

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOUTHPORT

In 1887 the small coastal village of Smithville was rechristened Southport in eager anticipation of the day when it would emerge as the great seaport of the southeast. The recent closing off of the new inlet and the dredging of the Cape Fear had created a natural harbor at Southport. For the first time in two hundred years, North Carolina had an easily accessible deep water harbor. Surely the obvious commercial advantages of having a port city here were not going to be ignored by progressive businessmen of the New South or enterprising northern capitalists. In an editorial in the local newspaper, an enthusiastic booster rhapsodized:

That a town so geographically located should need a herald seems strange, but strangest of all will be its future history, if it becomes not the city of the South Atlantic . . . The city of Southport, at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, claims unhesitatingly a situation unsurpassed for the building of a metropolis. It has a magnificent harbor, twelve miles in length and three fourths of a mile in width, affording a safe anchorage in water varying in depth from 27 to 40 feet . . . To the capitalist, merchant, and tourist, Southport offers an unbounded field for investment, business, and recreation.¹

The allure of building another Chicago or Atlanta attracted money and men to Southport. Wealthy outsiders from Boston, Fort Wayne and Chicago descended upon the town to buy up land and to speculate in new commercial ventures. Each month the few hotels and boarding houses were filled with more businessmen. Real estate prices began to soar. Dozens of new houses were going up all over town. The City Council ordered that sidewalks be laid along the sandy streets. A water system and even electrification were promised. The *Southport Leader* wrote that "the old town of Smithville can scarcely be recognized in the new and ambitious City of Southport."²

Notwithstanding this promise of activity, many citizens could recognize that the lack of a rail connection with Wilmington and markets further inland would forever prevent the growth of a metropolitan seaport. What Southport needed, then, was a railroad line to one of the developing industrial cities in the Piedmont or at least a trunk line from Wilmington. Several promoters came forth with schemes to entice railroads to build a line to Southport. The town was eager to extend every privilege to the railroads, willing to grant any rights promoters might require. Subscriptions were offered and citizens put forth what capital they had. But nothing of substance ever developed; the schemes fizzled. The flush of excitement soon

abated. The disappointed began to talk about the slow business of building a new city and developing new lines of commerce.³ Although the railroad finally arrived in 1911 with great fanfare, the opportunity had passed. There was the growing realization that Southport would never become anything more than a pleasant little coastal village.

Whatever the commercial advantages of Southport in the late nineteenth century, the location of the town had a different significance in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Lying at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, the site was of paramount military importance to the English colonists. In the late 1740's, the royal governor Gabriel Johnston oversaw the construction of a fort named in his honour. Through the rest of the eighteenth century, the fort never seemed to be equipped with enough artillery to be properly defended. By the 1790's two or three small houses had been put up near the fort by river pilots. These pilots would sail out to the ocean and search for ships seeking to enter the Cape Fear. For a fee the river pilots offered to guide the cargo ships through the dangerous shoals and up the river. In these years a few families from Wilmington came down to the area around the fort to spend the summer months taking in "the cool and healthy sea breezes."⁴ Agitation for the establishment of a town led to an act by the General Assembly in 1792 "to lay off and establish a town near Fort Johnston, on the west side of the Cape Fear River, in Brunswick County."⁵

River pilots, "and other inhabitants of Brunswick County" had contended

(T)hat the erection of a town on the west side of the Cape Fear River, will be attended with a variety of beneficial effects to the health, commerce and convenience of said county and those adjoining.⁶

Benjamin Smith and Joshua Potts laid off the town around the fort in one hundred half acre lots. Where the shore line curved, the two commissioners turned their streets to run parallel with the river. Cross streets were made to run perpendicular to the river so that a number of odd triangular parcels of land were created. (See map). Boundary Street (Caswell Avenue) was the western limit and Brown Street the northern boundary of the town.

Two important decisions made in the first decade of the nineteenth century were to have a lasting influence on the development of the new town of Smithville. In 1804 the United States War Department decided to rebuild the dilapidated Ft. Johnston. In so doing, it assured the continuing

presence of the military in the town. Four years later, an act was passed by the General Assembly to move the Brunswick County Court House from Lockwood's Folly to Smithville. With the court house came the other offices of the county government. These two institutions helped mold the character of the town during the ante-bellum period.

A third significant development that influenced the character of the town was the emergence of the tourist trade. It was a latent feature present from the time when Joshua Potts sailed down from Wilmington in the early 1790's to take advantage of the salubrious climate. Only in the last decade before the Civil War did Smithville receive a large number of visitors. By the "latter part of the Fifties, when all was alive with beauty and fashion, it was the favorite resort of persons of wealth and refinement from Wilmington and other places, for health and pleasure." It was in these years that popular hotels and boarding houses such as the Stuart House on the waterfront and the Carolina House flourished.

One the eve of the Civil War, the county seat had a little less than seven hundred inhabitants. Of this number, an overwhelming majority found their living connected in some way with the river and ocean. The leading occupation, as it was to continue to be until the early twentieth century, was that of river pilot. If a man was not a pilot, then he was either a pilot apprentice or seaman. There was a small number of fishermen, boat carpenters, and dock workers. Other occupations included carpenters, mechanics, lawyers, boarding house keepers, and merchants. A few soldiers, ministers, and county officers completed the list. Black slaves were employed as household servants or dock workers but were few in number.

Antebellum Smithville was not a wealthy town. Few planters had a secondary home in Smithville. River pilots could earn little money and during trade depressions, competition was always fierce. The few merchants in town supplied only the most basic goods. Without superfluous wealth, there was little need for fancy shops or special service trades. The county court only met four times a year and these were but a brief few weeks. The boarding houses did brisk business but there was too little else. The county jail seemed always to be filled but the boarders there asked for little and received much less. The military population was never large and for many years the fort would be virtually abandoned. Only during the long summer months of the tourist season was there some semblance of prosperous commercial activity. A few hotel keepers accumulated some capital but most of it was usually poured back into refurbishing their

property. Smithville was not without its few well to do citizens or one of two fine two story houses on Bay Street, but by in large most of its inhabitants were of modest means.

Smithville survived the Civil War and Reconstruction without much social turmoil or economic disruption. In a town dependent on the sea and not the surrounding agricultural fortunes, this was hardly surprising. During the war, many river pilots volunteered their services to the Confederacy as blockade runners. The intrepid courage of the blockade runner was admired but all too often, he lost either his ship, his life or both. After the capture of the forts of the lower Cape Fear in January, 1865, the citizens of Smithville found it prudent to surrender the town to the U.S. Navy. After the war, a Freedman's Bureau was established in town to see to the affairs of the former slaves. Many blacks left their former plantations along the river and chose to settle in Smithville. By the turn of the century, two distinct black neighborhoods had been established, one in the northwestern part of town and a smaller one in the northeast section.

In the 1870's work began on closing New Inlet. Once this task was completed, it was realized that the currents of the Cape Fear River would naturally create a deeper channel and an excellent harbor at Southport and further upriver. With this development, the future prospects of the town seemed bright indeed. Although the exaggerated enthusiasm over the new seaport described earlier was transient, the more modest achievements of the new city of Southport were of lasting significance. The outsiders who came to Southport brought with them two important things: money and business acumen. Real estate companies, insurance agencies, and a bank were established. By the last decade of the nineteenth century a nascent commercial district was forming on East Moore Street. With a steady flow and accumulation of finance capital, several public improvements were undertaken throughout the town. With the possibility of securing easy loans, homeowners began to make much needed additions to their old houses, or, as it was becoming fashionable, to build an entirely new house on a much grander scale. Houses were being built in areas where there had been little more than swamp or forest. Whole new neighborhoods and subdivisions were developed. The face of Southport changed dramatically in the quarter of a century after 1887. Along the river front, several new docks appeared in response to the growing commercial importance of the fishing fleet. A coaling dock was erected at the foot of Rhett Street to service the numerous steam ships that anchored at Southport. New churches and a new school were built to minister to

the needs of an expanding population. In 1890 there were 1181 inhabitants in Southport, nearly double the population of thirty years before. Along with the newcomers from the Midwest, several Scandinavians and their families emigrated to Southport, giving the town something of a cosmopolitan atmosphere.

Through World War I and the early 1920's, Southport sustained a moderate growth rate. The great boom era faded slowly and finally ended with the Depression of the 1930's. Military activity in and around Southport during World War II encouraged

the economic revival of the town. After the war, a building boom reminiscent of the late nineteenth century, created new suburbs outside the historic center of Southport. This upswing in economic activity was sponsored in part by the influx of a few large industries and the commercial development of nearby beaches. A severe challenge to the continued growth and development of the town emerged in the mid 1970's when the citizens of Brunswick County voted to relocate the county seat.

* *Southport Leader*, February 27, 1890.

² *Ibid.*, March 6, 1890.

³ See W.G. Curtis, *Reminiscences of Wilmington and Smithville—Southport, 1848-1900*, n. d., p. 44.

⁴ Joshua Potts, "The Location of Smithville," *James Sprunt Historical Monograph*, Nos. 4-6, 1903, p. 86.

⁵ An act to lay off and establish a town near Fort Johnston, on the west side of the Cape Fear River, in Brunswick County, Secretary of State Papers, State Archives.

⁶ *Southport Leader*, February 27, 1890.