville Burying Ground and a moving ceremony held in their honor. The names of the ten men who lost their lives are chiseled in stone, along with the following inscription:

The Wings and the Sea Sing
Their Requiem
And Shall
For ever more.

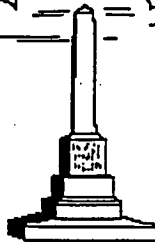
Your attention please . . .

Many thanks to Jean Fairley and John Knowles who worked with Bert on the Ad Hoc Tree Committee until the Southport Forestry Committee could be established. On March 20 the Forestry Committee is sponsoring a symbolic tree planting behind City Hall as part of Arbor Day festivities. Let's have a good turnout that Saturday at 10:00—it's the first day of spring!!

Brunswick Town / Fort Anderson is now closed for renovation. Call Bert at the Southport Visitor Center 457-7927, or at home 457-5302 to discuss groups visiting the site.



BRUNSWICK COUNTY
COURT HOUSE - 1854



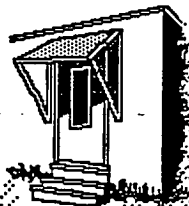
PILOT OBELISK - 1879



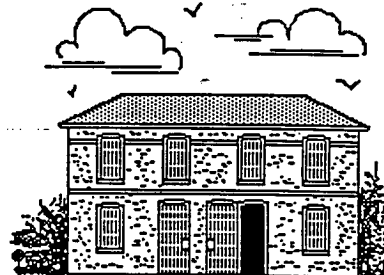
FT. JOHNSTON GARRISON HOUSE
1809



MASONIC HALL
ARMY-NAVY BUILDING - WWI



PUBLIC LIBRARY
1912



OLD JAIL - 1904



SCHOOL - 1904
CITY HALL - 1937
ART GALLERY - 1979

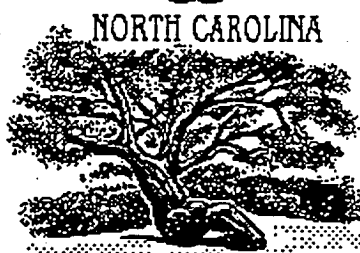
SOUTHPORT



DOSHER HOSPITAL - 1930



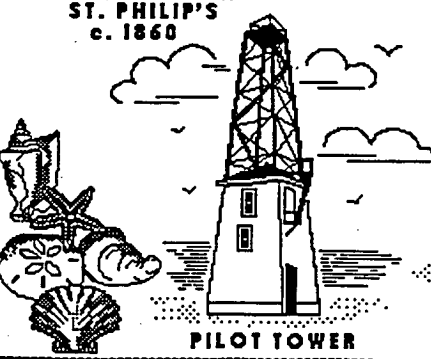
ST. PHILIP'S
c. 1860



NORTH CAROLINA
INDIAN TRAIL TREE



TRINITY'S 3RD SANCTUARY
SAME SITE - 1888



PILOT TOWER



PRICE'S CREEK
LIGHT - 1851



OLD BALDY - 1817

Introducing the Southport Coverlet

This beautiful coverlet was commissioned by the Southport Historical Society and created by *We Love Country*. It is 100% cotton, two-layer, Jacquard woven in the U.S.A., preshrunk, colorfast and machine-washable. It is handsome and practical, measuring approximately 48 x 68 inches. and fringed on all four sides.

The design captures the history and spirit of early Southport, as seen in old photographs taken many years ago. Depicted are the Brunswick County Courthouse, the Pilot obelisk at the old cemetery, the Ft. Johnston Garrison House, the Masonic Hall during World War I, the entrance (1912) of the Southport Public Library, the Old Jail, the early school (1904) which is now an art gallery, Doshier Memorial Hospital, St. Philip's, Trinity Methodist, the old Pilot tower, Prince's Creek light, Old Baldy on Bald Head Island, the Indian Trail Tree and the Historical Society logo. The perfect gift for family members and friends both near and far, it captures special memories and will become an instant keepsake.

This unique, custom woven coverlet is available in the following classic colors: Williamsburg Blue, Hunter Green and Cranberry Red, all with Natural as a second color. The price is only \$50.00. Member discount, 10%.

Please enter the desired quantity of each color:

| | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|---------|
| ___ Williamsburg Blue | @ \$50.00 each | \$_____ |
| ___ Hunter Green | @ \$50.00 each | \$_____ |
| ___ Cranberry Red | @ \$50.00 each | \$_____ |
| | Sales Tax @ 6% | \$_____ |
| | Shipping (if necessary) | \$ 5.00 |

TOTAL enclosed \$ _____

Checks should be made payable to The Southport Historical Society and mailed to 501 N. Atlantic Ave., Southport, NC 28461.

Ordered by:

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____

Phone _____

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. Published by Broadfoot's Bookmark, Wendell, North Carolina, 1983. 138 pp., ill., hard-cover. Sold out. New edition expected in mid-1998.

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.

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, NC. 1995, 2. printing 1997, 364 pp., ill., hard-cover, \$17.95

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-Brunswick County, North Carolina, Volume III, 1920-1940, A Chronology 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 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.