

THE WHITTLES BENCH

Southport Historical Society

Volume XXVI, Number 3

May, 2002

F.Y.I

- We have 169 memberships and 3 organizations who paid dues in 2002
- We mail out 62 complimentary copies
- We had 50 memberships who did not rejoin in 2001 or 2002

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PRESIDENT'S PARAGRAPH

Your President has been meeting with two groups who are planning special events which will enhance the mission of the SHS, the preservation of Southport history and its dissemination to the public.

The first group is chaired by our own Gary Brown and has partnering with the Southport Art Museum (Steve Bliss), The Maritime Museum (Mary Strickland), Southport Department of Tourism (Randy Jones), and NC History and Tourism (Bert Felton). The group has been meeting for some months now and is putting the finishing touches to the first annual Southport Heritage Day Festival. This will be held on Saturday, May 25th in the Southport Community Building and on the grounds. This is to be a non-commercial endeavor so it will be possible to come, listen, participate, look, enjoy, and never spend a penny to learn more about Southport's heritage. As part of the festivities, a Heritage Walk will be begun along the waterfront at Waterfront Park.

The next endeavor is to restore the Robert Ruark Festival to its former glory and to provide the author with the recognition he so deserves. In this, the SHS, Southport Department of Tourism, and Southport Art Museum and others are partnering with the Ruark Foundation. At this point, it appears that the literary festival will be held sometime this Fall.

I'm really looking forward to the May meeting where author and Duke professor David Cecelski will be the speaker. Professor Cecelski's newest book, *THE WATERMAN'S SONG*, Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina, has met with rave reviews. The watermen will be the focus of his talk. The professor will be at the Southport Community Building for a book signing on the afternoon of May 23rd and we will have our pot luck dinner and meeting at the Community Building beginning at 6:30 pm. It would be really helpful if a few members could come a little early and help with the set-up.

I look forward to seeing y'all then!

Peter Wyckoff

"The Whittler's Bench" prepared by Becky & Bert Felton, Ann Brown
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LOOKING BACK - THE HISTORY PAGE

Susan Carson, Editor



It's been more than 175 years since the construction of a defensive installation on Oak Island in Brunswick County. When completed it was named Fort Caswell in honor of Richard Caswell, North Carolina's first governor elected by the General Assembly after the Declaration of Independence was signed.

The Fort had a long and fascinating military history, serving our country in the Mexican War, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I and World War II. Between the two world wars, the fort was under caretaker status. An attempt was made by some Florida-based developers to turn the property into a resort, but the Great Depression and stock market crash ended that idea. In November 1941, as war clouds again darkened the world, the U. S. Navy purchased the fort. This time it became known as Caswell Naval Section Base.

Several years ago I met Mellin and Evelyn Huff who were visiting Southport from Decatur, Georgia. Mellin had been stationed for a time at the Section Base, and some of you may remember seeing some of his photos of that era which were published in the State Port Pilot's "The Way It Was" column.

Recently, at my urging, Mellin wrote me about some of his experiences at the base and agreed that I might share the article in this column. Here's what Mellin had to say:

SERVING AT CASWELL NAVAL SECTION BASE

In 1941, when it was necessary for me to enter military service, fortunately I qualified for midshipman's school where I was commissioned as Ensign. My first assignment was to the Sixth Naval District. The Sixth Naval District had Inshore Patrol bases at Southport, Charleston, Savannah and Miami. Lucky for me, Southport was my assignment in May 1942. The travel to Southport was via rail from Charleston to Wilmington and from there in a Chevrolet van with the person who had the contract to haul mail to the post office.

The base, which had opened in January of that year, had a harbor patrol boat, a small converted patrol yacht, and a minesweeper that daily swept the shipping lanes for magnetic mines several miles out from the mouth of the Cape Fear River. Personnel at the base came mostly from North and South Carolina. The Navy had a school at Georgetown to teach how to participate in Navy life. Most of these men were talented people, assigned to positions for which they were best fitted. For instance, Coxswain Buddy Dew, on my boat YP470, was a fisherman from Little River, S.C., just down the coast.

The Navy bought a number of shrimp boats which were converted for inshore patrol. The wood masts were replaced with small metal ones. Each YP had a 40-cal. Machine gun of the forecandle and four depth charges on the aft. None of these were ever used. The German U-boats left the coast in early 1942 to attack convoys crossing the Atlantic. Ensign Jenrette and I were ordered to Charleston to get the first two converted YPs for the Caswell base. We returned via the Inland Waterway, stopping overnight at Little River. Several more YPs were brought to the base later. We patrolled at sea for two days, returning to base overnight and back out for two more days.

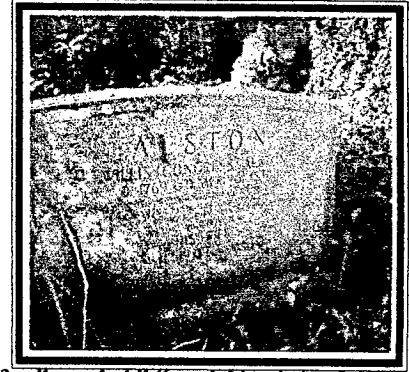
In September, Base Commander Haskell reassigned me to his office. That was pleasing as the weather was getting cooler and the sea rougher. A small boat was not the most comfortable place to be. Dr. Landis Brown was our medical officer and on Monday mornings inquiry was always made as to which sailor had an appendectomy over the weekend. In December 1943 orders arrived for me to report to Pacific Fleet sea duty. Arriving in Brisbane, Australia, surprisingly CDR Haskell's name was in a directory as Operations Officer on Admiral Glover's staff. When I visited him he had me assigned to his office. That was great, as sea duty was not planned in my career when growing up on a cotton farm.

Thanks for these memories, Mellin.

Susie's Dream

"I would like to know where Joshua is buried." It was the second or third day of Susie Carson's class. I had been in town less than a year but had been told that Miss Susie's class was "must do" for newcomers. As she continued talking about Joshua Potts, founder of Southport, father of Sarah Madaline, father-in-law of Willis Alston, I stopped taking notes. Susie was speaking of people and places that were familiar to me.

During the class break, I told Susie that I was from Halifax County and an Alston descendent. But I didn't stop there! I told her I would find the graves of Sallie and Willis Alston. (Tradition has Joshua buried on his son-in-law's plot). How hard could that be? I had the Alston and Allston book filled with 300 years of Alstons as well as my family and childhood friends back home. Little did I know where Susie's dream would take me.



Three years later, I can tell you exactly where the time, and I, went. The Alston book told me that Sallie Potts and Willis Alston had three sons and two daughters. The third child, Missouri Florida, married a cousin, Archibald Davis Alston. All stayed in Halifax or Warren County but no one could tell me where. Then I learned that Missouri and Archie's eleventh child, Missouri F., married William Henry Pleasants. Their summer home was Saxham Hall in Warren County but they lived in Louisburg. No tombstones to be seen that first year.

In the Fall of 2000, I hit "pay dirt" when I asked the Halifax County librarian if she knew where I might find the grave of Willis Alston. She replied, "Exactly". And gave me a 1992 survey of family cemeteries in Halifax County and a map with the location! Surgery prevented my returning for almost a year, but their trip was worth the wait. With map in hand, driving more slowly than usual, I headed toward Littleton in northwestern Halifax County just about on the Warren County line. As I drove the narrow road through woods and more woods, I thought that the paved road and utility poles were the only difference in what I was seeing and what Sallie Potts saw in the late 1700s on her way to the Alston's. I finally saw SR 1300 on a post in the middle of nowhere. At the junction of SR 1304, I saw three mailboxes with ALSTON on them but no sign of life until I went to the end of the road. A black woman was on her porch so I asked if she knew where Willis Alston might be buried. She replied, "That's my people. I'm an Alston."

"Me too", I said and neither of us blinked an eye. She suggested I go back to the mailboxes in front of the trailers. My knock brought a young girl, Tiericka, to the door. My question was met with a "No M'am" until Kendra, her older sister, appeared. I told them that the grave wasn't likely to be at a church or large cemetery, but rather in the woods or near an old house. Kendra's face lit up when I said that. A couple of minutes later, after talking with the grandmother, the 9 year old, the 12 year old carrying an axe handle (for snakes), and I in business clothes were headed for the woods. We walked through the barnyard and cotton field toward the woods. Pointing to a mass of honeysuckle and blackberry vines Kendra told me the grave was in there. I couldn't begin to get through the undergrowth so I borrowed the axe handle and began whacking away at the resilient vines. It took over a half hour to get to a low stone wall; then another half hour to get to the back of the enclosure where I saw the outlines shape of a tombstone.

The girls stayed at the edge of the woods but we talked most of the time. I finally told them to go back home, but I wanted to get inside the wall and take a picture. "Oh no, Miss. We're going to stay with you. Something might happen." I told them I was fine but they insisted on staying. Kendra said that she liked to hear me talk about history. I was touched by their protectiveness and wondered if their ancestors had displayed the same feelings toward Sallie Potts.

Two hours after entering the woods, I emerged a grimy but happy woman. I had pictures for Susie! Proof that anyone visiting the grave would know that Joshua Potts was a prominent man. The tombstone inscription reads:

ALSTON
WILLIS (CONGRESS) ALSTON
HIS WIFE
SARAH POTTS ALSTON
DAUGHTER OF JOSHUA POTTS, COLLECTOR OF CUSTOMS,
THE PORT OF WILMINGTON AND KNOWN AS THE SOCRATES OF AMERICA

Please make the following changes to your membership list...

Shirley and Woodrow Wilson - wayfarer@bcinet.net

Daniel and Karen Knighton - dknighton@ec.rr.com

Sam and Joan White - 457-5634

Please add the following names to your membership list...

Anderson, Catherine Shannon
PO Box 448
Hartsville, SC 29551
843-857-9626

Campbell, Peggy and Ray
516 Brunswick
Southport, NC 28461
454-9140

Chisholm, Noel and Gail
3553 St. James Drive
Southport, NC 28461
253-3553

Fairley, Jean S.
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457-5512

Felber, Bob and Jane
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457-6466

Harper, Margaret
PO Box 10548
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Harris, Bob and Judy
316 W. West Street
Southport, NC 28461
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Johnston, Dennis and Dorothy
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278-9791

McGowan, Bonnie Smith and William
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845-2414

Myers, Lois
2519 W. Dolphin Drive
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278-4721

Rogers, Gilda
402 Womble Street
Oak Island, NC 28465
278-5215

Shipman, Martha B.
PO Box 246
Bladenboro, NC 28320-0246
910-863-4653

Steele, Dorothy C.
2200½ Bay Street
Morehead City, NC 28557

Strickland, Mary and Wayne
222 S. River Drive
Southport, NC 28461
457-5201

Thomas, Rosa May
1723 Choctaw Street
Dothan, AL 36303-3145
334-793-2865

Turley-Lavallee, Kay and Roger
3672 Players Club Drive
Southport, NC 28461
454-0432

Ward, Judith
2745 Juneberry Lane
Southport, NC 28461-8570

Watson, D. I.
1102 Elizabeth Drive
Oak Island, NC 28465
278-6318

Williams, Henry C.
PO Box 1311
Shallotte, NC 28459
910-754-6686



Heritage Day Celebration

Southport Heritage Day – Saturday, May 25, 2002

On the above date, from 10:00 a.m. until approximately 5:00 p.m., there will be a celebration of Southport's heritage at the Community Building and on the Garrison lawn. While certain groups (Historical Society, Woman's Club, others) have offered events at times, this is the first time that we have developed an inclusive program for celebrating our varied and wonderful heritage.

On May 25, 'stations' will be set up, with persons there to dialogue with those who come by, regarding Maritime History, Fishing and Shrimping, Piloting the Cape Fear River, Robert Ruark, Kate Stewart, Cape Fear Indians, Piracy, Revolutionary/Civil War History/Re-enactment, and perhaps others. In addition, there will be walking tours and a formal remembering of the Founders of our city.

To this point, Southport Heritage Day is being sponsored by N.C. Heritage Tourism, Southport Department of Tourism, the North Carolina Maritime Museum at Southport, the Southport Historical Society, the Southport Art Museum, and the Adams' Battery.

This is a free, non-commercial event, so bring your families and friends and join us!

Gary H. Brown

Historic Home Plaques



Let's Put Facts Behind Those Plaques! - Larry Maisel

Peter Wyckoff has made getting plaques on all Historic District homes that qualify one of the goals of his term as President. Like many others, I applaud that effort.

But I have another suggestion which takes it one step farther. As the Plaque Coordinator, (or whatever the job I volunteered for in a weak moment is called!), I am urging new applicants to spend some time researching the history of their home, beyond the 75 years of existence, or being listed in Lounsbury's *The Architecture of Southport*, that qualifies it for a plaque. I have offered to help them get started on the search.

I would urge the same for those of you who already have a plaque. For a number of these homes, there's fascinating history back beyond the date on the plaque. Sometimes finding out who owned the lot before there was a home on it can tie your property to some interesting stories and people. Not only will this unveil new historic tidbits for owners, but it will make this information readily available for our organization's archives in future years. Think about it.



Jail Renovations

Volunteers are needed to assist with the old jail renovation on Wednesday mornings. Currently, volunteers are painting windows and frames for the first floor and water proofing the exterior fence. Call Karen Knighton at 454-8018 for details.