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A Publication
of the North
Carolina Maritime
History Council

October 2006
Number 14

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An Unlikely Mariner

Joints and Eats:

The Sunny Side Oyster Bar and Its Vanishing Culinary Landscape

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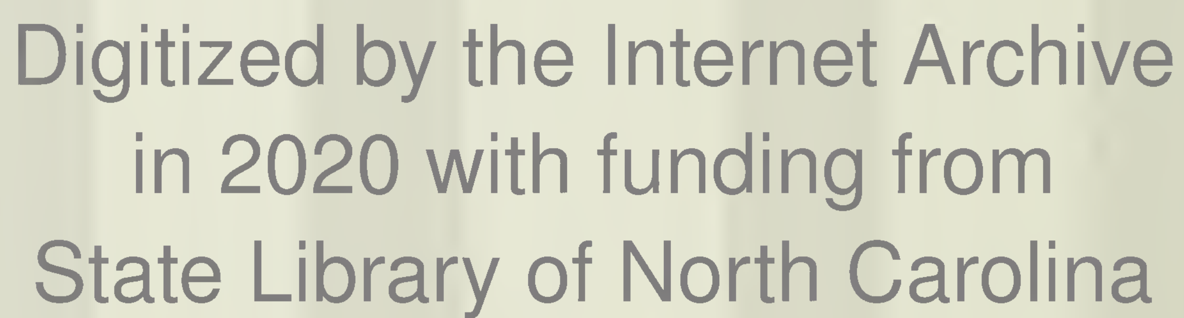
Interactions and Change from 1660-1916

Still Standing:

A Journey into the Ethnohistory of Hatteras and Ocracoke Island Villages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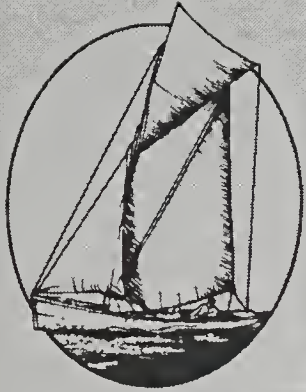

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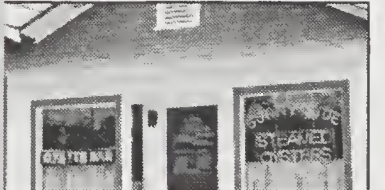

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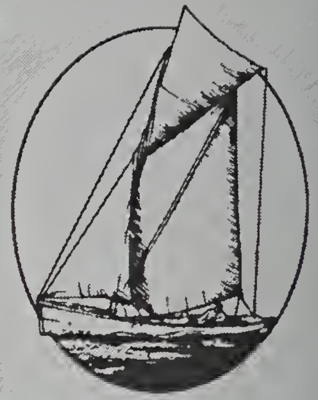

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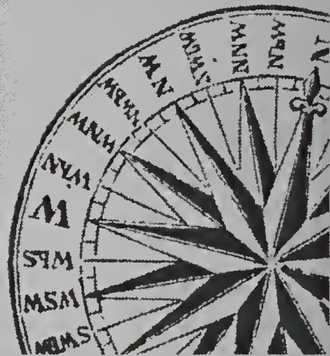

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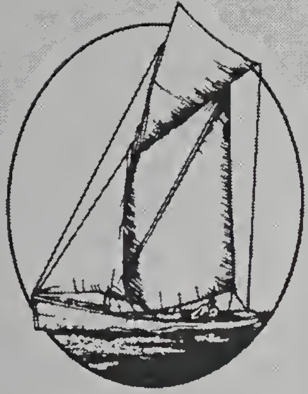


Tributaries

A Publication of the North Carolina Maritime History Council

About

the Maritime History Council

What is North Carolina's maritime history? It's dugout canoes, pirate ships, southern ironclads, and British blockade runners. Ships of exploration, vessels for victory, and countless craft of every description tie the Tar Heel State to the world's waterways.

The North Carolina Maritime History Council brings together all the elements that comprise our nautical heritage. It is a rich heritage, one that tells tales of high drama and unfortunate tragedy. Often one finds the state's economic and social development t o be synonymous with its relation to the creeks, rivers, and sea. The production of tar, pitch, and turpentine, for instance, kept fleets afloat while providing a livelihood for innumerable North Carolinians for almost two hundred years. It is, in fact, why we are called Tar Heels.

The passion for maritime history motivated a group of like-minded individuals to form the North Carolina Maritime History Council in 1988. They incorporated the Council as a non-profit entity in 1990.

The Council's bylaws state the mission as "to identify and encourage historical and educational projects that have as their purpose the enhancement and preservation of the state's maritime history and culture, and that create public awareness of that heritage." The Council can already claim many accomplishments, including:

- The purchase of the Edwin Champney drawings—a collection of fifty-nine sketches of coastal scenes from the Civil War period that were obtained using funds donated by the Frank Stick Trust and other nonprofit groups.
- Serving as the principal grant recipient for the *Queen Anne's Revenge* archaeological project.
- Publishing Tributaries since 1991, North Carolina's only maritime history journal.
- Conducting an annual conference on North Carolina maritime heritage.
- Creating a register of North Carolina historic vessels.

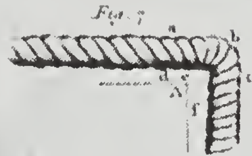
Council membership is open to individuals and institutions interested in maritime history. We encourage this membership to seek ways to pool resources, share information, and discuss issues to benefit the dissemination of our mutual maritime heritage.

This issue of Tributaries contains a variety of topics that demonstrate North Carolina's multi-faceted maritime history. The Council feels privileged to publish work by such well-qualified contributors.

Harry S. Warren,
Chair

Fig 5

Fig 6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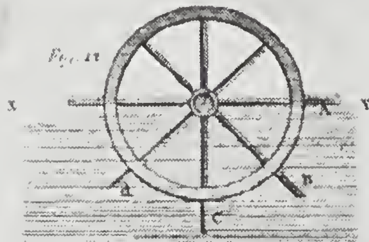

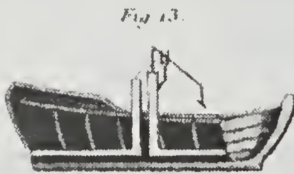
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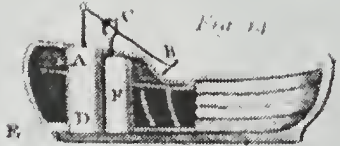
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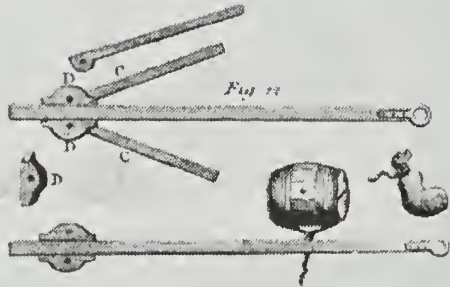

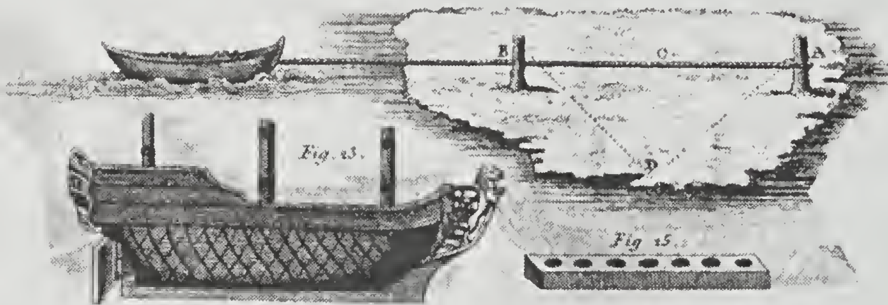
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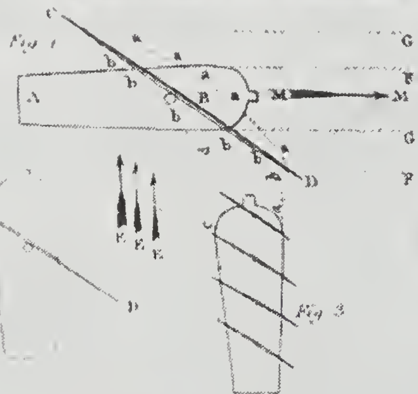
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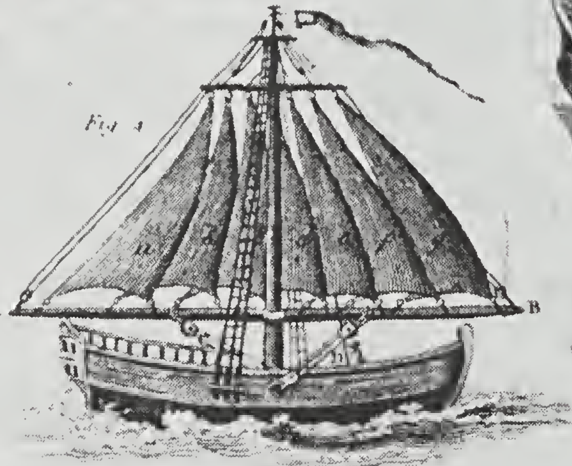
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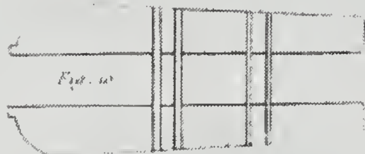

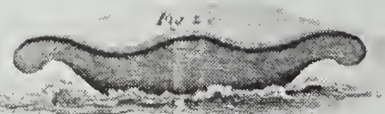

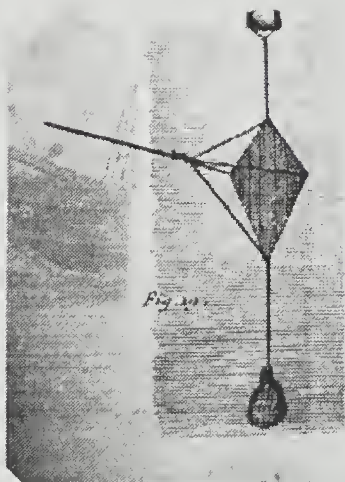

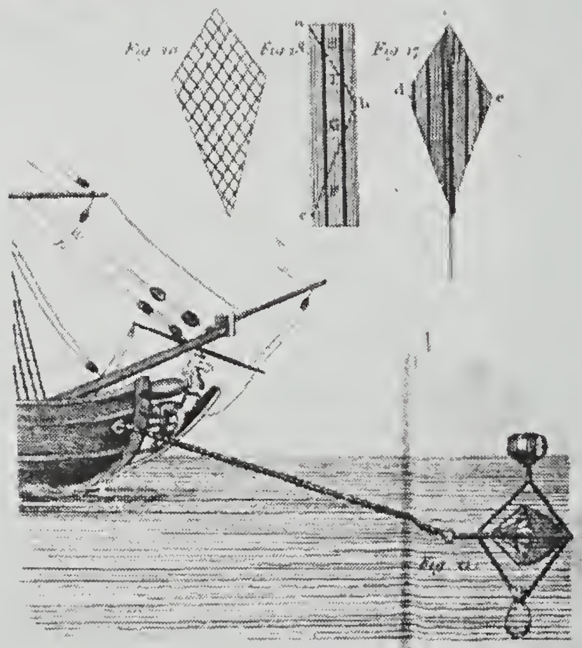
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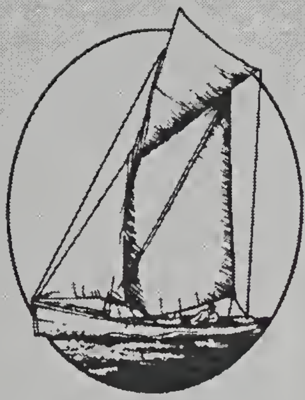

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Left: Illustration using selected images from "..Sundry Maritime Observations," by Benjamin Franklin. In: Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, Vol. II, 1786 (From NOAA Photo Library)

Right: Benjamin Franklin

Benjamin Franklin:

An Unlikely Mariner

by Harry Warren
North Carolina Museum of Forestry

I...had a *strong inclination* for the sea
Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin

Who would have thought Benjamin Franklin a great mariner? Admirers frequently call him a patriot, printer, politician, promoter of the public good, and pursuer of ideas, but seldom do they utter Franklin was an old salty dog or a man of the sea. Nevertheless, he could claim, if his "vanity"[1] allowed him to do so, to be a landlocked man who was a seaman at heart.

During his life, Franklin proved to be comfortable either on land or sea. This familiarly and fondness for the water came naturally at an early age. He even considered going to sea although his father "declared against it." As he wrote in his autobiography, "living near the water, I was much in and about it, learned early to swim well, and to manage boats, and when in a boat or canoe with other boys, I was commonly allowed to govern."[2]

He took to the water like a young duck, learning to swim by reading *The Art of Swimming*, by Melchisedec Thevenot. Even early on, Franklin toyed with ways to improve the process by creating foot flippers to propel him faster and once combined swimming and sailing, tying a kite on his foot to pull him across a pond. The experience gave him "the greatest pleasure imaginable."[3]

Born in 1706 Boston, the port town fueled his youthful imagination. When he was twelve or thirteen, while working as his brother's apprentice, he wrote, "The Lighthouse Tragedy" and "A Sailor's Song." They contained, respectively, accounts of the drowning of Captain Worthilake with his two daughters and the story of Blackbeard's recent defeat in the Carolinas. His brother printed the two short "rub-street" ballads, Franklin's first published work, and sent younger brother Ben around Boston to peddle the pieces. [4]

Franklin's maiden sea voyage came at the age of seventeen to escape his harsh apprenticeship. He recalled the trip enjoyed "a fair wind, [and] in three days I found myself in New York, nearly 300 miles from home."[5] But despite fair sailing, his "inclinations for the sea were by this time worn out."[6] Nevertheless, Franklin was to spend much time on and about watercraft during his life, becoming one of the best-traveled non-sailors of the eighteenth century.

Yet he was more than just a frequent traveler. Franklin observed, took notes, and made drawings on how vessels and voyages could be improved. He shared many of his ideas with Alphorrus le Roy, a Parisian scientific colleague, in a long letter written during his last trans-Atlantic voyage in August 1785. Beginning with the most practical nautical needs, Franklin examined how to make a ship go faster, hold it in place, and keep it afloat.

Franklin calculated how to improve speed by examining wind resistance. He contended mathematicians worked to improve boat speed by looking at a ship's movement through only one fluid – water. However, they had "given little attention to moving through another fluid, the air."[7] His theory resulted in drawings of a strange looking vessel with one main mast supporting numerous sails of equal size. He wisely, though, suggested experiments be made before building the craft.

Franklin followed this up by tackling the topic of developing a better anchor, noting how ships often snapped their lines when weighing them. He blames this on unequal points of stress on the cable and he suggests using a pulley so it would "be more equally strained, and better able to bear the jerk."[8] Again, he provided a drawing to illustrate his point.

"One maritime observation more, shall finish this letter," Franklin promised his French correspondent. He then turned his attention to a mariner's greatest worry, keeping their vessel afloat. He recounted sailors' tales of leaky ships filling with water and, when pumping couldn't keep up with the rising flood, abandoning ship. Yet, the boat frequently did not sink, and could be found washed upon a coastline or salvaged by another vessel. Newspapers seem to confirm this, for "few years pass without an account of some vessel met at sea, with no soul being on board."[9]

Franklin assumed most sailors panic when they noticed their ship sinking and desert the vessel prematurely. The force (water pouring into the hull), he conjectured, "is in proportion to the difference of level between the water without and that within. It enters . . . with more force at first, and in greater quantity . . . this helps to terrify." He advised sailors to keep a cool and level head during such a crisis, contending water flowing into the ship will eventually decrease as the submerged part becomes filled. Once water intrusion slows, "the pumps that could not keep water from rising at first, might afterward be able to prevent it from rising." As an added safety measure, he suggested, tying down empty chests, water casks, and light

Right: Franklin in 1785, the same year he wrote the lengthy letter with his maritime observations. (Charles Wilson Peale, *Benjamin Franklin*, 1785, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia)

woodwork to serve as floatation devices. While this might not save all sinking ships, Franklin felt many supposedly doomed craft might well "have been saved."[10]

Franklin promised his letter would end at this point, but this was quickly reneged, asking the reader to indulge "the garrulity of an old man." It was also self-evident to him, at the age of seventy-nine, he "may never have another occasion of writing on the subject," therefore, "I think I may as well now, once and for all, empty my nautical budget."[11]

His bottle uncorked, a lifetime of maritime musings poured out. Franklin expanded further on his thoughts of keeping ships safe and afloat. Boats sank, he claimed, from six causes (leakage, oversetting sails, fire, lightning, collision with other ships, and "islands of ice") and he expounded on various ways to avoid these misfortunes. His cures for calamity included beating a drum in the dark of night to prevent sailing into another ship, transporting hard liquor in bottles instead of casks to reduce the risk of fire, and installing lightning rods that could be "fixed in about five minutes."[12] He continued with a discourse on the motion of boats. The merits of the Chinese rowing method and attributes of Native American birch bark canoes were examined, as was the use of windmills, "placed at the head of the boat to provide wind for sails."[13] This worked well when Franklin saw it demonstrated on the Seine River, although it took much labor to turn the windmill. He also shared a few more

Right: Chart based upon Franklin's measurement of the Gulf Stream through water temperature. (From Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*, 2003)

thoughts on a ship's operation. He revisited the problem of anchorage and proposes an odd-looking device called "a swimming anchor."[14] Franklin then provided an analysis for what he is often erroneously credited with discovering – the Gulf Stream.

The Gulf Stream phenomenon had consumed Franklin's curiosity for many years. However, mariners had known about this invisible flow of water from the South Atlantic to Europe since Ponce de Leon noted the current around Florida in 1513. Franklin's contribution to understanding it came through careful measuring of water temperature. This enabled him to produce charts of exactly where the Gulf Stream flowed making navigation more efficient. Even today, NASA uses Franklin's scientific studies of the Gulf Stream; his association with it is nearly universal. The common belief he discovered the Gulf Stream would have made a good parable for *Poor Richard's Almanac*. One might say credit for something attaches itself to the one who promotes it.

The Gulf Stream analysis was followed with practical advice for the eighteenth-century accidental tourist. The first suggestion is simple: keep your travel plans secret when taking a long voyage because "you will be continually interrupted in your preparations by the visits of friends and acquaintances."[15] While this may not have been true for all early modern travelers, it undoubtedly was for Franklin, who, in this case, seems the victim of his own notoriety.

Some of his suggestions, however, would be advantageous for anyone seeking passage on a ship destined to be at sea for at least six weeks. For instance, selecting a good captain was most important for "much of your comfort in the passage may depend on his personal character." Numerous items are recommended to take aboard for personal comfort, no matter what provisions the ship may provide. "Good water," tops the list followed by "good tea," "coffee ground," chocolate, "wine of the sort you particularly like," raisins, almonds, sugar, lemons, Jamaica spirits, "eggs greas'd," "diet bread," and

"portable soup." Franklin warned potential passengers that no legitimate cook can be found on most merchant ships. He lamented, "the worst hand as a seaman is appointed to that office, in which he is not only very ignorant but very dirty."[16] Franklin recommended that one cook their own meals, if possible, and even offered a few cooking methods to do this.

Franklin finally concludes his long letter reflecting on the morality of commerce during the eighteenth century. He chastised the slave trade observing, "how much more commendable would it be if we could give up the few minutes gratification afforded once or twice a day by the taste of sugar in our tea rather than encourage the cruelties exercised in producing it." He also belittled so many ships involved in the tobacco trade "for the utility of tobacco there is little to be said."[17]

Benjamin Franklin made eight trips across the Atlantic, the first in 1724 when eighteen and last in 1785 at the age of seventy-nine. His contributions and suggestions spanned a wide range of maritime activity. He probably knew the sea as well as most sailors. Although he never could be called an old salt, the study and suggestions he made concerning the maritime world around him entitles him to be considered more than just a mere passenger.

Yet, Franklin did not see himself as a seaman. He acknowledges "some sailors may think the writer has given himself unnecessary trouble in pretending to advise them, for they have a little repugnance to the advice of land men."[18] Apparently, he considered himself a "land man." However, he recognized many nautical instruments were "the invention of land men," and, indeed, were not all men land locked until the first boat was built.

So today, three hundred years after his birth, maybe he could be considered a person worthy of being called a mariner. One thing seems certain, Franklin's youthful "strong inclination for the sea" found many ways to express itself.

Endnotes

1 Franklin felt "vanity" not necessarily a bad thing. His humorous analysis of this much-maligned human trait is explored in the first few pages of his autobiography. Benjamin Franklin, The Autobiography, in The Benjamin Franklin Reader, ed. Walter Isaacson (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 407.

2 Ibid.

3 Benjamin Franklin to BarBeu DuBoung, April 1773, in Benjamin Franklin: An American Life, ed. Walter Isaacson (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003) 16.

4 Franklin, Autobiography, 411.

5 Ibid. 419.

6 Ibid.

7 Benjamin Franklin to Alphorrus Le Roy, August 1785, at NOAA Ocean Explorer, http://www.oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/library/readings/gulf/gulf.html (accessed 11 July 2006).

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

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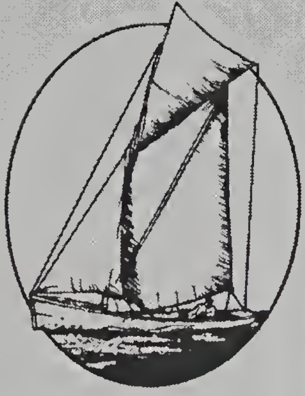

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Joints and Eats:

The Sunny Side Oyster Bar and Its Vanishing Culinary Landscape*

by Penne Sandbeck

On a winter's night, the Sunny Side Oyster Bar's bright pink neon sign stands out among fading auto dealerships and storefronts at the edge of Williamston's business sector. A humble-looking establishment, it would take a native or an oyster-loving pilgrim to seek it out. Its low-to-the-ground foundation is poured concrete, its exterior is plain and weatherboarded with no particularly catchy signage or colors. The two front-gable buildings comprising the bar and former butcher shop now live under a single roof and the exterior has been somewhat smartened up, but the front plate glass windows with its painted and neon signage have not changed for decades.

Seventy-seven years old in 2006, Sunny Side began with Theodore Roberson's one-story, front-gable Sanitary Service Market, a meat market, in 1929. Then, in the winter of 1930-1931, Roberson extended his Sanitary Service Market on its south side with a smaller front-gable room, the Sunny Side Inn, a café. Sometime between 1935 and 1940, Roberson and his two sons, Charles Tilghman ("C.T.") and George, built a rear extension to serve as an oyster bar behind the Inn. This last and smallest addition, like a tail wagging a dog, has become the building's chief identity. People who would remember the Sunny Side Inn are either very, very old or have shed this mortal coil, but the Sunny Side Oyster Bar remains famous throughout North Carolina and Tidewater Virginia.

The oyster bar's "waiting room" – the original Sunny Side Inn – is lit by the two aforesaid display windows, the recessed entry's sidelights and two side windows; oddly, there are only small windows at the south elevation, the "sunny side" of the building. Guests at Mr. Roberson's opening dinner on 29 January 1931, would have crowded in the wooden booths still in place, dining upon "turkey, barbecue, Brunswick stew, and sea foods" for the price of seventy-five cents. Cubbyhole wooden lockers near the counter are reminiscent of bygone days before liquor by the drink, when a person who did not want his bourbon to be lonely at home could carry it to the Sunny Side (discreetly, in a brown paper bag) and check it in a locker. The former meat market provides extra space for waiting diners, who have been known to launch into the "Electric Slide."[1]

A short step down, behind the Inn's original counter, is the oyster bar itself, a narrow, rectangular room. The U-shaped metal bar, restored in 1994, dominates the room. Surrounding the bar are wooden stools, many from the 1940s, painted a lacquered green and white, echoing the shiny green-and-white of the beaded-board, tongue-and-groove sheathed walls. Behind the bar is the shuckers station; the shuckers' side of the bar has an aluminum trough all around for easy cleaning and a plywood floor covered with cedar shavings to catch any stray oyster juice. The use of cedar shavings, a practice outlawed some time ago by the health department, is allowed here under a grandfather clause.

Right: An early Sunny Side Oyster Bar ad (From the *Williamston [NC] Enterprise*, 1945) and the front elevation of Sunny Side Oyster bar, (Penne Smith Sandbeck, 1995)

The original complex of oyster steaming and oyster storage outbuildings immediately east of Sunny Side was torn down in 1993 and replaced by a small cement block building housing the old oyster steamer (used since the 1940s), washing pit, boiler, and storage area. When an order is placed, the shuckers go to this building to give the orders to the steamer, who hands over the requested oysters in a metal pail—a process identical to what occurred in the original steamer building.

A successful commercial enterprise, Sunny Side has entered modern times. Its interior, as well as its exterior, has been successively buffed-up, and it now not only has its own website, but a satellite branch known as Sunny Side Too, located in Garner, North Carolina. But the original Sunny Side remains the only oyster bar in continuous operation of sixteen such places, nine of which were located outside town limits, serving eastern North Carolina between 1930 and 1950. And even with its augmentations, the Sunny Side has remained intact enough that a time-traveler from fifty years ago could wander in, wait in the tall booths, and saunter to the bar without any sense of disorientation, except that the place is much cleaner and less smoky. New regional oyster bars have appeared on the scene, such as the Roanoke Oyster Bar in Plymouth, and Blackbeard's Oyster Bar in Washington, however, these are only approximations of an authentic, well-maintained, and well-preserved early twentieth-century eastern North Carolina oyster bar and not the real thing. The "real thing" – a host of simple, early twentieth-century buildings, concrete block and frame alike, that served as barbecue stands and oyster bars – have almost all vanished from this landscape.

From documentary evidence, period oyster bars in North Carolina's eastern edge of the Coastal Plain shared similarities in appearance, plan, and location. Williamston's Mickey's Inn and Sunny Side, along with Washington's Togo Sandwich Shop, were frame, one-story vernacular buildings, plain in appearance. Their simplicity was a quality shared with other unpretentious local eateries; Piedmont North Carolina's fish camps come to mind, and there is also the "cook-up shack" tradition of frying herring along the Roanoke River, a tradition that spawned Martin County's Cypress Grill (ca. 1936) in Jamesville.[2]

Barbecue stands follow a similar tradition, although they are year-round cafes, and not, unlike herring and oysters, seasonally-dependent. However, apart from the pit house, which is almost always separate from the main building, there can be much variation of form and style.

These documented oyster bars, sometimes sharing space with barbecue stands, were unpretentious in appearance, often a bit tumbledown. Most, like Mickey's Inn, originally kept their oyster bars separate from their other eating facilities. One local oyster haunt, Paul Jones' Gulf station on Williamston's Washington Street closer to town, consolidated its operations in a small cement block rear addition with "Hot Barbecue – Oysters In Season" painted directly on the façade, further indication of the growing popularity of regional oyster dining along with North Carolina's mainstay, the barbecued pig.

In the case of the 1930s oyster bars, particularly Sunny Side, exterior features were closest to the Craftsman style, a popular early twentieth-century style with roots in the nineteenth-century British Arts and Crafts aesthetic. This movement (also influential with the more elaborate Queen Anne style) had eschewed artifice in exterior covering, espousing workmanlike qualities of a building to remain exposed. By the time Williamston's families were building Craftsman houses in the 1920s, the style had evolved into a simpler, comparatively modest form. Keynote features included exposed rafter tails, simple brackets also known as knee braces, and paired and single double-hung sash windows, usually with four vertical panes over a single glass pane, commonly known as "Craftsman style" windows. Why these buildings were built the way they were was probably not a conscious decision; apart from Craftsman style being popular, the Depression made a substantial impact on building choices. No one had the money to build a fine edifice for a café whose *raison d'etre* was a seasonal phenomenon. The spontaneity of the oyster season, furthermore, tended to promote an oyster bar somewhat rustic in appearance, a simulation of eating oysters in nature or close to it.

The American love affair with the oyster has often bordered on the obsessive, beginning with the seventeenth century "oyster wars"

between the Maryland and Virginia colonies. They were a gastronomic delicacy in colonial America and continued in popularity afterwards, if the number of documented "oyster cellars" in northeastern cities is any indication.[3] In Samuel Wood's *Cries of New-York, 1808-1814*, there is mention of the open-air "oyster

Right: Barbeque stand and oyster bar at Paul Jones' Gulf Station, Williamston, NC (Francis Manning Room, Martin County Community College, Williamston, NC)

stands in the city, where black men are ready with some of the finest oysters, which they open and serve out raw from one to three cents a piece."[4] The ritual of oyster consumption, a common sight in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, where food writer M. F. K. Fisher describes the bivalve served "on a plate of shaved ice, with small round white crackers in a bowl or vase" became a less elaborate ritual in the South.[5] Here, a diner enjoyed informal intimacy in surroundings and ritual. In a simply finished and furnished room lit by an exposed light bulb or a fluorescent tube, all the pleasure was in the ritual and the oysters themselves as opposed to décor and trappings. There was the shucker, expertly flipping oysters from the shell into a small dish as he conversed easily on sports or the weather, while strangers seated all around the bar with their food and beer might well become friends by the end of an evening. Later, there might even be dancing in the front room. This simpler form of entertainment in humble surroundings was heightened in its pleasure by the seasonal aspect of oysters themselves; six months of the year, the oyster bar would be closed and waiting for fall.[6]

In 1849, railroads began shipping oysters packed in ice to inland cities such as Buffalo and Chicago. Where there were no railroads, horse-drawn wagons carried oysters further to the hinterlands.[7] Norfolk and Baltimore became major oyster processing centers, shipping most of their product to northern cities. By the 1880s, as stocks were running low in the northeast, hungry eyes looked south to North Carolina's "great Pamlico Sound, with its wonderful oyster bed."[8] To meet demand, Virginian oystermen freely invaded the Pamlico's waters for "spat" (young oysters) to revitalize their own dwindling stocks in the Chesapeake.[9] At the turn of the century, oystering as a business took root in the Old North State. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, created for municipalities, show oyster canneries and smaller packing houses to be a dominant feature of the 1890s and early 1900s townscapes of Beaufort, Elizabeth City, Morehead City, Washington, and New Bern. New Bern's most prominent oyster dealer at the end of the nineteenth century was a northern transplant, George Ives, who was a strong advocate for the industry. Further north in Beaufort County, Belhaven had the Montgomery and Makely packing house and Washington had the J. S. Farrow and Company Canning Factory in 1901.

The industry endured a slump in the early twentieth century, after the oyster beds of the Pamlico and Albemarle sounds were rapaciously over-harvested. The Elizabeth City *Independent* announced in 15 December 1922, that Governor Cameron Morrison was about to request a $500,000 appropriation from the General Assembly to reseed the Pamlico with spats. Flush with this news, the editorial opined:

> Now for a name for an oyster! We have got to have a name to identify the North Carolina oyster, just as Lynnhaven identifies the best oysters grown in Virginia waters. We have got to have a name for North Carolina oysters that will stand for the best in oysters and identify North Carolina oysters. The country is fed up on Lynnhavens, Horn Harbors, Sea Tags, Cape Cods, Cherrystones, and Blue Points. Let's have a Pamlico, a Carolina or some other oyster and make the name stick.[10]

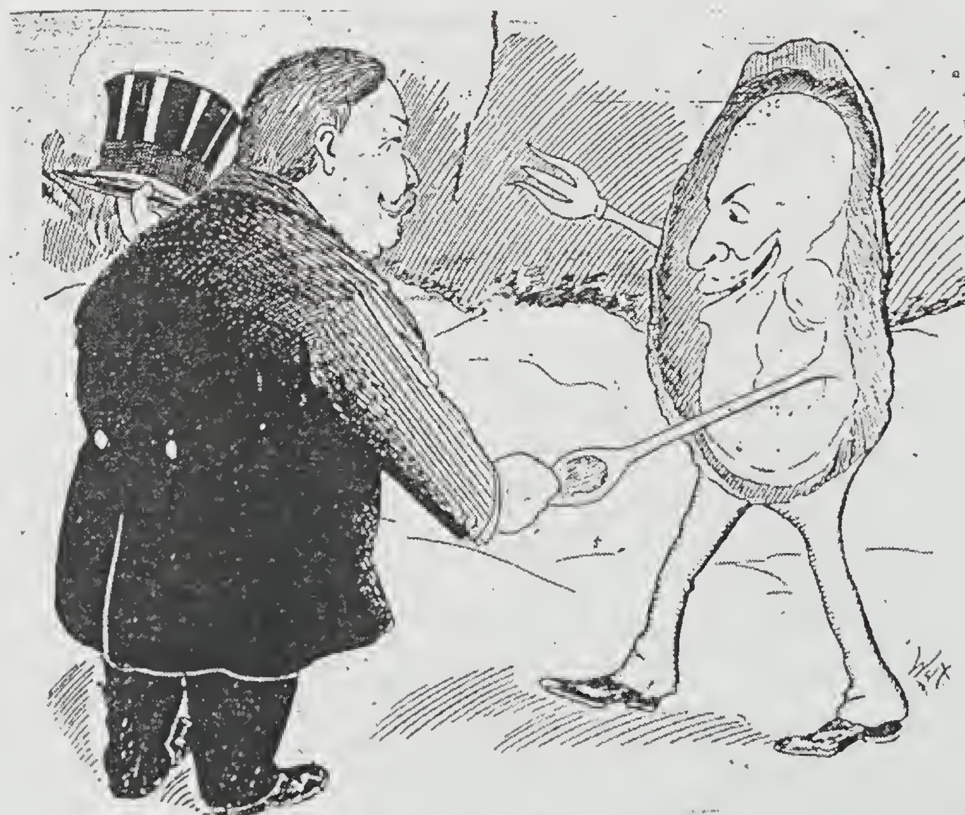
The Lynnhaven oyster, gathered from the waters near Virginia Beach, had become particularly famous due to two early twentieth-century oyster bars, "Colonel" Ernest Browne's at 407 Granby Street, Norfolk, and O'Keefe's Casino near Cape Henry. O'Keefe's was a Virginia Beach institution and even visited by President William Howard Taft, who is said to have had a splendid meal at the casino. Nearby, Elizabeth City's residents were no doubt familiar with these places and possibly patterned their own oyster bars after Browne's and O'Keefe's.[11]

New Bern and Elizabeth City may have been the first towns in North Carolina with oyster-eating establishments. Lack of firm documentary evidence, however, precludes definitely stating that these establishments were oyster bars as we know them today. Raleigh, considerably inland, also had restaurants offering oysters in season during the 1880s, one being the Moseley House at 124 Fayetteville Street. New Bern had Detrick's Restaurant and Billiard Parlor at the corner of Pollock and Middle Streets, which advertised "oysters in every style" on its menu. But New Bern and Elizabeth City also offered a spontaneous factor common to the docks of northeastern ports that prefigured North Carolina's twentieth-century oyster bars. It was then a common practice that oyster shuckers would proffer raw and steamed oysters to passers by on the docks. The informality and guilty pleasures of eating oysters in the open air continued in these riverside towns, according to Elizabeth City's Fred Fearing, into the 1930s.[12]

This form of dockside dining had a counterpart in eastern North Carolina's early twentieth-century cafes. In the 1933 Beaufort County Directory, there are two illustrations of "sandwich shops" in Washington – Togo's Sandwich Shoppe at Charlotte Street and East Main Street's Shore View. Togo's one-story log bungalow built in the Craftsman style, had two timber frame outbuildings, one a pavilion and the other an open shed with a chimney grill visible; the latter outbuilding was probably a pit house for barbecue and possibly with a steaming area with oysters. The Shore View, a one-story frame building, had an open side deck with a view of the Pamlico River.

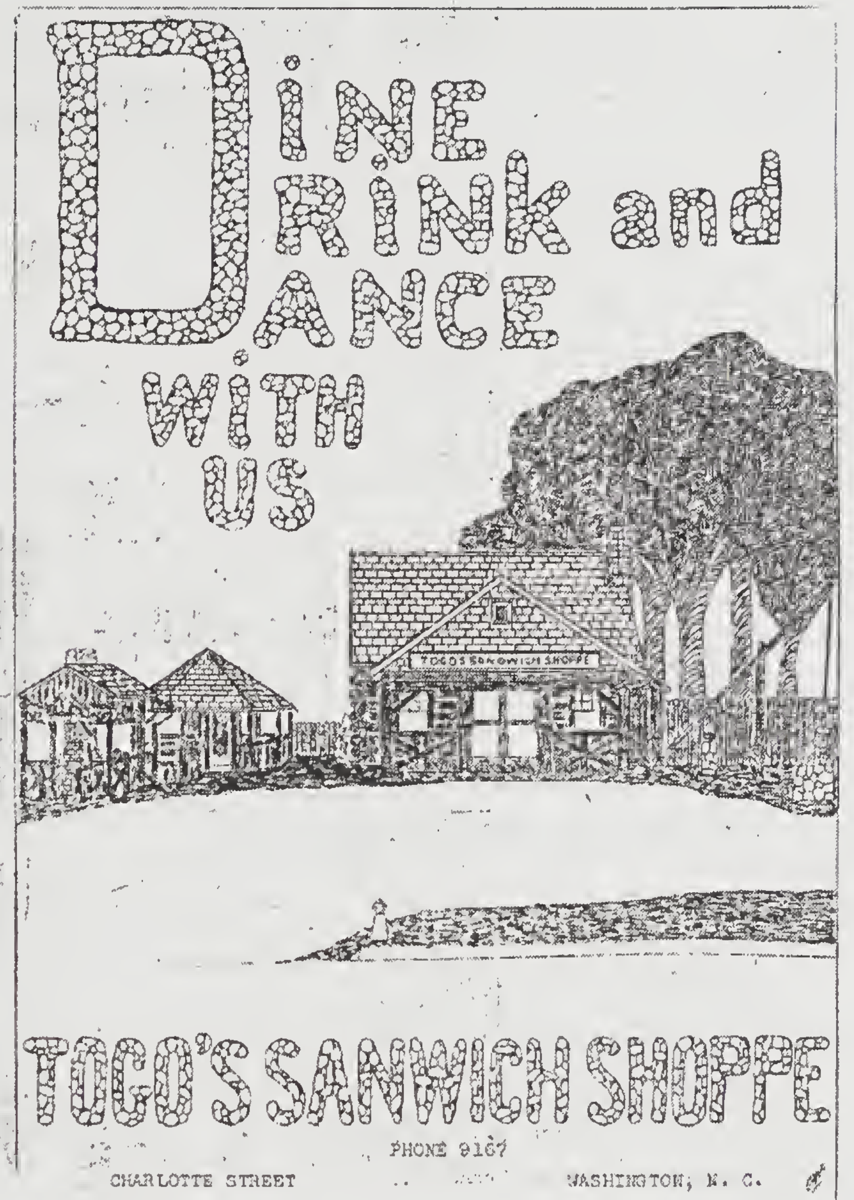
Theodore Roberson's Sunny Side Inn was not on a picturesque riverfront, but it was also very much in the spirit of a less formal dining atmosphere in tune with the needs of a small town/rural North Carolina community. Roberson, a forty-nine year-old grocery store proprietor, built his butcher shop on the edge of Williamston in 1929 and opened for business in September. The stock market crash one month later affected Roberson, like many small businessmen; he took out an ad in the newspaper on 31 December, thanking his customers for their business, nevertheless emphasizing that "Business conditions compel me to sell only for – Cash Next Year."[13] Roberson's next newspaper advertisement was in January 1931, announcing the opening of a "New Lunch Room – Sunny Side Inn."[14] Deciding to open a café at the dawn of the Great Depression could either have been a desperate attempt to feed his growing family or to capitalize upon his successful grocery business. That Roberson added the oyster bar to the back of the Sunny Side Inn around 1935 suggests the latter. Roberson further diversified his grocery-restaurant-oyster bar by selling fireworks at the Sunny Side during the 1934 and 1935 Christmas seasons.[15]

Longtime Williamston residents recall that Theodore Roberson bought his oysters from


A BIVALVE GENTLEMAN OF VIRGINIA GREETS A GENTLEMAN OF OHIO.

Left: President William Howard Taft, who was in Norfolk for a commission meeting, managed to find time for a visit to the celebrated O'Keefe's Casino in Virginia Beach (From the *Norfolk (VA) Virginian-Pilot*, 12 November 1909)

Virginia, rather than from the local North Carolina markets. The 1930s Virginia oyster industry, as well as its general seafood industry, was comparatively more sophisticated and extensive. According to the United States Department of Commerce's 1933 Statistical Abstract of the United States, North Carolina's 1931 seafood harvest was approximately 98,000 pounds, but Virginia's came to 226,637 pounds. Norfolk and Portsmouth had seven major seafood wholesale distributors in 1931 and, apart from a 1925 quarantine due to a typhoid fever outbreak, the oyster industry had steadily strengthened in Maryland and Virginia as stock in New Jersey's Atlantic Coast and Delaware Bay waters was attacked by parasitical "oyster drills." In November 1933, Norfolk's oyster shipments "in a single week from near-by packing houses reached a total valuation of $50,000."[16] Within the industry there was great concern that oyster prices remain stable "in order that those in the business may not show a list to the loss side," and smaller dealers could remain in operation.[17] The trucking industry increased oyster sales much in the way transporting oysters by railroad or wagon had a century before. As of March 1934, "Virginia oysters, taken from beds in the Rappahannock River near Urbanna, are now being served in homes and restaurants in Dayton, Ohio, and it is probable that when present plans are completed, a number of trucks will be in constant service carrying bivalves to cities of the Middle West."[18]



Right: Advertisement for "Togo's Sanwich (sic) Shoppe," Washington, NC (Wilkinson Collection, Brown Memorial Library, Washington, NC)

North Carolina's efforts to revive their favorite bivalve began bearing fruit by the early 1930s. In November 1931, H. F. Prytherch, director of the U. S. Bureau of Fisheries' Beaufort, NC, station, announced, "It will not be long before much of the bottoms of the inland waterway in this state will be planted in oysters, as much of the area through which it passes is admirably suited to oyster growing."[19] Three years later, the *Atlantic Fisherman* reported that Prytherch's efforts to cultivate North Carolina's waters were well underway, and oysters from the small town of Belhaven were already gaining popularity.[20] An identifiably North Carolina oyster even came to pass; J. H. Ward's Market inWilliamston, North Carolina, advertised in 1932, "We now have fine Belhaven Oysters. They are fresh and fine."[21] With its newfound fame, the Belhaven Oyster also tasted a bit of notoriety. A month later, the *Williamston Enterprise* reported that "an employee of George N. Baker, Belhaven oyster dealer" had been apprehended in Charleston, South Carolina, for selling Baker's oysters and pocketing the money himself. The felon was one of Baker's truck drivers; according to the story, he had sold nearly all the oysters in his shipment and abandoned the truck in Williamston, where he "asked a worker in the café here to call the owner and tell him where the truck was."[22]

Eastern North Carolina's burgeoning oyster industry and growing popularity of informal barbecue/oyster stands meant that their sound and river towns—not just Williamston on the Roanoke, but other cities on the Tar, the Neuse, and their surrounding communities—would have more access to oysters. One flamboyant example was Greenville's Yum Yum Barbecue Palace, located north of the Tar River Bridge, nearly an hour's drive from

Williamston. On 19 December 1931, cards were scattered from an "aeroplane" flying over Williamston's Main Street, entitling lucky recipients to a free airplane ride after a meal at the Yum Yum Palace, where they could feast upon "barbecue, Brunswick stew, slaw," and "oysters all styles."[23] The Yum Yum also held dances; their New Year's Eve dance in 1931 featured the sounds of the "Red Hot Rambling Syncopators."[24] Local history has it that Yum Yum's original proprietors got the idea to open a restaurant in Greenville from visiting a successful barbecue/oyster stand in Rocky Mount.[25] As for the airplane, the Perkins family, who co-owned Yum Yum with Van Fleming, owned land along the Tar River's north banks extending to, and including, the airport.[26] Jim Clark, Yum Yum's manager, made the most of the situation with a "Yum Yum Airport" advertisement:

> We will be glad to serve you all kinds of Eats, at very reasonable prices. Eat then ride, after the ride with the C&W Flying Service, EAT AGAIN.
>
> BARBECUE, BRUNSWICK STEW, SLAW, OYSTERS ALL STYLES.[27]

Although no photographs are known to exist of the Yum Yum, it enjoyed a long tenure in its roadside spot north of Greenville. Taken over by C. M. and R. W. Respess in 1951, who had run it four years prior (and whose brother, Alton, had run it beforehand) it enjoyed a second life as Respess Brothers into the 1970s. The Yum Yum-Respess Brothers building continued as a restaurant with an oyster bar, its last incarnation being Pirates Galley in the 1990s. Hurricane Floyd ended its nearly seventy years of existence in 1999.[28]

The 1947 lease Curtis and Cordelia Perkins signed with the Respess Brothers describes the complex containing "the main café building, the oyster bar located near the highway" and a barbecue pit house where pork would have been prepared over a wood fire.[29] The earliest known photograph of Respess Brothers, taken in 1960, shows several changes as having taken place, beginning with the oyster bar and café consolidated into one long side-gable building. On closer inspection, Respess' long concrete block side-gable building was actually two different buildings that were joined together over time. Greenville natives who went to Respess in the 1940s and 1950s recalled that they entered the building at the side entrance, and the oyster bar was to the left (north), entered through a front-gable stoop porch.[30]

A closer competitor to the Sunny Side's doorstep emerged with Mickey's Place in 1935. One mile west of Williamston, Mickey's Place advertised itself as a "little colony" replete with steamed oysters, homemade barbecue, "drinks, and other miscellaneous items sold at modern filling stations and lunch stands." Transients and tourists alike were welcomed; in 1995 at least two frame tourist cabins remained on the premises.[31] In 1937, having become Mickey's Inn, times were good; "an unlimited supply of fireworks" for the Christmas and New Year's holidays was listed, along with "Drinks of All Kinds . . . DeMais Sandwiches," and, prominently centered in the advertisement, "Dancing and Oysters."[32] Mickey's Inn itself was a one-story, frame store, modest and comparable to the Sunny Side, and has been a convenience store for some years. Behind Mickey's is the former oyster bar, a front-gable, frame building resembling a shotgun house. Its rear shed, still standing, is where oysters were stored and steamed. Oyster shells are still in abundance around the building.[33]

A lively place of business, one longtime Williamston resident recalled hearing that Mickey's Inn was a "joint" where the manager wore a gun when on duty.[34] What miscreants may have been discouraged by law and order at Mickey's Inn may have made the ride to Plymouth's Juniper Lodge one December night in 1945 when, at precisely ten-thirty, an explosion "caused by pranksters setting off a charge of dynamite" shattered glasses, blew the fuses, and burst the oyster bar's water pipes, creating general mayhem within the premises.[35]

The casual nature of oyster bars and their slightly dissolute atmosphere reveals a dichotomy in popular culture versus the 1930s and 1940s oyster industry's promotion of its product. A 1934 editorial in the *Atlantic Fisherman* extolled the oyster's nutritional value and its consequent potential to become a family foodstuff on the plateau occupied by chicken, pork, or fish.[36] Juxtaposed with such promotion are eastern North Carolina's oyster bars and oyster/barbecue stands with their advertised

connotations of spicy barbecue, warm steamed oysters, drinks (after Prohibition), and dancing. While many of these establishments were frequented by respectable people and were not dens of iniquity, neither were they, by nature of their sensual connotations, considered clean, family fun. Yet, as much as was possible, the Robersons endeavored to keep Sunny Side respectable. It was a place where grandparents could bring their grandchildren for a treat, where high schools students could congregate and dance, and where profanity was frowned upon.[37] "None of us had enough money to buy oysters," one Williamston resident recalled, adding that their quarters went toward Pepsi, crackers, and cocktail sauce.[38]

Fifteen other documented oyster bars of the era, located in Rocky Mount, Plymouth, Williamston, Greenville, Raleigh, New Bern, and Tarboro, no longer exist. The exception is Cliff's Seafood Restaurant and Oyster Bar, established by Clifton Whitehurst in the early 1950s near Greenville's Port Terminal docks on the Tar River. The area was also home to the eponymous 1940s Port Terminal Oyster Bar, also a favorite with East Carolina University underclassmen. With the exception of Plymouth and New Bern, these were towns alongside rivers, but not towns sited on riverfronts. New Bern had oyster bars and stands, including the 1930s Bee Jay Oyster Bar and Bowden's Oyster Bar in the heart of downtown, and their particular history, as New Bern's Middle Street was a thriving wharf into the 1920s, would be a fascinating study in itself.

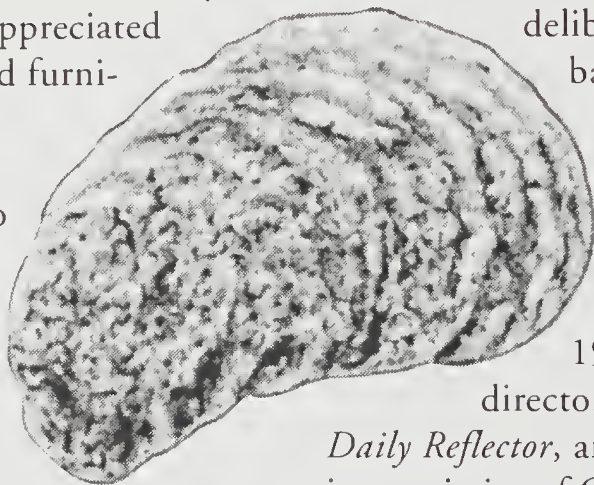
Right: Cliff's Oyster Bar, Greenville, NC (From *The [East Carolina] Buccaneer*, 1961)

Coastal seafood restaurants in the Morehead City and Beaufort area were comparatively more sedate than the inland barbecue/oyster stands. In the late 1930s, this seaside section of Carteret County housed cafes on a par with Mickey's Inn or Plymouth's Juniper Lodge, particularly Stanley's on Route 70 east of Morehead City. Local ordinances on the sale of beer and restaurants serving beer, however, indicate that Carteret County's citizens preferred restrictions on alcohol. In 1938, Ted Garner and Tony Seamon rented an old waterfront fish house from longtime seafood magnate Charles Wallace, with an understanding that "no beer would be sold and no drinking [would] take place."[39] The original Sanitary Fish Market seated twenty people; by the 1970s, as the tourist industry expanded along Carteret County's oceanfront, the restaurant's "new" building (circa 1949) seated over 500 customers.[40] Captain Headen "Bill" Ballou, in turn, renovated another old Morehead City fish house, first as an officer's club in 1941 and then, "Capt. Bill's Waterfront Restaurant" in 1945.[41] In contrast to the inland oyster bars, these restaurants were self-sufficient in terms of seafood produce. They were also more conventional restaurants, offering full meals and especially catering to young families.

The Robersons ran Sunny Side for just over sixty years, except for a brief interlude in the early 1940s. The 2 July 1943, issue of the *Enterprise* announced "the Reopening of Sunny Side Inn, Operating Under New Management." New proprietress Geraldine Moore advertised chicken and steak dinners. This unsuccessful venture metamorphosed into the "Traveler's Rest Café" just a year later. Mr. and Mrs. Mayo Matthews advertised the bill of fare as including "Vegetable Dinners," steak, chicken, and seafood. By November 1945, the Sunny Side was back in Roberson family ownership and management and remained so until 1993. In those ensuing years, Theodore Roberson's son C. T. ran the oyster bar between October and April, his other source of income being the C. T. Roberson Tire Company at 905 Washington Street, which he sold in 1977. His mother Annie L. Roberson deeded Sunny Side to

him in 1964.[42] In 1993, the Robersons sold Sunny Side to a group of local investors who carefully restored the exterior, rehabilitated the interior, but were less than sensitive to the feelings of the family, creating a rift where some Williamston citizens sided with the Robersons, some with the investors, and others flitted uneasily between.

Like a dinosaur at the dusk of its eon, Sunny Side stands alone on the Coastal Plain landscape, having outlived its peers. Its survival as a business and a distinctive example of an early twentieth-century café and oyster bar is due to the tenacity of the Roberson family and a loyal following, who appreciated the original simple finish and furniture and, through continual patronage, ensured that it remain thus. Its survival into the twenty-first century is further remarkable because of both the transient nature of oyster bars and oyster/barbecue stands and the conscribed season peculiar to oyster bars, making them a unique and not always lucrative business. Consequently, there has traditionally been less investment in the form and construction of an oyster bar, many of which eventually passed on to other uses or vanished, due to its transient nature, from the landscape. To study these buildings is to, for the most part, study a reality that has not existed for decades. So it is that with these enterprises, seasonal and ephemeral by nature, their existence is ephemeral as well, reflecting the transience – tourist cabins, barbecue stands, rural service stations, music "joints" – of the early twentieth-century semi-rural American landscape.



Appendix

Locations of oyster bars have contributed to their being difficult to document. Many of the known oyster bars or oyster bar/barbecue restaurants built in the 1930s and 1940s were located outside of town limits. This may have been one reason why beer and wine were available there, and, conversely, why their location could have been deliberate. An additional oyster bar, now demolished, was within Greenville's city limits – the Oyster House at 101 Short Street (1944-1946), briefly May's Oyster House in the late 1950s. Citations exist in city directories, the *Greenville (NC) Daily Reflector*, and period maps. The building, a victim of Greenville's 1960s urban renewal plans for the Tar waterfront, was a front-gable, frame Craftsman style house with a series of side and rear extensions from which the oyster bar was run; one innovation was the front extension, a Craftsman style garage building with doors still intact, turned to its side. Unlike the other oyster bars, which had a primarily white clientele, May's was in an African American neighborhood and patronage is thought to have stayed within the neighborhood.[43]

Oyster bars in the Coastal Plain's eastern edge all located outside of their respective town limits:

Sunny Side Oyster Bar	Williamston, NC	near Hwy 17 (1931—)
Mickey's Inn	Williamston, NC	on Everetts Hwy (1935-1946)
Juniper Lodge	Plymouth, NC	Hwy 64, at NC 32 (1944-46)
Respess Barbecue	Greenville, NC	Greene Street, north of Tar River Bridge (1930-1970s)*
Cliff's Oyster Bar	Greenville, NC	Hwy 264, east of town (1953)
Port Terminal Inn	Greenville, NC	Hwy 264, east of town (1947-49)
Dixie Inn	Wilson, NC	Jct. Routes 22 and 40, now NC 117 (1931)
Stanley's Café	Morehead City, NC	Hwy 70, west of Morehead City (1939-41)
Purifoy's Oyster Bar	Rocky Mount, NC	1333 Tarboro Street (1950-63)

* Also known as Yum Yum Barbecue Palace, 1931-1935.

Above: May's Oyster House, c. 1960, Greenville, NC (Special Collections, J.Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University)

Endnotes

* Research for this article was conducted in part as background for the author's 1995 National Register nomination for the Sunny Side Oyster Bar, Williamston, NC

1 Anna Tilghman, Raleigh, NC, conversation with author, 20 January 1996.

2 T. Edward Nickens, "The Last Cook-up Shack," *Wildlife In North Carolina*, March 2003, 6-9.

3 Mark Kurlansky's recent work, *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006), provides considerable context on the social history of northeastern United States oyster consumption from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

4 Molly O'Neill, *The New York Cookbook* (New York: Workman Publishing Company, 1992), 371.

5 M. F. K. Fisher, *Consider The Oyster* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1941), 64.

6 For health reasons, oysters have traditionally been eaten between September and April. As the folk saying has it, oysters should only be eaten where there's an "R" in the month.

7 Waverly Root and Richard de Rochemont, *Eating in America: A History* (New York, William Morrow and Company, 1976), 135.

8 George I. Nowitzky, *Norfolk: The Marine Metropolis of Virginia, and The Sound and River Cities of North Carolina, A Narrative* (Norfolk, VA, and Raleigh, NC: G. I. Nowitzky, 1888), 206.

9 Gary Dunbar, *Historical Geography of the North Carolina Outer Banks* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), 86.

10 *The Independent* (Elizabeth City, NC), 15 December 1922.

11 Ibid., 5 March 1926; *The Virginian-Pilot* (Norfolk, VA), 12 November 1909; Stephen S. Mansfield, *Princess Anne County and Virginia Beach: A Pictorial History* (Norfolk, VA: The Donning Company, 1989), 113; Joseph Dunn and Barbara Lyle, *Virginia Beach, "Wish You Were Here": A Postcard View of Days Gone By* (Norfolk, VA: The Donning Company, 1983), 33.

12 Fred Fearing, Elizabeth City, NC, telephone conversation with author, 14 February 1995.

13 *The Enterprise* (Williamston, NC), 31 December 1929.

14 Ibid., 27 January 1931.

15 Ibid., 14 December 1934; 17 December 1935.

16 Paul Titlow, "Virginia Sees Improvement in Seafood Business," *Atlantic Fisherman*, December 1933, 12.

17 Curtis Sandusky, "North Carolina and Virginia: Oyster Industry Increasing in Area and Sales," *Atlantic Fisherman*, November 1931, 9.

18 Idem, "Virginia Oyster Prices Rise," *Atlantic Fisherman*, March 1934, 14.

19 *Enterprise*, 27 November 1931.

20 Sandusky, "Virginia Oyster Prices Rise," 14.

21 *Enterprise*, 4 October 1932. Virginia Electric and Power Company (VEPCO) had just opened a plant in Williamston, and so one wonders if the locals weren't wagging their new Virginian friends a bit.

22 Ibid., 22 November 1932. The café is not identified in the article.

23 Ibid., 18 December 1931.

24 Ibid., 1 January 1932; *The Daily Reflector* (Greenville, NC), 30 December 1931.

25 Mary Alice Roebuck, Stokes, NC, telephone conversation with author, 17 August 1995. According to Mrs. Roebuck, the name was originally "Yum Yum Barbecue Palace," and the oysters came later, although oysters were advertised as being on the bill of fare by 1931.

26 Ibid.

27 *Daily Reflector*, 25 November 1931.

28 Pitt County Register of Deeds, Book R-25 (Curtis Perkins and family>C. M. and R. W. Respess, Deed, July 1951), 276; Greenville City Directory, 1948-1973; *The Buccaneer* (East Carolina University), 1958-1963.

29 Pitt County Register of Deeds, Book A-25 (Perkins>Respess, August 1947), 271.

30 Charles W. Howard, Greenville, NC, conversation with author, 20 February 1995.

31 *The Enterprise*, 8 November 1935; "Mickey's Inn," photograph, (Francis Manning Collection, Martin County Community College, Williamston, NC).; Penne Smith Sandbeck, 2 June 1995, site visit to Mickey's Inn, Williamston, NC

32 *Enterprise*, 10 December 1937.

33 Martin County Register of Deeds, Book V-3 (S. J. and Cassie Dickson, misspelled "Dixon">VEPCO, Easement, February 1946), 496.

34 Nathan Mizell, Williamston, NC, conversation with author, 2 June 1995.

35 *The Roanoke Beacon* (Plymouth, NC), 20 December 1945.

36 P. G. Lamson, "The Glorious Oyster," *Atlantic Fisherman*, November 1934, page not numbered.

37 Sue Cause, Chris Kidder, Deborah Norman, Judy Phillips, and Beth Wiegand, "The 'Peck' of the Oyster Houses," *North Carolina's Taste Full,* Winter 1993, 11; Bland Simpson, *Into The Sound Country: A Carolinian's Coastal Plain* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 79. Simpson quotes Theodore Roberson's grandson, Charles, who was running Sunny Side in the early 1990s: "You get outa hand, you talk dirty, you're *outa* here!"

38 Jack Edwards, Williamston, NC, conversation with author, 13 February 1995.

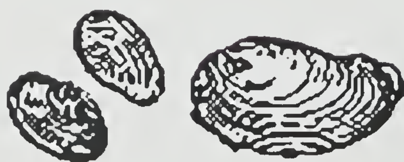
39 Morehead City (NC) Woman's Club, *A Pictorial Review of Morehead City* (Greenville, N.C.: Highland Press, 1982), 108.

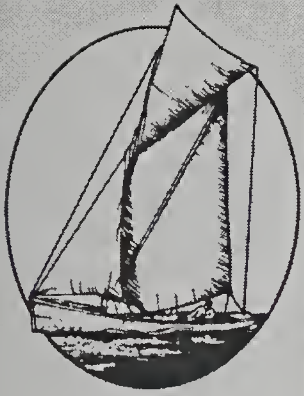
40 Morehead City Woman's Club, 109.

41 Ibid., 106.

42 Martin County Register of Deeds, Book R-7 (Annie L. Roberson> C. T. Roberson, Deed, 22 October 1964), 152.

43 City of Greenville Redevelopment Commission, Shore Drive Redevelopment Project, ca. 1965. (Special Collections, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC).





Tributaries

A Publication of the North Carolina Maritime History Council

The North Carolina Whaling Industry:

Interactions and Change from 1660-1916

by Jessica Curci
Coastal Resources Management Program, East Carolina University

Right: Whalers "cutting," or removing, blubber (From Marcus Simpson and Sallie Simpson, *Whaling on the North Carolina Coast*, 1988)

Hunters have pursued whales off North America since antiquity, but organized whaling expeditions only began on a large scale in the seventeenth century. Dutch and British fleets promoted the whaling industry during their campaigns to exploit all forms of "fishing" in North America. New England, specifically, became the most well known hub of whaling in the early eighteenth century. In addition to the large-scale whaling industries in New England and New York, many local fishing communities actively pursued whales along the Atlantic coast. During the colonial period, local fishing communities from Maine to South Carolina developed varying forms of whaling. For example, in Williamsburg, Virginia whaling was a short-lived and somewhat casual industry regarded as an experiment. On the New Jersey shore, however, the whaling industry influenced the promotion of immigration and the increase of settlements.[1] Almost all commercial whaling in North America began as local shore-based whaling activities that evolved into pelagic fleets that hunted for whales. Through this transition, most of the shore-based whaling industries on the Atlantic coast, south of New York, were abandoned by the early nineteenth century. Unlike those shore-based whaling communities, North Carolina did not abandon its tradition, but also did not make this transition from shore whaling to pelagic whaling.[2] Instead, North Carolina whale hunting continued locally into the twentieth century, aided by its advantageous geographical position for whaling.

The barrier islands of North Carolina enjoyed the luxury of close proximity to the Gulf Stream and, therefore, the migratory routes of certain whales, such as the highly sought Right Whales (*Eubalaena glacialis*) and Sperm Whales (*Physeter catodon*). This offered residents the opportunity to whale with little actual "hunting." The local whaling industry of North Carolina focused first on the barrier islands in the Albemarle region; later, the Beaufort area saw most of its whaling crews hunting off Cape Lookout. Northbound Right Whales passed by Bogue Banks and Shackleford Banks during their spring migration and whaling crews took full advantage of this movement.

Whalers from large commercial industries, such as New England and New York, and the comparatively smaller local whaling industry in North Carolina began from the same modest roots. Both industries initially used similar methods in hunting whales, but in the early eighteenth century diverged into two drastically different whaling techniques. After this deviation, continued interaction existed between the larger commercial whalers and the local North Carolina whalers. The commercial whalers would often sail to the North Carolina coast in the spring (to the area known as the "Hatteras ground," between 35° and 38° north latitude and 70° and 75° west longitude along the edge of the Gulf Stream off the northeast section of the Carolina coast). In this way, they exploited the favorable geographical conditions that provided Sperm Whales and Right Whales.[3] Although the interactions between the two industries continued, the North Carolina whaling industry never attempted to adopt the techniques of the commercial pelagic whalers.

Local shore whalers in North Carolina initially depended on whales that washed onshore, known as drift whales, or whales that beached along the banks. Whalers eventually supplemented this passive whaling with the use of double-ended open rowing boats outfitted with crews to chase whales sighted from shore. After a sighting, they chased, harpooned, and towed the whales to shore. The whalers then harvested the blubber, oil, and whalebone on the open beach.

Whalers captured only a few whales each season, as evidenced by the Shackleford Banks residents' habit of naming each whale. This tradition, documented in the written record, imparted a unique aspect to every hunt and provides evidence of the techniques used to hunt and kill whales. In 1894, H. H. Brimley recorded the methods of whaling off Shackleford Banks.[4] On sighting a whale, the crew was assembled for each boat (Brimley recorded

Left: Whalers "trying out," or boiling and rendering, the blubber (From Marcus Simpson and Sallie Simpson, *Whaling on the North Carolina Coast*, 1988)

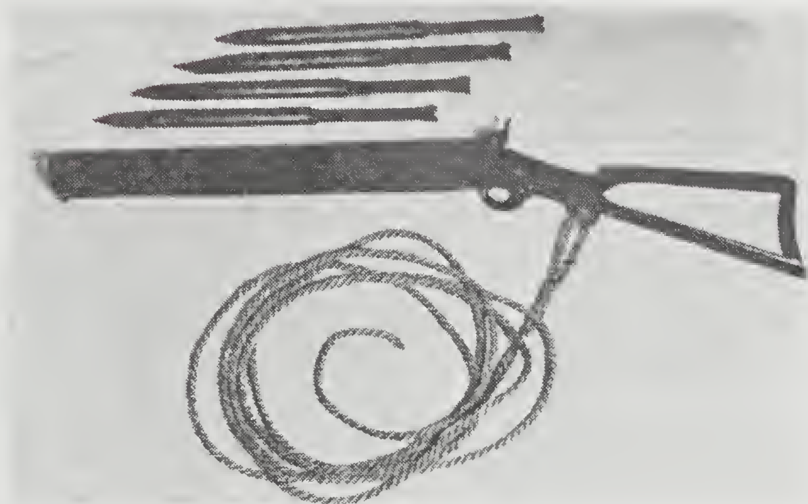
Right: Carteret County boatbuilder Devine S. Guthrie pictured with a North Carolina whaling vessel (From Marcus Simpson and Sallie Simpson, *Whaling on the North Carolina Coast*, 1988)

the use of four whaling boats on one hunt for three whales) and began the chase. The first boat would row close to the whale, harpoon it carefully, deep and fast, to ensure a hit. The crew then maneuvered the boat near where the crew expected the whale to rise (after staying submerged for around thirty minutes, the whale usually surfaced). The boat crew rowed in close and one man fired the whale-gun. The whale would submerge in response and the shooter reloaded the gun. The whale usually attempted to swim out to sea, but the boat would keep chase, constantly shooting rounds from the whale-gun when the opportunity arose. This continued until the whale tired and a last, fatal harpoon and lance was thrown into the vital organs. Afterwards, the boat crew towed the whale to shore. On shore, the whalers cut up and processed the carcass by stripping blubber from the body, removing the tongue, lips, flukes, and deep body fat. The crew boiled the blubber and dipped out the oil with a ladle. The oil was poured through a strainer twice to refine it, rendering the oil clear and ready for barreling.[5]

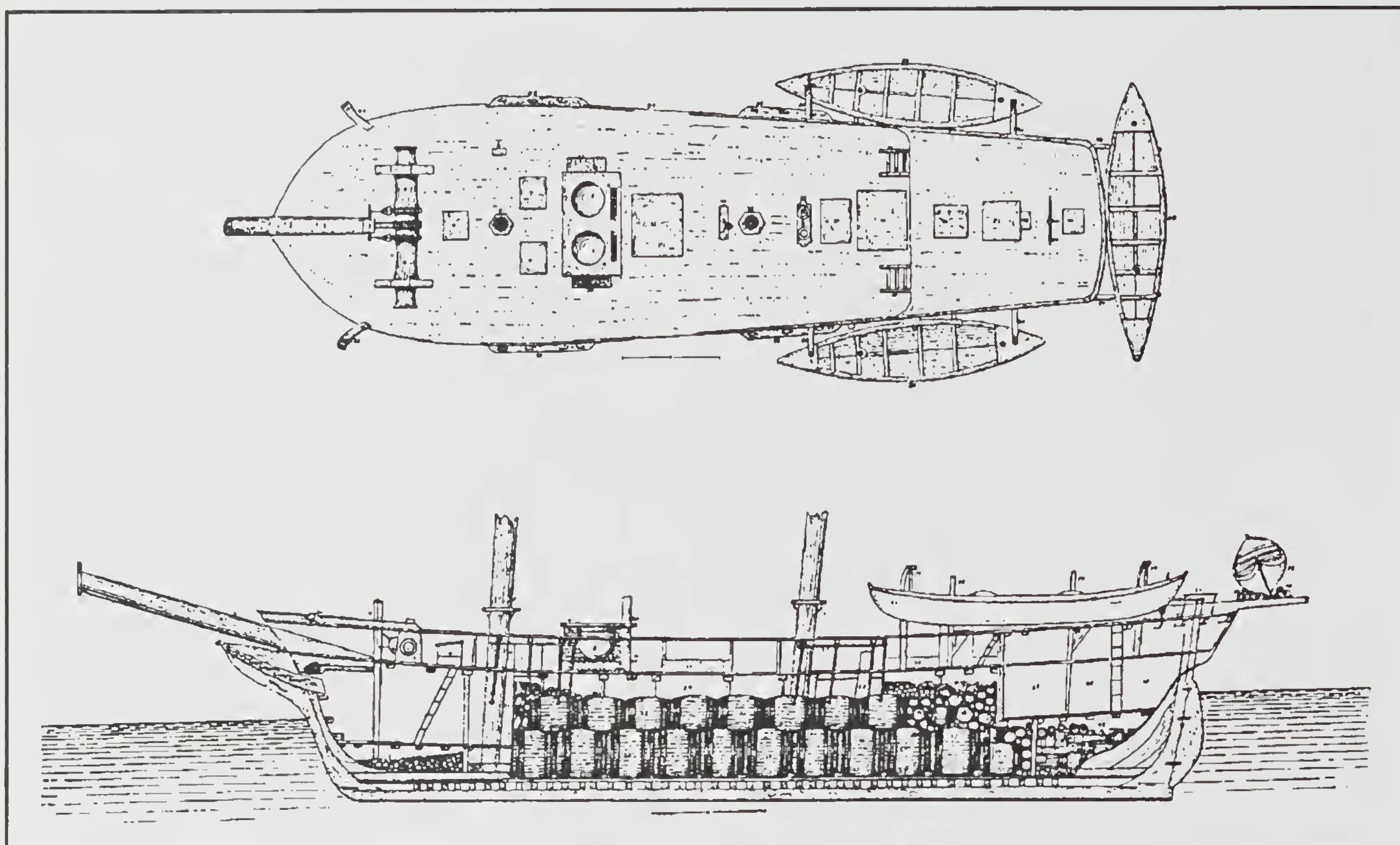
The whaleboats were constructed locally and designed specifically for whaling. The boats had a lapstrake design, made from local juniper and cedar timbers. The boats were twenty to twenty-five-feet long and double-ended, with high, pointed bows and sterns and carried a crew of six men.

Four men handled the oars, one acted as steersman, and one acted as the gunner/harpooner, while also manning the bow oar until the approach to the whale.[6] The gunner/harpooner used whale-guns in addition to harpoons beginning after the Civil War. Two of these guns survive from Shackleford Banks whalers and are single-barreled, muzzle-loading shoulder pieces. These guns fired "explosive bomb-lances" around one-inch in diameter and sixteen to eighteen-inches long. These projectiles were designed with rubber "feathers" to better guide the missile to the target. The projectiles exploded deep in the whale and usually ended the hunt quicker, and at safer distance, than traditional harpooning.[7]

The North Carolina local whalers also used two types of harpoons (often called irons). One, called the "two-fluted," was an older style of fixed-blade spear. The other, a "toggle iron," was a more advanced spear that had a hinged barb, which firmly anchored in the whale due to a swiveling harpoon head. A short line, usually less than forty fathoms and tied to the harpoons, was attached to a square block of wood, called the "drag" or "drogue." The drag block slightly hindered the movement of the whale and marked its location.[8]



Right: Shoulder-fired whale gun called a "Brand Whaling-Gun" (From Marcus Simpson and Sallie Simpson, *Whaling on the North Carolina Coast*, 1988)



Left: Deck and interior view of the Northeastern whaling schooner, *Amelia* (From Marcus Simpson and Sallie Simpson, *Whaling on the North Carolina Coast*, 1988)

Right Whales, the type most often hunted by North Carolina whalers, provided oil from the blubber for use as a lubricant and a fuel. This type of whale also provided "whalebone," the flexible, tough baleen used by the animal to filter its food from seawater. Whalebone was sold commercially for use in products like buggy whips and corset stays. Whalers did not hunt Sperm Whales as often from the shore, but these animals were equally as important commercially as the Right Whale. Sperm Whales were vital for the unique "spermaceti" oil extracted from their heads. Spermaceti oil was very high quality, and used for various products, such as candles, cosmetic oils, and fine lubricants. The bulk of both types of whales' muscle, bones, and internal organs, were generally discarded.[9]

The number of whales successfully hunted or captured during this early period and the relative importance of whales captured while beached versus captured during shore hunts compared to pelagic hunts is unknown because of the dearth of published information on whaling on the North Carolina shore. Also unknown is the size, sex, and relative amounts of product from the different types of whales of the early whaling period. Colonial naturalist John Brickell speaks generally about the identification of the female genitals on the Right Whale, but only through observation as a naturalist.[10] He also discusses the practice of sailors scooping buckets of whale semen from the ocean and even describes the taste of it.[11] The records from this period consist mainly of court documents, which tend to be somewhat exaggerated or biased because of the reliance on participant testimony. There is a conventional belief that an "average" Right Whale would yield thirty to fifty barrels of oil. This estimate meant that the North Carolina whaling industry's production of 4,200 barrels in fifteen years represents 84 to 140 whales, or six to nine whales per year.[12]

The local shore-based whaling industry was established by the 1660s and 1670s in North Carolina. Evidence of this exists in correspondence and shipping records, which state that whalebone and whale oil were two major products of the Albemarle region. In 1668, Colington Island produced around eighty barrels of whale oil, which was regarded as a great commodity.[13] The rising economic importance of whale products in North Carolina initiated a need for the regulation of the industry. This regulation included taxation and a proprietary interest in encouraging the practice. The Lords Proprietors' 1667 written instructions to Governor Samuel Stephens state that any tradesman exporting whale oil from North Carolina shall be exempt from taxation.[14] However, two years later, the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*, drafted

on proprietary orders in 1669, detailed that all whale fishing and half of all ambergris, a valuable product of Sperm Whales, "shall wholly belong to the Lords Proprietors." In 1672, Assistant Governor Peter Carteret wrote in his financial accounts that he sent 195 barrels of whale oil to London, clearing twenty-five shillings per barrel, or £243 15s. Assistant Governor Carteret's financial accounts from 1673 reference a similar figure.[15] In 1681, the Proprietors renounced the rights to whale products publicly by instructing Governor John Jenkins and the Executive Council to announce that the local whalers were authorized to take what whales they could find for their own use.[16] In the fifteen years after that announcement, the whaling industry in North Carolina flourished. Evidence from court records of complaints that arose over the ownership of whales and whale products were common and show that the shore whaling industry had become a competitive one. Unfortunately, these court documents do not indicate whether the whalers embroiled in litigation hunted whales with harpooning crews or through processing drift whales.[17]

In order to encourage further whale hunting in North Carolina, the proprietary instructions to governors Edward Hyde in 1712 and Charles Eden in 1713 included a reminder that the duties on whale products were lowered. The Lords Proprietors wished to benefit from the profits of whale hunting, but also wanted to promote the industry as a long-term one so that the benefits would not be short-lived. To this end, the Proprietors waived the immediate return on whale hunting. In 1714, however, this waiver was nullified and Governor Eden supervised the collection of the "tenths" of whale oil and whalebone that whale hunters owed the government. The Proprietors especially wished to encourage whaling off the North Carolina coast by men from other colonies. This allowed whalers from New England to exploit the advantages of hunting off the North Carolina coast, a particularly beneficial situation because their own shore-based whaling industry was in decline. The dissolution of New England shore whaling led to the increased funding of seagoing whaling outfits to hunt whales in the deep ocean along the Gulf Stream.[18] The New England whalers had the ability to chase and hunt at greater speeds and with larger crews operating a fleet of sailing vessels – a decided advantage over the local North Carolina whalers. Assisted by this change, the New England whaling industry, compared with North Carolina shore whaling, netted a larger amount of whales and, therefore, enjoyed much larger profits.

The domestic whaling industry continued to thrive until the Revolutionary War. In February 1775, a bill introduced in Parliament prohibited the colonies from conducting any fishing on the banks of Newfoundland or any of the North American coasts. In the years before the war, the whaling industry

Right: Table 1 - Vessels transporting whale products from North Carolina (From Marcus Simpson and Sallie Simpson, *Whaling on the North Carolina Coast*, 1988)

Vessel	Weight	Captain	Destination	Port of Departure	Date of Departure	Cargo
Sloop *Nancy*	20 tons	John Groton	Rhode Island	Beaufort	April 27, 1785	Whalebone
Schooner *Nancy*	12 tons	Solomon Fuller	Baltimore	Beaufort	May 22, 1787	Oil
Schooner *Raven*	18 tons	Warback	Swansborough	Beaufort	February, 1788	Oil
Sloop *Industry*	30 tons	Hubble	Philadelphia	Beaufort	May 31, 1788	Oil
Sloop *New York Packet*	60 tons	Griffin	New York	Beaufort	June 16, 1788	Oil
Sloop *Friendship*	65 tons	Johnston	Bath	Beaufort	February 17, 1789	Oil
Sloop *Charlotte*	18 tons	Samuel Chadwick	Boston	Beaufort	April 17, 1789	Oil
Schooner *Polly*	65 tons	Turner	West Indies	Beaufort	April 25, 1789	Oil
Schooner *Betsey*	80 tons	Smith	England	Beaufort	May 2, 1789	Oil
Schooner *Fanny*	60 tons	Benjamin Leecraft	Guadeloupe	Beaufort	May 7, 1789	Oil
Schooner *Active*	67 tons		Roanoke	Beaufort	December 29, 1789	Oil
Ship *Minerva*	100 tons	Gideon Freeborn	Dublin	Brunswick	January 13, 1787	Oil
Schooner *Wilmington Packet*	30 tons	Luke Swain	Charleston	Brunswick	June 30, 1787	Oil
Brig *Polly*		Edmund Case	St. Bartholomew	Brunswick	April 17, 1788	Oil Spermaceti Candles
Schooner *Good Hope*		Henry Hunter	St. Eustatius	Brunswick	December 5, 1788	Oil
Schooner *Sally*	38 tons	Thomas Potter	Martinique	Brunswick	December 1, 1789	Oil
Lively		John Litchfield	Baltimore	Currituck	October 17, 1784 September 15, 1785	Oil
Sally	5 tons	Caleb Chaplan	Baltimore	Currituck	June 19, 1786	Oil
Nancy	15 tons	Solomon Ashby	Baltimore	Currituck	November 28, 1788	Oil
Sally	9 tons	William Arthur	Baltimore	Currituck	January, 1789	Oil
Industry	12 tons	John Cudworth	Baltimore	Currituck	April 17, 1789	Oil
Polly	5 tons	Mark Davis	Richmond	Currituck	May 20, 1789	Oil
	5 tons	William Price	Virginia	Currituck	June 30, 1789	Oil
Schooner *Phoenix*	60 tons	John Barry	St. Bartholomew	Roanoke	March 4, 1786	Oil

employed 4,700 men and 360 ships, netting an annual production of 45,000 barrels of sperm oil, 8,500 barrels of whale oil, and 75,000 pounds of whalebone. By 1789, however, the number of ships shrank to 130 vessels and the annual production of sperm oil to 10,000 barrels.[19] The effects of the Revolutionary War on shore whaling, though, are not well documented. It is known that shore whaling was active on the North Carolina coast because in April of 1782, a group was spotted near Fort Hancock on Shackleford Banks waiting to hunt whales. Additionally, after the Revolution, port records show that whale products were common on ships leaving North Carolina. While the spermaceti candles and some of the oil might have been transshipments from outside the state, the majority of the outgoing whale oil was produced locally.

Most of the whaling exports from North Carolina left Port Beaufort, where between April 1785 and December 1789 at least eleven ships left with "oil" as cargo, headed for Rhode Island, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, England, the West Indies, and Guadeloupe. Port Currituck also handled exports and logged eight ships leaving for Baltimore and Virginia with whale oil. Between January 1787 and December 1789, Port Brunswick catalogued five ships leaving for Dublin, Charleston, and the West Indian islands of St. Barthelemy, St. Eustatius, and Martinique carrying whale oil. Table 1 shows the record of these exports.

Between the War of 1812 and the Civil War, shore whaling in North Carolina and pelagic whaling by New England and New York whalers continued with increased fervor. In fact, the 1840s were known as the "Golden Age of American Whaling" because northern whalers, having exhausted the commercially profitable whale populations on the Atlantic coast, voyaged to the Pacific, Indian, and western Arctic oceans.[20] In addition to venturing far from home to find commercially acceptable whales, northern whalers continued to hunt in the Hatteras grounds and along the Outer Banks during the 1830s and 1840s. These types of operations ranged from long stays, hunting the major capes far out to sea, to short voyages through the area. In the 1840s and 1850s, the northern whaling industry that dominated the pelagic whaling off the North Carolina coast was the Provincetown fleet out of Massachusetts. This is due to the increasing depletion of commercially acceptable whales in the Atlantic Ocean and the subsequent desertion of the area by commercial whalers headed for the Pacific Ocean.[21] The Civil War marked the decline of this Golden Age. The Atlantic was all but depleted of easy prey and Confederate vessels enacted large tolls on northern whalers, forcing them even further away into the northern Pacific and western Arctic oceans. The discovery of petroleum, the rising cost of outfitting whaling vessels, and the increasing need for lengthier, and therefore more dangerous, voyages to find commercially suitable whales made it impractical to rely heavily on whale oil products.[22]

At the end of the Civil War in 1865, the simmering hostility between northern pelagic whalers and local North Carolina shore whalers became fierce and aggressive. First-hand accounts this conflict are recorded in letters from the inhabitants of the coast. On 2 April 1867, Colonel John M. Perry, a lawyer living in Beaufort, North Carolina wrote to Miss Della Barlow of Tarboro, North Carolina that New England whalers had incurred the wrath of local whalers for taking whales in the area.[23] In addition, Col. Perry stated that, "every spring now, since the ending of the war, we have one or more whaling schooners from New England arriving around here after whales. Our native whalers, a portion of my constituents, living on the bank, wants the legislature to pass a law prohibiting these 'furriners' as they call them."[24] Conflict between the rival whaling industries was escalating, then, from merely competitive encounters to full-scale attempts at petitions against foreign or non-resident whalers. It is not known whether the state legislature tòok the local whalers petition seriously, however, in the end, a law prohibiting foreign whalers from hunting off the North Carolina coast was not enacted. A few days later he wrote, "We had another whale

caught yesterday. The boats chased and fought him from 2 o'clock till sun down. Our natives haven't caught any yet and they will be more severe than ever on the legislature for not protesting . . . these 'furriners' . . . ."[25]

Not only does this illustrate that the legislature did not attempt to stop foreign whalers from profiting from whaling off the North Carolina coast, but it also shows that the northern pelagic whalers were in direct competition with the shore whalers during this period. The local whalers resented the northerners, and not simply because the northern whalers captured whales available to shore whalers. The northern whalers possessed advanced whaling technologies and the equipment to conduct long offshore hunts. This allowed them to chase whales further offshore outside of the Gulf Stream and the coastal area. The disruption of the whales' migration along the Gulf Stream disrupted, in turn, the whaling practices of the locals. The North Carolina whalers relied on the proximity of the animals to the coast and in the Gulf Stream because they utilized small crews and boats that were unable to sail far out to sea or give extensive chase. The depletion of whales in the Atlantic Ocean increased the tensions between the two whaling industries and made competition for the small number of whales all the more fierce.

In his letter of 5 April 1867, Perry provides further information regarding the economics of whale hunting and the techniques of local whalers in North Carolina.

> The whale fishing would be very profitable here if the season lasted longer but they are rarely seen after April – The whalers used to employ only harpoons and lances but now they shoot them with an explosive bullet which if it lands in a vital part, bursts into pieces, and kills the whale. The one they caught last Sunday was worth $1000. I am told sometimes they are worth twice that sum. If I can get a small one, I'll bring him up to you when I come, if I can get transportation for him.[26]

Perry coyly wrote the next week, "I am sorry that I haven't another whale to write about, but none has been caught since my last . . . I'll go a fishing and the first young whale that bites at my hook I'll catch and save for you."[27] The size, type, or gender of the whale worth $1000 is unclear, however, for local shore whalers that sum was certainly worth the effort of hauling in a whale regardless of size or type, especially if the whale could have been worth twice as much—the potential for the great worth of whales in 1867 is evidence as to why the local shore whaling contingent did not die out along with other shore whaling communities. Also interesting is the playful suggestion that Perry could catch a whale while out fishing to bring back to his beloved. While he wrote this in playful jest, it is interesting to see the apparent widely held belief that whales were abundant enough off the coast of North Carolina that anyone could catch at least a small, young whale.

Perry's description of the techniques used by the whalers also provides insight into the development of additional methods to facilitate the whale hunt. The original use of harpoons and lances correlated to most other shore whaling practices on the Atlantic coast. The introduction of guns to the whale hunt facilitated the ease of the hunt and ensured that once spotted, the hunters had the advantage over the quarry. This advantage helped guarantee that the whalers would bring home a catch if a spotter located one. Whether this addition was in reaction to whaling methods practiced by the northern pelagic whalers is not clear.

Col. Perry also provides interesting information on the economic situation of Beaufort in the mid-nineteenth century. On 13 September 1867, he wrote, "This house [is] sadly in need of repair . . . . There is another and a better one on First Street . . . a nice house, but larger than we would want which I can probably get, tho' I can't ascertain just now if it is for sale. I could buy it but I do not care to be furthered in real estate in Beaufort as there is so much uncertainty as to the future of the place."[28] Interestingly, Perry was unwilling to invest in Beaufort as a remunerative city. He does not detail the amount of economic advantage the city enjoyed from the whaling industry, however, the evidence

suggests it may have had a favorable impact. From the amount of exports from Port Beaufort and other ports in the area, the whaling industry, while local and not as technologically advanced as its northern counterparts, increased the wealth of Beaufort. The whaling industry encouraged watermen, as well as men of other trades, to move to the North Carolina coast to exploit the proliferation of whales available. Whether the depletion of whales on the coast, and the ensuing breakdown of the whaling industry as a whole in the area, led to the detriment of the city itself is not suggested in the evidence. Depending on the extent of the whaling industry in Beaufort, the hardships of the industry would reflect on the town's economic standing.

Elliott Coues, a physician and naturalist, was assigned duty as an army doctor at Fort Macon in Carteret County from February 1869 to November 1870. He recorded that the natives, who were mostly fishermen, "captured an occasional whale in spring." He also talked of a Right Whale, about forty feet long, caught on Shackleford Island. He claimed that all the bones were "at disposal of self or anybody else but it would be an augean job to clean them."[29] He also stated that, in addition to that whale's carcass, there are several "bleached jaws, humeri, [and] vertebrae lying all about." He further mentioned that the locals talk of only three types of whale being hunted—the Right, the "Scrag," and the Humpback. While this may be true, no actual formal records exist detailing the shore hunting of Humpback Whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*). If a Humpback beached itself, however, locals would have taken advantage of the find regardless of type. The identity of the "Scrag" whale is unknown, although Simpson and Simpson postulate that it might have been the Gray Whale (*Eschrichtius robustus*, also known as the "dry skin" Right Whale), a rather thin species that yielded small amounts of oil.[30]

The North Carolina whaling industry attracted the continued attention of scientists in the region, even during the industry's decline. State geologist W. C. Kerr states that in 1875 the value in whale oil and whalebone for a Right Whale usually ranged from $1,200 to $1,500. In the 1880s, A. H. Clark, another scientific authority on whales, claimed that a typical annual catch of four whales would yield around $4,500 in profit. Col. Perry's claim that the whale caught in 1867 yielded a profit of $1,000 further substantiates the scientists' claims.[31] This continued profit from whaling makes it hard to believe that North Carolina shore whaling would experience decline. However, the combination of massive hurricanes in 1899, the general depletion of whale populations in the North Atlantic Ocean due to over-hunting, and the collapse of the whalebone market probably caused even the local whaling industry to experience a sharp decline at the turn of the century. The hurricanes caused many residents to abandon the coast and the Outer Banks, while the over-hunting of whales meant that during a number of years, no whales were seen at all and little measurable profit was to be made. Moreover, the whalebone market collapsed in 1907 due to changes in women's dress fashions that essentially eliminated the need for baleen, or "whalebone," corset stays.[32]

Despite this, two successful hunts were recorded in April and May of 1908. In April, the forty-three-foot whale yielded forty-five barrels of whale oil, but the whale caught in May was so thin that the hunters made no effort to process the blubber into oil.[33] It is telling that locals did not record the amount of "whalebone" extracted. Whether it was harvested and not recorded, or not harvested at all, is unclear. However, the lack of information regarding the whalebone is most likely because the market for such items had collapsed. The same disregard for whalebone occurred in the records of the last whale hunt in North Carolina on 16 March 1916. A fifty-seven-foot Right Whale was caught in the shallows of Cape Lookout and after processing yielded thirty-eight barrels of whale oil. These were reportedly the last barrels of whale oil procured through active shore whaling by North Carolinians.[34] Whether the thirty-eight barrels is a normal amount is not recorded, however, considering in 1908 a

forty-three-foot whale yielded forty-five barrels, the whale caught in 1916 may have been somewhat thin. Soon after the collapse of the local whaling industry in North Carolina, the northern pelagic whalers also abandoned the trade. Coastal residents spotted some New England whaling ships off the North Carolina coast in the spring and summer, however, 1925 is generally considered the end of all whaling in North Carolina waters.[35]

The North Carolina whaling industry is a unique one, in that a local, shore-based communal whaling industry lasted from 1660 until 1916. Other shore whaling communities along the east coast of the United States failed or abandoned the practice long before the industry in North Carolina became redundant. The North Carolina shore whalers plied their trade side by side with the larger, commercial northern pelagic whalers, such as New Englanders, with little co-mingling of techniques. The one adaptation the North Carolinians did make, the adoption of the whaling gun used in addition to the lances and harpoons, gave the local whalers an advantage over the whale, but not over the pelagic whalers. These two industries, with vastly different resources, operated together until after the Civil War without many hostile interactions. All the more remarkable is the fact that there existed enough whales available for hunting in the Atlantic before the Civil War to appease both industries.

The record of interactions between the North Carolina shore whalers and the northern pelagic whalers illustrates how a depletion of resources creates tensions between competitors. Before whales became scarce off the North Carolina coast, both the local whalers and the northern whalers were more than accommodating to each other. There were arguments over ownership of a whale, as evidenced from litigation documents, but not usually between the two whaling industries. Only when the whales became scarce did the local whalers begin to call for the prohibition or restriction of foreign whalers on the North Carolina coast. The local whalers did not feel threatened by the superior technology possessed by the pelagic whalers, nor did they resent the relatively large amount of whales that their competitors could catch. This may be due to the fact that before the Civil War the pelagic whalers hunted further offshore on the edge of the Gulf Stream, while the local whalers hunted closer to shore. Only the depletion of resources truly brought the two groups together in clashes over the whale population, and even then, the "Golden Age of American Whaling" had ended and pelagic whalers numbered relatively few. The lack of similar whaling technologies of the two industries and their relative lack of association illustrates an interesting symbiotic relationship between the North Carolina shore whalers and the northern commercial pelagic whalers.

Unfortunately, there is not a great deal of research regarding North Carolina whaling. The exploitation of coastal North Carolina's favorable geographical location by northern commercial whalers is well documented, but the same cannot be said for North Carolina whaling itself. The main work cited in this article, Simpson and Simpson's *Whaling on the North Carolina Coast*, is the most comprehensive work regarding local North Carolina whaling. Fortunately, primary documents, in the form of court litigation and personal letters, do exist, and help paint a larger picture of the industry on the North Carolina coast. The topic of North Carolina shore whaling is a remarkably unique one. While most shore whaling industries died out long before World War I, North Carolina whalers exploited this resource until it was no longer economically feasible to do so. The shore whaling practices of North Carolinians may have been technologically inferior to the larger commercial whaling operations, but the local techniques were successful in satisfying the local demand for whale products. Whaling in North Carolina was, admittedly, a small, localized custom and not one of the larger industries bringing revenue to the state, however, it was a custom that withstood over 250 years of interaction and change, and therefore warrants further critical study.

Endnotes

[1] Marcus B. Simpson and Sallie W. Simpson, *Whaling on the North Carolina Coast*, (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1988), 2.

[2] Ibid; Mark Staniforth, email message to author, 24 March 2003.

[3] John Brickell, *The Natural History of North Carolina*, (Dublin, 1737; Murfreesboro, NC: Johnson Publishing, 1968), 220, 212-214; Ivan Terence Sanderson, *Follow the Whale*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1956), 115, 372-374; Simpson and Simpson, 4; Staniforth.

[4] Simpson and Simpson, 42-43.

[5] Amy Muse, *Grandpa was a Whaler: A Story of Carteret Chadwicks*, (New Bern, NC: O.G. Dunn, 1961), 14-16; Simpson and Simpson, 42-43.

[6] Muse, 71; Simpson and Simpson, 44.

[7] Simpson and Simpson, 45.

[8] Ibid., 46.

[9] Brickell, 215; Simpson and Simpson, 5-6; Staniforth.

[10] Brickell, 216-217.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., 218-219; Simpson and Simpson, 16.

[13] William Powell, ed., *Ye Countie of Albemarle in Carolina: A Collection of Documents, 1664-1675*, (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1958), 30-32; Simpson and Simpson, 6; Staniforth.

[14] Powell, 25.

[15] Ibid., 57, 59, 62-63; Staniforth. Carteret writes in his 1674 personal account of living in Albemarle County of the hardships of farming in the county and the amount of whale oil produced.

[16] Simpson and Simpson, 7.

[17] Ibid., 8.

[18] Ibid., 10.

[19] Ibid., 21.

[20] Ibid., 26.

[21] Ibid., 28-29.

[22] Ibid., 29.

[23] John M. Perry to Della Barlow, 2 April 1867, (Della Barlow Papers, Special Collections, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC).

[24] Ibid.

[25] John M. Perry to Della Barlow, 5 April 1867, (Della Barlow Papers, Special Collections, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC).

[26] Ibid.

[27] John M. Perry to Della Barlow, 13 April 1867, (Della Barlow Papers, Special Collections, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC).

[28] John M. Perry to Della Barlow, 13 September 1867, (Della Barlow Papers, Special Collections, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC).

[29] Simpson and Simpson, 31-32.

[30] Ibid., 32.

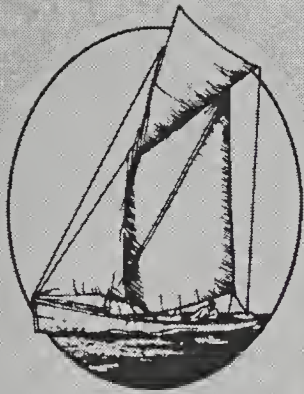
[31] Ibid., 32-33.

[32] Ibid., 49.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid., 49-50.

[35] Ibid., 50.



Tributaries

A Publication of the North Carolina Maritime History Council

Still Standing:

a Journey into the Ethnohistory of Hatteras and Ocracoke Island Villages

by Barbara Garrity-Blake
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Right: Map of the North Carolina Coastline.

"The lighthouse is cracked all the way down but it's still standing," said Joe Farrow of Buxton, quoting a Hatteras Island saying that refers to the deeply ingrained resilience and survival instincts of Outer Banks people. Mr. Farrow sat in a chair with his dog Toto and explained he had maybe one month to live. His arms were bruised from needles and his body frail from the final stages of cancer. I had no idea he was so ill, and felt terrible for disturbing him. But he insisted I come in and ask my questions.

I explained to Mr. Farrow that the National Park Service had initiated and funded a three-year ethnohistorical study of the eight villages along Cape Hatteras National Seashore in order to better understand the culture and history of the Outer Banks people. His reaction was both positive and skeptical, reflecting the long and troubled relationship islanders have had with the park since its establishment in 1953.

While serving on an advisory committee years earlier, Mr. Farrow had suggested to park officials that they educate visitors about the cultural ways and practices of native islanders. "You tell them about shore birds, the lighthouse, turtles. If you can't educate them about us, why, there's no use of me being on this committee." He told me that his advice seemed to fall on deaf ears, but maybe now, at last, the federal agency was acknowledging the cultural value of native banks dwellers.

Indeed, in 2001 the National Park Service issued a call for proposals to undertake the research, describing the eight villages adjoining Cape Hatteras National Seashore as "living exponents of the human history and maritime cultures" of the Outer Banks. The intent of the research was to "support the park in the interpretation of its cultural resources, stewardship of ethnographic sources within the park, and in community relations with these park neighbors."

Working with Impact Assessment Incorporated, a social science research company that

received funding to conduct the project, I put together a team of fieldworkers to collect oral histories and interviews of village residents, particularly those with memory of Hatteras or Ocracoke before the National Seashore was established. The interviews were loosely structured, designed to encourage people to talk about what was important to them, and perhaps cover topics we didn't even know existed. We asked general questions on a wide range of topics, including family history, childhood experiences, commerce and trade, transportation challenges, religious practices, and cultural changes over time. We heard compelling details about such mysteries as the "sea oar" industry of Kinnakeet (eel grass collected for mattresses and furniture), what happened when the Assembly of God church settled on the Banks, how fishing nets were made from a ball of twine, and what the old place names mean for creeks, roads, and other landmarks.

Left: Ocracoke light house and the sorrounding community. (From the U.S. Coast Guard.)

The picture that emerged of early Banker life was surprising. I had assumed that most early settlers had been fishermen or shipwreck victims, not cowboys. Yet many of the old Banker families can be traced to mainland North Carolina or Virginia, as pioneers first set out for Hatteras or Ocracoke to carve out a life as stockmen. They relied upon subsistence fishing and bartered or sold smoked or salted mullet, but nineteenth century islanders spent more time on horseback tending cattle, sheep, and horses than in a fishing boat. This legacy of round-ups, branding, shearing, marketing, and butchering lasted well into the twentith century and shaped islander's perception of the environment: open beach was considered pastureland and the ocean and sound provided a natural fence. Once free-ranging livestock was outlawed before the establishment of the park, open beach lost its primary use and value to Bankers, and perhaps this contributed to some selling their land to the government at a bargain price.

Another surprise that emerged from this research is that the "natural" landscape of the Outer Banks is largely man-made. The sand dunes that lie between the ocean and the highway today are a cultural legacy of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) program of the 1930s, continued by the National Park Service. Before the dunes, Hatteras and Ocracoke islands were relatively flat, kept smooth by frequent ocean overwash. The dune-building project and the later road-building efforts went hand-in-hand with the establishment of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore; islanders recalled getting hired to help build sand fences, plant spartina grass, and dig ditches and roads. Today, many question the wisdom of turning the landscape from "flat as a shield" to "rolling sand hills," as they suspect that the dunes have contributed to shore erosion and village flooding, blocking the sound waters from rushing back to sea during hurricanes.

Probably the biggest surprise emerging from interviews was just how worldly and well-traveled early islanders were. A 1980s proposal to collect interviews for the Southern Oral History Project described Bankers as "isolated from the rest of the country" and "separated from their own peculiarities." The proposal asks, "What is the message they send across the years, these proud, independent individuals living a life apart in a world apart?" The interviews subsequently collected for the Southern Oral History Project, as well as the interviews we collected, show that islanders have long been connected to the outside world.

These connections include the earliest days of trading smoked fish for corn on the mainland, working aboard ocean-going schooners, an extensive mail boat circuit, freight boat deliveries, fish and livestock market networks, and a history of U.S. Lifesaving Service/Coast Guard Service and Armed Service deployments. Many young men and women also left the islands to attend boarding school or college. Long before the first paved roads were built, Bankers even had a public transportation system: the Manteo-Hatteras Bus Line run by the Midgett brothers of Rodanthe. As it turns out, survival on the Outer Banks depended not only on local resources and skills, but also on a far flung network of family, friends, and business relations.

Right: Cape Hatteras Light House.

The importance of documenting Outer Bank community history became increasingly evident during the course of our fieldwork. Hatteras Village was devastated and forever altered after Hurricane Isabel in 2003. An unprecedented level of development was fast transforming the villages before and after Isabel, so aggressive that many Park Service critics were conceding that perhaps it wasn't such a bad thing that land was set aside and designated off-limits to developers. Bulldozed homeplaces, disturbed graves, and mowed-down oak tree groves were daily reminders of change. Remnants of the history and culture of Outer Banks villages were becoming more and more dwarfed by the attention-demanding tourism and real estate boom, and this fact likely contributed to islanders' willingness to share their stories and memories with us, recognizing that their place on these islands could become as invisible as an unmarked grave if not recorded. Many of the traditions and people recorded in Cape Hatteras School's *Sea Chest* journal, as well as the Southern Oral History Project, have already disappeared.

Yet beneath the seasonal veneer of a vacation hotspot, Hatteras and Ocracoke Islanders quietly go about their lives both despite and because of a tourism-driven economy. Many questions emerged from this research, including: what defines a community, and at what point do communities lose the ability to maintain their cohesiveness and distinctiveness? What does a community display, and what does it hide? What is turned into a commodity to be sold, and what is protected at all costs? In the end, what's the prognosis for Outer Banks traditions and culture? The island saying says it all: the lighthouse is cracked, but it is still standing.

Joe Farrow described how he lost a thumb during a fishing accident. He told me where the best black gum saplings grew, and how the fishermen used them for pound net stakes. He said he wasn't afraid to die. "I've lived my life." He had just sold his boat to a younger fisherman since he wouldn't be needing it anymore. "Kind of hated to see that go," he added. "I've had her so long."

The *Ethnohistorical Description of the Eight Villages Adjoining Cape Hatteras National Seashore and Interpretive Themes of History and Heritage, Vol. 1 and 2,* National Park Service, U.S. Department of Interior, is available at the Cape Hatteras National Seashore bookstore, The Outer Banks History Center, Manteo and other regional libraries.

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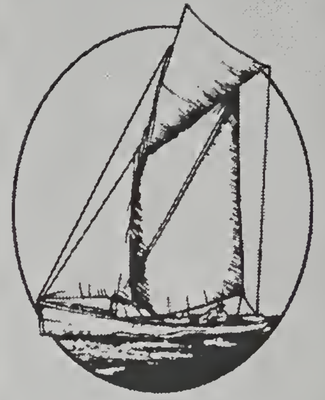

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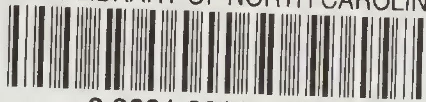
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