

Tributaries

A Publication
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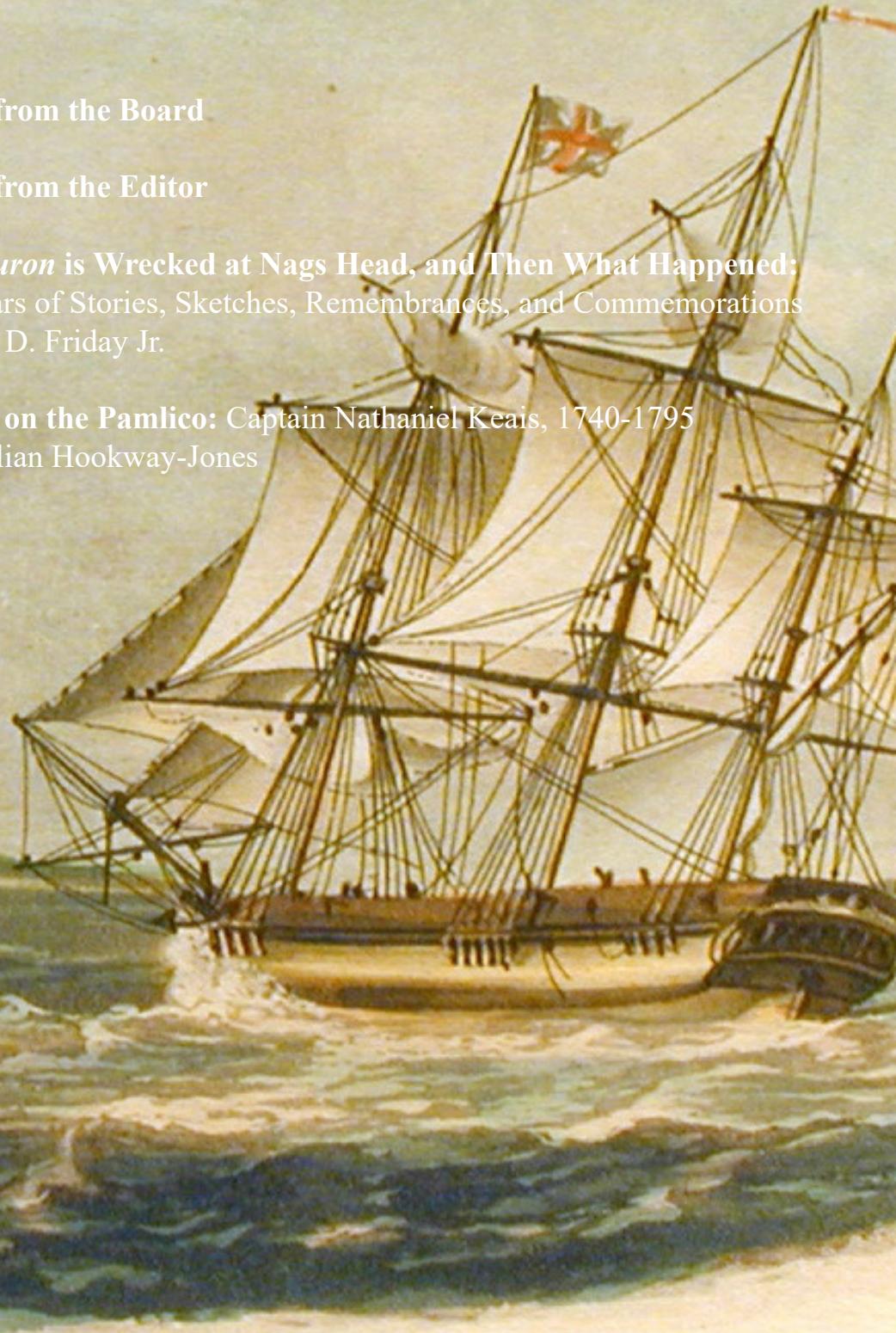
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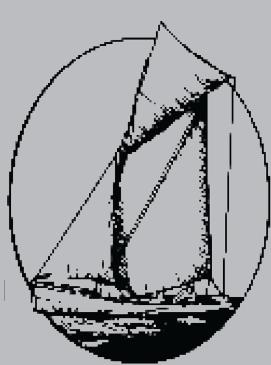
Letter from the Board

Letter from the Editor

**USS *Huron* is Wrecked at Nags Head, and Then What Happened:
150 Years of Stories, Sketches, Remembrances, and Commemorations**
By: Joe D. Friday Jr.

Patriot on the Pamlico: Captain Nathaniel Keais, 1740-1795
By: Gillian Hookway-Jones





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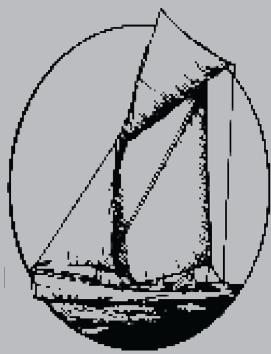
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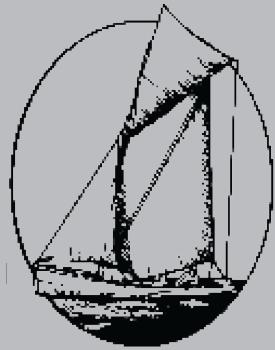
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Letter from the Board

What is North Carolina's maritime history?

The maritime landscape of North Carolina is truly remarkable. Throughout prehistory, native inhabitants utilized dugout canoes to maintain lines of communication, trade, and relied on the marine environment in daily life. Ships of exploration and colonial craft of every description plied coastal, sound, and riverine waters. Vessels of piracy, warfare, and commerce led to legendary shipwrecks, heroic rescues, and enduring maritime mysteries. Maritime industries flourished adjacent to and within the resource-rich waters of the Tar Heel State. All this combines to form an incredibly profound maritime heritage, one which is only now beginning to be understood in its broadest context.

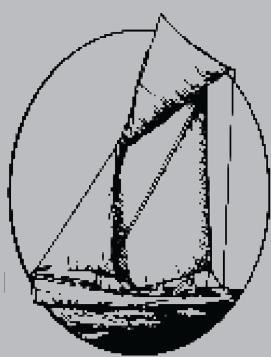
The North Carolina Maritime History Council came together in 1988 when a group of individuals involved in the maritime history field began meeting informally to share information and to discuss issues of mutual concern. In 1990 the North Carolina Maritime History Council was incorporated with the mission 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.

Council membership is open to any individuals and institutions interested in the maritime history of our region. We encourage this membership to seek ways to pool resources, share information, and discuss issues to benefit the dissemination of our mutual maritime heritage. It is our hope that you will continue to support the Council as we encourage and learn from more diverse scholarship in our field. No story is too small, no voice left unheard. Learn more about us on our website: www.ncmaritimehistory.com. Please consider renewing your membership or otherwise contributing to our mission.

Sincerely,
The Executive Board of the North Carolina Maritime History Council

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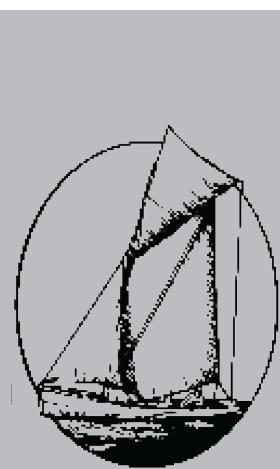
Tributaries is a product of the North Carolina Maritime History Council. Produced since the Council's incorporation in 1990, *Tributaries* is the only history journal published in the state fully dedicated to North Carolina-based maritime historical and archaeological topics. As stated in the Council's mission, we seek to enhance understanding and promote our state's maritime history, and *Tributaries* is a major component towards that purpose.

North Carolina's maritime history is not limited to the well-known stories and sites that attract the attention of the public and researchers. It is my hope to utilize *Tributaries* as a repository for a wide range of histories related to specific ships, shipwrecks, maritime sites, people, events, and industries that might help inform broader research themes in our state. If you are conducting research on a site or artifact associated with past maritime activity in North Carolina, I encourage you to submit any historical research to the journal. All members of the maritime history community, including independent researchers, local history groups, genealogical societies, oral historians, students, academics, and federal, state, or municipal governments are encouraged to submit articles to the journal. If you are a student who wrote a term paper on a shipwreck site or maritime historical topic, consider submitting it to the journal. A lot of important research isn't shared, and we are hoping to change that.

This issue of *Tributaries* highlights two stories within our state - one well known, the other less so. The first article discusses the history and legacy of USS *Huron*, a nationally known maritime tragedy that inspired the formation of the United States Life-Saving Service. The article explores the history of the site itself, from the wrecking event, to the salvage, and all the way through its modern management by the State of N.C. and Town of Nags Head. The author skillfully reiterates the importance of this site to our state's history as well as to our national maritime heritage. The next article discusses the life of a relatively unknown colonial official during the late eighteenth century, Nathaniel Keais. Using deep historical research into various sources, the author makes a compelling argument that Keais was an important figure in the growth and development of ports at Bath and Washington. By revealing more information on figures like Keais, the author adds to rich historiography of North Carolinians who helped shape our maritime past. Happy reading!

Yours in continual learning,
Jeremy Borrelli

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USS *Huron* is Wrecked at Nags Head, And Then What Happened: 150 Years of Stories, Sketches, Remembrances, and Commemorations

by Joe D. Friday Jr.

Introduction

"*Huron* struck two miles north of No. 7 station at 1:30 a.m. Foremast and main top-mast gone. Steamer a total wreck. Assistance needed immediately. The sea is breaking over her, and several have already washed ashore, drowned."¹

Barely nine hours had passed since the telegram from Kitty Hawk was published in the Washington papers, reporting that USS *Huron* had struck the outer bar at Nags Head. Soon the American people would learn that ninety-eight sailors had drowned only 200 yards from the beach in North Carolina. A naval court of inquiry concluded that the ship's captain, Commander George P. Ryan, was primarily responsible for the wreck and loss of his ship. The court also said the navigator, Lieutenant Lambert G. Palmer, failed in his duties of proper navigation. Compass errors had not been made known to the captain or navigator, but the court said those errors would not have made a significant difference.²

Over time the story of the *Huron* shipwreck and loss of its sailors became as much a part of the Outer Banks as the winds and the sand. But not so much is known about the peripheral incidents, the sidebar stories, and the anecdotes surrounding the wreck of *Huron*: what was happening on the beach, details on how the wreck was salvaged, how it is remembered, and how it has been commemorated, over time and still today. The same goes for many of the *Huron* survivors and their families, whatever happened to them, and family members of those killed. *Huron*'s wrecking touched many lives and has many stories still to tell. This paper intends to fill in some of those gaps and add to the human-interest perspectives of the *Huron* shipwreck disaster.

On the Beach at Nags Head

A fisherman named Evan O'Neil was supposedly the first man to see USS *Huron* as it grounded on the outer sandbar at about 1:45 a.m. O'Neil was enroute goose hunting that morning when he saw *Huron*'s masthead light and heard the steam whistle.³ According to him, the ship hit the sandbar about a quarter mile south of where it finally came to rest. The vessel bounced and drifted north until it was firmly stuck and heeled over. This account corresponds with statements later made by one of *Huron*'s officers, Master William Conway. O'Neil saw signal lights and distress rockets being fired, saw the men on board the ship, and heard the screams for help. He saw the foremast go over the side and one of the ship's boats with men on board get smashed. What makes O'Neil's story fascinating is that he watched the wreck for an hour, and he did not help or go for help.⁴

After watching *Huron* begin to break apart, O'Neil then went back to his home. He stopped briefly at the homes of a friend and his brother. When he got to his house, O'Neil put away his hunting supplies, cart, and mules. He then ate his breakfast. Approximately three hours had passed by this time. O'Neil returned to the beach after sunrise. By then, other people had become aware of the wreck and a small crowd gathered. There were some survivors ashore, such as Ensign Lucien Young and Seaman Antonio Williams, and dead bodies began washing up on the beach. It was reported that O'Neil was seen examining the debris that washed ashore and that he made no effort to help with the rescue efforts.⁵ That O'Neil would have been looking through the washed-up debris makes sense. It was a part of life for the Outer Bankers to salvage materials washed ashore, and which they might find useful in their own lives. That he was

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doing this while the ship was actively breaking apart and while rescues were still ongoing seems incredible.

Patty Tillet was a young girl living in Nags Head at the time of the wreck. She went over to the beach to see the wreck. She recalled in an interview given years later, “Dead men were washing ashore all along the beach. I saw one man floating in with his leg cut off at the knee.... He begged us to knock him in the head and let him die.”⁶ Tillet went on to say that dead men washed up on the beach for several days, spanning thirty miles along the beach.

About midday, a fisherman built a fire on the beach and cooked canned tomatoes, corn, and meat for some of the survivors. These canned foods were provisions that had washed ashore from *Huron*. He added some sweet potatoes from his own stores, and later he asked if the survivors could pay him for the sweet potatoes he provided.⁷

Dare County Sheriff William T. Brinkley came to the scene of the wreck at about nine o'clock. He rescued men from the surf and took charge of the injured. He took *Huron*'s officers to his house and saw to it that the enlisted men were housed and made as comfortable as possible in the Nags Head lifesaving station. Brinkley coordinated the provision of food, blankets, and clothes for the officers and crew. He notified the keeper of the station, Franklin Meekins, along with a Mr. T. Toller and had them at the station to care for the men. It was later said by survivors that Mr. Toller, “did everything in his power to add to the comfort of the shipwrecked men.”⁸ Brinkley was said to be “untiring in his attention to the wants of the survivors...sent them hearty and wholesome food and furnished the officers with sleeping accommodations and meals at his residence.”⁹ Brinkley later helped with the search and burial of bodies washed ashore.

On Sunday, the morning after the wreck, ships from Norfolk arrived off the beach. These included the Navy warships *Swatara*, *Powhatan*, and *Fortune* along with the wrecking steamer, *B & J Baker* from the Baker Wrecking Company of Norfolk. The crews of these ships could do nothing to help the *Huron* survivors. The surf was too rough to safely land any boats, and five men from *B & J Baker* drowned trying to get to shore, including Captain John J. Guthrie, district superintendent of the lifesaving service. The other four killed in *Baker*'s surfboat were African American employees of Baker Wrecking Company: James Saxton, Stephen Bell, Willis Walker, and Dennis McCoy. Saxton was steering the boat when a wave turned the surfboat broadside, broke the steering oar, and capsized the boat. Saxton was also a salvage diver for the

Baker company, which seems significant for a Black man in the reconstruction South still recovering from the Civil War.¹⁰ Saxton was well-known and had a reputation as one of the ablest surfmen, wreckers, and divers on the east coast. A church in his community hosted a fundraiser to help pay some of his family's expenses after his death and the United States Congress voted to provide the families of Saxton and the others who died in the surfboat a relief payment equal to one year's pay of a seaman in the Navy.¹¹

On Sunday afternoon the *Huron* survivors boarded a steamer for transport back to Norfolk through the Albemarle canal. The work on the beach would continue for several weeks.

Accusations of Robbing the Dead

Lieutenant Walter Walton, inspector for the lifesaving service's sixth district, compiled a report about the wreck in December 1877 for his superiors in Washington. In the report, he strongly criticized Evan O'Neil for his failure to alert authorities about the *Huron* wreck.¹² Walton's report also criticized the Outer Bankers by claiming they robbed the bodies of the dead as they washed ashore. Walton cited for example the condition of Lieutenant Sidney Simons' body after it was recovered. Walton noted someone had obviously scratched and gouged the third and fourth fingers on Simons' left hand in attempts to remove his ring.¹³

The people of the Outer Banks were outraged at Walton's accusations. Residents of Currituck gathered at the courthouse on January 17, 1878, to respond to the charge. They published a resolution declaring Walton's report to be, “a reckless libel upon the character of our people; and its author as deserving the indignant condemnation of the public.”¹⁴ They even got their congressman involved. US Representative Jesse Yeates, of the first district of North Carolina, read the Currituck resolution on the house floor and got unanimous consent to enter it into the house record.¹⁵ Editorials in most of the major North Carolina newspapers condemned Walton and vigorously defended the honor of the people of Dare and Currituck counties. When the details of his report were made public, Walton was “set upon and beaten by indignant residents.”¹⁶ Walton must have been a hated man from then on, because the following year he transferred from the sixth district headquarters in Manteo, NC to the eleventh district, headquartered in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.¹⁷

In April 1878, the *Norfolk Landmark* reported that a Norfolk jeweler received a US Naval Academy class ring which had belonged to a *Huron* victim, Master James Wight.¹⁸ An investigation found that somebody bought the ring from a

man living on the Outer Banks. It was never decided just how that man came to have Wight's naval academy ring. But it seems probable the ring was taken from his body.¹⁹ Marine Lieutenant Francis H. Harrington, who participated in the search and burial detail that recovered *Huron*'s dead, documented another disturbing incident. Harrington recovered from one local resident, "a gold collar button, two gold sleeve buttons, two gold spiral studs with a pearl in the center of each, and a ring with inscribed initials."²⁰ Personal uniform items and jewelry as described here could only have been taken from a dead body it seems, and most likely from an officer.

Besides robbing the dead bodies, the bankers were taking and keeping things from the wreck they found on the beach. In a different dispatch sent to the navy yard by Harrington, he reported that he recovered "two rifles and several other things" from residents.²¹

Recovering The Bodies

A few days after the wreck, Lieutenant Commander James G. Green, an officer attached to the Norfolk naval station, received orders to go to Nags Head and begin the retrieval and burial of the dead. He arrived at Nags Head around November 27 or 28 with a detachment of sailors and marines, some of them survivors of the *Huron*. They patrolled the beach for about two weeks where they recovered bodies washed ashore, buried them, and marked the locations until such time as they could be removed for proper disposition. In a report to his commander, Green wrote that divers working on the wreck recovered two bodies shortly after he got to Nags Head.²² These were the bodies of seaman Thomas Armstrong and machinist Alfred Carson.²³ They had been lashed to the bowsprit of *Huron* for the past four days, and their bodies must have been a gruesome sight by then.

Samuel Clark, a second-class fireman and *Huron* survivor, was part of Green's detachment. It was Clark's grim duty to go with the search party and help find and bury the bodies. Green compliments Clark in his report and says Clark identified most of the bodies. Many of them were badly decomposed and distinguishable only by the tattoos which had been applied by Clark. Other *Huron* survivors who took part in the burial detail were Joseph Murphy, ship's cook, John Collins, captain of the forecastle, William McHughes, ordinary seaman, and Peter Duffy, second-class fireman.²⁴ Green also expressed thanks to members of the Palmer Island and Currituck hunting clubs who fed and housed the members of his detail and also helped search for bodies.

Green's burial party found and buried eighty-

three bodies and parts of bodies as far as forty miles north of the wreck site. To put it in perspective, bodies from *Huron* drifted and washed ashore from Nags Head, near present day Nags Head fishing pier, to as far north as present day Carova, NC, near the Virginia state line. In a dispatch published on December 2, Green described the scene on the beach, saying "The bodies are mangled and defaced by fishes and insects, and so putrid as to defy recognition except by clothing or tattoo marks."²⁵

Just before Green's return to Norfolk, Baker company divers found and recovered the body of Charles Chapman, paymaster's yeoman. Salvage divers dug out his body from the sand accumulated inside the wreck.²⁶ Green brought Chapman back to Norfolk with his detachment. Green and his detachment worked on the recovery and burial detail until December 11.

Green returned to Nags Head in late March 1878 with sixty metal caskets for removing and properly transporting the bodies from Nags Head. The Navy had contracted with an undertaker named Augustus Burgdorf to remove the bodies to Annapolis. They were to be buried in the US Naval Academy. Burgdorf was to work with Greene.²⁷ This, too, must have been grisly work, considering the decomposition of the bodies over time, and because even March and April on the Outer Banks can be harsh and cold.

Obituaries, Funerals, and Burials

Besides news from the wreck site, newspapers across the nation published funeral notices for many of *Huron*'s dead. The December 8 issue of the *Public Ledger* in Norfolk had four such obituaries, all for officers with detailed summaries of each funeral.²⁸

Huron's captain was Commander George P. Ryan, an 1861 graduate of the naval academy. He had a talent for practical and theoretical astronomy, navigation, and hydrographic survey. When Ryan turned twenty years old in 1862, he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant.²⁹ After the Civil War, Ryan taught at the naval academy. In 1874 he led an astronomical team to the South Indian Ocean to plot and record the planet Venus as it passed in front of the Sun.³⁰ And later that year he was promoted to the rank of commander. The funeral for Ryan took place in Boston at the Church of the Immaculate Conception with full military honors. A detachment of sailors from *Wabash* served as pallbearers. Ryan's funeral procession had a company of US Marines, also from *Wabash*, as escort. He was buried at Augustine Cemetery in Boston.³¹

Lieutenant Lambert G. Palmer was assigned as *Huron*'s navigator. In early October, just a month before the *Huron* disaster, he received

orders transferring him from *Huron* to *Swatara*, but those orders were rescinded, and he stayed on *Huron*. One newspaper account says Palmer lobbied to have his orders changed so he could stay on *Huron*.³² Perhaps he wanted to continue serving with Ryan, *Huron*'s captain, who had a reputation as an excellent surveyor and navigator. The change in orders was a twist of fate that cost Palmer his life and earned him significant blame for the *Huron* tragedy.

Palmer's obituary says he was "a gentleman of the best school, amiable, and generous; cordial, and affectionate."³³ His funeral procession was accompanied by a "battalion" of marines with music provided by a marine band.³⁴ Among the pallbearers were surviving *Huron* officers, Master William Conway and Ensign Lucien Young. Palmer was buried at Oak Hill cemetery in Georgetown. In 1942 his remains were reinterred in Arlington National Cemetery and placed alongside his parents and brother, First Lieutenant Aulick Palmer, USMC.³⁵

Lieutenant Sidney Simons graduated from the naval academy in 1867 where he stood fifth in his class. He had been assigned as executive officer to *Huron* in October 1877.

After his body was recovered, it was taken to the Brooklyn navy yard where it was laid in state in the Sailor's Hall. Simons' casket was decorated with his uniform epaulettes, uniform dress hat, and his dress sword. It was then transferred by steam tug for interment at Staten Island. His escort included sailors and marines from Colorado and Minnesota. While flags at the Brooklyn navy yard flew at half-mast, the bells tolled and a navy band played a funeral dirge. Simons left behind a wife, Emma Polk, who lived until 1907.³⁶

As *Huron*'s surgeon, George S. Culbreth held the rank of Lieutenant Commander. His funeral took place at his father-in-law's house in Smyrna, Delaware. A sizable crowd endured a nasty rainstorm to attend his burial at St. Peter's cemetery. The 1878 lifesaving service's annual report said of him: "He lived a sailor's life and died a sailor's death."³⁷ Culbreth had promised his wife Margaret that he would resign from the Navy after this last cruise and start a medical practice in his hometown because he did not want to be away from home so much. He was thirty-four years old.³⁸

In some cases, family members of the dead did not wait for the Navy to retrieve their loved ones. For example, Dallas Sanders was the brother of *Huron*'s paymaster, Cary N. Sanders. Dallas Sanders chartered a steamer and met with Green and Harrington, to disinter his brother from the dunes near Currituck Beach Lighthouse and bring the body back to Norfolk. Sanders complimented Green's compassion and

good judgment, and the difficult job he had to do under sad and miserable circumstances.³⁹

On December 15, the steamer *Cygnets* landed at Norfolk with the bodies of Culbreth and the engineer yeoman William S. Entwistle. *Cygnets* had been chartered by the Culbreth and Entwistle families to go from Elizabeth City to Nags Head so that Culbreth's and Entwistle's bodies could be returned more quickly. Entwistle's body was taken to the Naval Hospital where an honor guard from the Franklin served as pallbearers for the burial in the cemetery there.⁴⁰

Salvage of the *Huron*

When the news of the *Huron* disaster hit Norfolk, the Baker Wrecking Company of Norfolk quickly dispatched its wrecking ship the *B & J Baker* to Nags Head. The Baker company was a well-established salvage firm and had been doing business in the tidewater region with the Navy for many years. Since *Huron* was a total loss, the company contracted to salvage what it could from the wrecked hull. A few days after the wrecking, divers began working as weather allowed. It must have been difficult for a ship to remain on station over or near the *Huron* wreck while the hardhat divers worked below. Divers wearing hundreds of pounds of weights and equipment had to deal with tidal surge and ocean swells, longshore currents, and minimal visibility, along with water temperatures in the mid-fifties throughout the winter. It had to have been a tough job made considerably tougher given the conditions. Contemporary newspapers report the Baker salvage ships had to pause operations several times due to severe weather, wind, and waves.⁴¹

The wreck would have been a tangled mess of broken, heavy equipment, including massive cannons, engines and loose engine parts, boilers, pipes, stanchions, decking, broken timbers, pieces of rigging and cables, yards of sail canvas, and jagged parts of iron hull. It was a dangerous place to be underwater. One of Baker company's first reports from the scene of the wreck said that divers were attempting to recover several bodies which were still lashed to the bowsprit.⁴² That was at the end of November, but within another day or two, the surf was up again and too rough for diving.⁴³ A dispatch sent on December 2 reported: "[the] berth deck nearly floated up to the spar deck so that divers could not get in the ward room. The under-tow and current are bad. The spar-deck is entirely submerged, the port side being eight feet under water."⁴⁴ The Navy Department sent the Baker company a set of the ship's deck plans as an aid to the divers.⁴⁵ A telegram on December 13 said the wreck was completely submerged except for a portion of the bow at low tide. The pivot gun was visible and could be saved, but the entire starboard side

of the ship had collapsed.⁴⁶ A later report said the wreck was rapidly filling with sand, and that one of the divers had used a hoe to dig out and recover a dead body (Charles Chapman) from inside the wreck.⁴⁷

There doesn't appear to be any complete record of all the salvage activities or of everything that was salvaged from the wreck of the *Huron*, but the Baker company posted information routinely in the Norfolk newspapers. Within a few weeks of the wreck, the divers had recovered a large quantity of stores including all sorts of clothing items: shirts, pants, jackets, shoes, and underclothing. They also brought up stores of blankets and canvas duck. The divers also recovered armaments such as the twelve-pound howitzer boat gun, a supply of carbines, and a supply of revolvers.⁴⁸

It seems that anything which might possibly have value was salvaged from the wreck. Working in between the winter storms, Baker's divers recovered anchors, chains, deadeyes, scrap iron, copper pipes, and any pieces of machinery they could hoist. At least one, maybe two of the Dahlgren guns were salvaged, along with the Parrot rifle. The salvaged materials were brought to the Norfolk navy yard for disposal. The Navy must have kept and reused many things such as chains, anchors, and other hardware. A public auction was held at the navy yard on February 6, 1878. It was at this auction that the clothing materials, blankets, jackets, caps, and shoes were sold. Also listed were categories of "condemned provisions and small stores." These included food stuffs which must have been preserved, canned, or otherwise sealed from the elements, such as 250 pounds of tea, 1,700 gallons of beans, dried apples, coffee, butter, molasses, and vinegar. Tin plates, flatware, kettles, and other kitchen supplies were also listed, as well as sewing thread, ribbons, tape, whisk brooms, and sewing silk. These items were for sale as condemned small stores.⁴⁹

Records on how long the Baker Wrecking Company worked at the wreck site are not clear. Weather would have been a limiting factor. It seems reasonable to believe the company would have stayed with the job as long as it was profitable. On April 8 two Baker company employees, Charles Halloway and Charles Hill, were caught stealing \$100 worth of copper, brass, and lead that had been salvaged from *Huron*. The divers were still working on the wreck as late as April 25, 1878 according to newspaper reports, when they brought in a load of boiler tubes, old lead and iron, several bolts, and some deadeyes.⁵⁰ The April 25 dispatch seems to be the last one published concerning their specific activities on *Huron*, and it appears from other newspaper accounts that the Baker Wrecking Company changed ownership in June due to the death of

co-owner Barnabas Baker and the settlement of his estate.⁵¹

Richard Thompson, Secretary of the Navy, visited Nags Head in May 1878 and toured the scene of the *Huron* wreck. Newspapers reporting on his visit said the hull was clearly visible from the beach at low tide. They estimated the value of materials still on board the wreck to be over \$100,000.⁵²

In March 1879, the Navy advertised for bids to go back to the wreck with an eye toward raising the hull. The call for bids included a request for retrieving "all materials, fittings, and armament" and it stipulated that the contractor should cause "no greater mutilation of the hull...than may be absolutely necessary" to raise the ship.⁵³

A contract was awarded to a wrecking firm called James Power & Company, out of Norfolk.⁵⁴ The company sent their wrecking schooner, *Bengal* to Nags Head with their principal diver, Eugene Whitney, in charge of salvage operations.⁵⁵ Whitney had an excellent reputation as a diver, and the newspapers described him as "one of the most expert submarine divers in the country."⁵⁶ *The News and Observer* of Raleigh called him a "sturdy son of Neptune."⁵⁷ Whitney must have judged that raising the hull was not possible because he soon abandoned the stipulation against using explosives. He made liberal use of dynamite to blow parts of the hull apart in order to get to various portions of the wreck. In one instance of using the explosive, the newspaper reported the blast resulted in a column of water several hundred feet high and left over 200 large sheepshead floating dead on the surface.⁵⁸

Whitney continued salvaging materials from the *Huron* for three years. He recovered the gatling gun, knives, articles of clothing and other personal items, scrap metals, pieces of machinery, and even bottles of wine.⁵⁹ Their salvage efforts were earning them about \$150 per day according to published reports.⁶⁰ In 1881, Whitney recovered a small safe, hopeful that it was the paymaster stores. The safe held six pieces of British gold currency, a gold ring, a silver coin, and two navy good conduct medals. The medals belonged to Henry Emerson and James Couch, both casualties. The safe had apparently belonged to an officer and was not the much sought after paymaster's stores. The paymaster's safe supposedly held about \$8,000, and had not been found as of 1881, according to published reports.⁶¹ Maybe it's still there, buried in the sand.

The Survivors

Four officers and thirty enlisted crew members were all who remained from the muster roll of *Huron*. The day after *Huron* wrecked, the survivors were brought back to Norfolk and quartered on the receiving ship, *Worcester*. Some of

the men went on to the Washington navy yard to testify at the court of inquiry.⁶²

Many of these men had lost everything they owned in the wreck. Master William Conway had no uniform clothes at all and was admonished for appearing “out of uniform” at the court of inquiry.⁶³ Following the conclusion of the court of inquiry, the officers were sent home to await further orders.⁶⁴ The enlisted men were filtered to other ships and little is known about most of them afterwards.

Some of the enlisted crew applied for disability pensions and in every case that could be found, these claims were denied. The case of ordinary seaman Daniel Burgan is a good example: Burgan claimed he was injured during the wreck when falling spars hit him across the chest. He applied for a pension claiming constant pain, rheumatism, heart disease, and a nervous condition that prevented him from working. He gave sworn statements from doctors and had a file of some 240 pages. “My health is so fading me at present that I will have to make an appeal for charity,” he said in his applications. After nineteen years of back and forth with the navy bureaucracy that included letters, denials, and appeals, his application was finally denied for good in 1896.⁶⁵

Another member of the enlisted crew will always be remembered for his heroic actions. Seaman Antonio Williams was described as “a cool and intelligent man,” by Ensign Lucien Young. He was born and raised in Spain and joined the US Navy in 1865. When the *Huron* wrecked, Williams and Young tried for about an hour to get a raft and line ashore from the wreck. The two men had to cut the raft loose, though. They tumbled and swam and were washed ashore nearly a mile north of the wreck. Williams and Young then began pulling other sailors out of the surf as they washed ashore. Legend has it that before he left the ship, Williams wrapped himself in *Huron*’s flag, and that he still had the flag with him when he made shore. After the wreck, Williams continued his service in the navy on board various ships including *Minnesota* and *Yantic*. Antonio Williams was awarded the Medal of Honor in 1879 for his action saving lives during the wreck of *Huron*.⁶⁶ While serving on *Yantic*, Williams had a brief reunion with Lucien Young. In a newspaper article about the reunion, Young credited Williams with saving his life. Williams eventually retired from the navy and received a pension for his years of service. He moved to Bristol, England and died in 1908. His headstone in Greenbank Cemetery in Bristol notes that he was a member of the US Navy and that he received the Medal of Honor for courage and fidelity displayed in the loss of *Huron*.⁶⁷

The four surviving officers from *Huron* contin-

ued their naval careers with varied success. They must have carried their experience on *Huron* with them in some way. How they did so, history will probably never know.

Robert G. Denig, USNA class of 1873, was a *Huron* plank owner, having been with the ship since her commission. When *Huron* wrecked, Denig suffered a near-drowning by apparently ingest-
ing a large amount of seawater into his lungs. He was severely ill and fortunate to have survived.⁶⁸ After the wrecking, he was hospitalized in Norfolk for several days. Following the court of inquiry, he was given leave to await further orders. In March Denig went to Chester, PA for special duties related to engineering training. He took leave again in April to get married to Jean Livingston Hubbard. *Huron* survivor Edgar Warburton, another engineering officer, served as Denig’s best man.⁶⁹

When *Huron* wrecked, Denig lost most of his possessions, including several letters he received from his fiancé. Soon afterwards, a beachcomber named Frank H. Taylor found one of the letters and, it having no name attached, authored a poem about a lover missing her drowned sailor. The poem became popular in the newspapers, and soon two and two were put together so that Denig was named as the letter’s owner. Here are a few sample lines from the poem:

“...Somewhere, tonight, a girlish face is raised to God in mute despair;

Somewhere, a woman prays for grace and strength of soul her load to bear.

Somewhere along the wintry coast her hopes lie buried in the sand,

While this tells of the love that’s lost This sea-
stained letter in my hand.”⁷⁰

After returning to duty, Denig was assigned to the Trenton, with the European Station. By 1883 Denig had been promoted to Passed Assistant Engineer and was detailed as an instructor in steam engineering at Hamilton College in Utica, New York.⁷¹ He later served in the Spanish-American War. Robert G. Denig rose to the rank of Commodore and during World War I he served as an inspector of naval war materials.⁷² He died in 1924 and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery. His son, Robert L. Denig served in the marine corps and was a Brigadier General in World War II.⁷³

Following his appearance “out of uniform,” at the court of inquiry, Master William Conway, USNA class of 1870, received orders in February to join *Wyoming* as it prepared to sail to the European Station. Conway and *Wyoming* went to Le Havre, France to deliver equipment for the 1878 Paris Exposition. From there the vessel stopped in Rouen and then Southampton before

returning to the US. Wyoming made a quick turn around and went to the Mediterranean, calling on ports there until coming back to the states in 1881.⁷⁴

Conway was promoted to Lieutenant in March 1881, and on December 8 he was ordered to the Asiatic Station by way of steamer from San Francisco.⁷⁵ Conway arrived in Hong Kong in January 1882 and joined the gunboat *Palos*. *Palos* was a converted steam tug and has the distinction of being the first American warship to transit the Suez Canal. Conway toured most of the major ports of China and Japan with *Palos*. He then transferred to *Enterprise* and sailed to Cape Town, Madagascar, Zanzibar, Singapore, China, Melbourne, Wellington, Montevideo, Barbados, and St. Thomas conducting oceanographic surveys. Conway and *Enterprise* returned to the US in the summer of 1886, where the ship was temporarily decommissioned. Conway, having circumnavigated the globe, was ordered to the naval hydrographic office in Philadelphia as the officer in charge. His work there involved the production of naval charts and books. Records show he regularly traveled to the navy department in Washington on business.⁷⁶

In the meanwhile, Conway had not forgotten his *Huron* shipmates and in October 1887 he served as an usher in Engineer Edgar Warburton's wedding in Philadelphia.⁷⁷ The next year, Conway married Susy Hawthorne Woodson on November 1, 1888, and according to the newspapers, "has won a most charming and accomplished lady."⁷⁸

In July 1890 Conway received orders to report as navigator to *Yorktown*.⁷⁹ This was one of the steel-hulled warships of the new "Squadron of Evolution" navy.⁸⁰ It must have been an exciting opportunity for Conway, and one would expect that he was looking forward to shipping on the newest and most advanced ships. In 1891 the ship cruised in the Caribbean making a call in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. The ship returned to Norfolk for a short stay, then prepared to sail to the Pacific. *Yorktown* sailed to Valparaiso, Chile in response to a diplomatic dispute, arriving in January 1892. After spending about 3 months there, the ship then sailed for the Bering Sea in response to a dispute with Great Britain over seal hunting. Conway completed the first chart of the Bering Sea while *Yorktown* was stationed there.⁸¹

Conway was detached from *Yorktown* in May for three months' leave. During that time, he contracted typhoid fever. He died on September 15, 1893, at his family home in Owensboro, KY. He was forty-four years old. Conway's brief obituary in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* doesn't mention his cruise with *Yorktown* or other assignments and achievements. It only says that he was a "survi-

vor of the wreck of the [...] *Huron*."⁸² His accomplished career followed in the footsteps of Ryan and Palmer, each of them skilled in navigation and hydrographic survey and had he not met such an untimely death, it is logical to believe Conway would have advanced much higher in his naval career.

Edgar Warburton graduated from the naval academy in 1875. After testifying at the *Huron* court of inquiry, he spent several months convalescing at home and awaiting orders. The events of the *Huron* wreck must have weighed heavily on his mind. His best friend and fellow cadet engineer Edmund Loomis had been killed.⁸³ To what degree that affected him is unknown.

In July Warburton went to the League Island navy yard to be examined for promotion to Assistant Engineer. This was his second attempt at the promotion board, having previously failed his board examination in June.⁸⁴ He then reported in September to the Boston navy yard and joined *Richmond* which was being refitted for the Asiatic station.⁸⁵ *Richmond* was a civil war era steamer and the work being done on the ship took another three months.

During that time, the first anniversary of the *Huron* wreck passed. Renewed interest and publicity about the wreck, along with sharp criticisms and blaming of the officers and crew must have stirred Warburton. He wrote an account of the wreck for publication in the journal, *The United Service*. Warburton strongly defended his shipmates, writing that "no captious criticism or sneering word can change the story or dim the record of the men who, calmly and fearlessly, met death on that fatal November night."⁸⁶

Before shipping out, Warburton learned that his promotion to Assistant Engineer had been approved.⁸⁷ *Richmond* sailed on January 11, 1879, going to Gibraltar and through the Suez Canal to reach the Asiatic fleet. Warburton was sailing with the ship but was to be assigned to *Ashuelot*, a side-wheel steamer stationed in the waters of southern Japan near Nagasaki.⁸⁸

Warburton joined the *Ashuelot* crew in June 1879. He stayed with the ship for two years and then returned to *Richmond*, which brought him back to the US in September 1881. He had a series of short-term duty assignments, then joined the coast survey steamer, *Hassler*, as chief engineer (without the corresponding promotion, it seems). This duty lasted three years and raises the question of whether Warburton believed he was being slighted by the Navy. He then spent a year assigned to the examining board of naval engineers as Secretary. He was promoted to Passed Assistant Engineer in July 1887.⁸⁹ Warburton married Helen Keen on October 25, 1887, with William Conway in attendance as an usher. The wedding announcement in the news-

paper didn't mention Warburton's current naval duties, only that he was a "Huron survivor," and this was ten years after the wreck.⁹⁰ Warburton continued a series of engineering assignments, inspecting *Charleston* and *San Francisco* over two years, then *Bancroft*, and *New Orleans*. He finally got promoted to Chief Engineer in May 1897. In March 1899, the Navy changed the way it classified engineering officer ranks, and Chief Engineer Edgar Warburton became Lieutenant Commander Edgar Warburton.⁹¹

Warburton was ordered to the naval academy in 1901 for two years. He then went to *Indiana* and then in November 1903 to the new *USS Maine*.⁹² This was the lead ship of the Great White Fleet that was to become famous for cruising the world in 1907-08, and Warburton's duty onboard the battleship would seem to be the pinnacle of an engineering officer's naval career. But, on April 1, 1904, at about 8:15 a.m. while in his cabin on *Maine*, Edgar Warburton put a .38 revolver against his right temple and killed himself.⁹³ No suicide note was left behind and no obvious reasons ever provided for this act. It's certainly worth asking if he could have suffered from depression, survivor's guilt, or post-traumatic stress related to the *Huron*. The answer to those questions are lost to history.

Lucien Young was a twenty-five-year-old ensign when *Huron* wrecked. As a naval academy cadet in 1875, Young had jumped from his ship, *Alaska*, while underway in the Mediterranean to save a man who'd fallen overboard. For that feat of heroism Young received a letter of commendation from the Secretary of the Navy and a first-class gold lifesaving medal from the Humane Society of New York. For his effort in saving the lives of his *Huron* shipmates, he was advanced to the rank of Master by President Hayes. He received a second gold lifesaving medal, this one from the US Lifesaving Service.⁹⁴ The Kentucky legislature awarded him with a presentation sword and made him an honorary member. Newspapers across the country hailed him as a hero.⁹⁵

Following the *Huron* disaster, Lucien Young was called "the bravest man in the navy" and the "gallant" Young.⁹⁶ He became a larger-than-life figure over the course of his naval career, and as the record shows he proved to be a man who attracted attention wherever he went.

Young had friends in politics and he was never afraid to ask for what he wanted. Between 1878 and 1880, Young served as an aide to the Secretary of the Navy. While in that role, Young petitioned the secretary for command of a ship for the Lady Franklin Bay arctic expedition, also known as the Greely arctic expedition. His request was denied, but only because the expedition was sponsored by the Army.⁹⁷ Young per-

sisted, and an Indiana congressman named William Calkins got involved with the idea. Calkins introduced a bill which authorized a separate naval expedition with Young specifically named as its commander and funded it with \$150,000.⁹⁸ The bill, however, got negative reviews from the committee on naval affairs as well as negative press coverage and did not pass in Congress.

Young was commissioned as a Lieutenant (junior grade) in March 1883 when the Navy revised its rank system.⁹⁹ He served as executive officer on *Shenandoah* and participated in the landings in Panama in 1885. While on board *Shenandoah*, Young was stationed in Chili where he invested in railroads and silver mines. Newspapers reported that Young cleared over \$1 million profit from those investments.¹⁰⁰ Once again, Young proved himself to be an ambitious and opportunistic man.

He received a full lieutenant commission and transferred to the torpedo station in Rhode Island, then to the Naval War College. Young went to *Detroit* for a short while and then to *Boston*. While attached to *Boston* in 1893, he had a front row seat to the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy and attempted annexation of the island nation. The American minister to Hawaii, John L. Stevens, and the American owners of the Hawaiian sugar plantations, led a coup that upended the Hawaiian monarchy. From *Boston*, Young landed some 150 marines and sailors to occupy the grounds surrounding the Arlington Hotel in Honolulu and intimidate Queen Liliuokalani. She yielded to the pressure and surrendered her government within a few days.¹⁰¹ Young and *Boston* remained in Hawaiian waters until about October 1893, returning then to San Francisco where he took three months leave. Young and other officers were called to testify before the US Senate about the Navy's role in the attempted Hawaiian annexation. Young denied there was any conspiracy to overthrow the monarchy, but his public comments, strongly supportive of the coup and favoring Hawaiian annexation, ignited controversy and landed him in hot water. Due to opposition from President Grover Cleveland and others, the annexation was delayed until the McKinley administration took office in 1898.¹⁰² Young was detached from *Boston* and assigned to the office of naval records, perhaps as an informal reprimand and to keep him out of the spotlight.

Young recounted the Hawaiian coup in a book he published, *The Real Hawaii: Its History and Present Condition, Including the True Story of The Revolution*. In his work, Young wrote, "whites overthrew the ignorant, selfish, corrupt, and semi-barbarous monarchy and established instead a republican government."¹⁰³ Written in 1895, Young's book was blocked from publication by the Cleveland administration because it

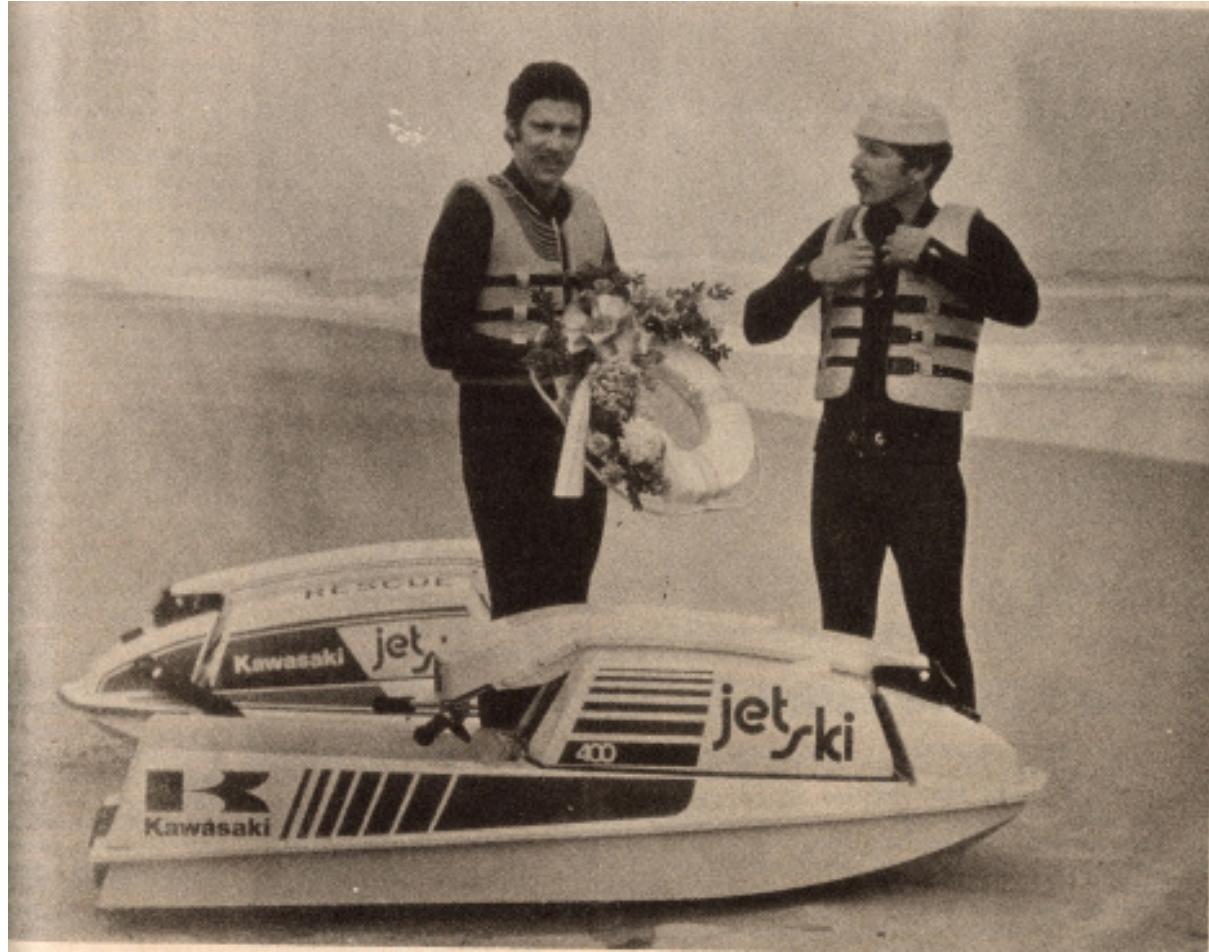


Figure 1. Divers (left to right) Jim Stuart and Sandy Sanderson prepare to lay a wreath over the USS Huron wrecksite on the centennial anniversary of its sinking, November 24, 1977 (Image courtesy of the Outer Banks History Center, State Archives of North Carolina).

contradicted the president's views on the legitimacy of the Hawaiian "revolution."¹⁰⁴ Finally published in 1899, it earned him the forever hatred of many Hawaiian people. One account said Young's book was a "defense of the most high-handed subjugation of the weak by the strong."¹⁰⁵ The *Hawaii Holomua-Progress* called him a "champion liar."¹⁰⁶ The evidence shows that Young was an advocate for American expansion and that he believed American imperialism was the natural continuation of the manifest destiny of the US.

During Young's time at the naval records office, he lobbied his political contacts on Capitol Hill to have one of the ships planned with the latest naval appropriations to be named for his home state of Kentucky.¹⁰⁷ He also promoted a popular patent medicine and cure-all tonic called Peruna, which was about 30% alcohol, and his picture was used in newspapers across the country advertising the product.¹⁰⁸ Following his tour of duty in Washington, Young served for a brief time in the Pacific as executive officer on *Alert*, a sister ship to *Huron*, from December 1897 to February 1898. He detached from *Alert* when he suffered a case of appendicitis and was forced to convalesce ashore for several weeks.¹⁰⁹

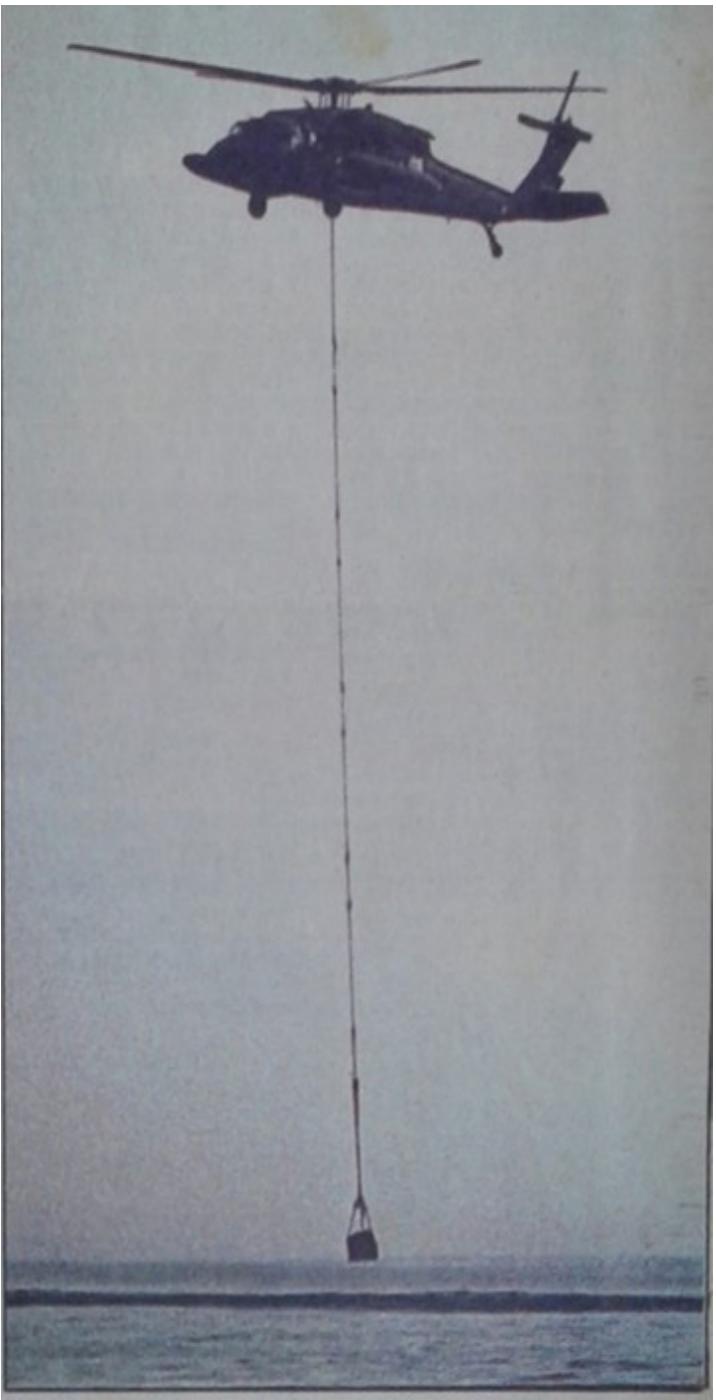
When the Spanish-American War broke out, Young took command of the converted yacht, *USS Hist*. Operating in concert with other

small gunboats, Young took *Hist* to battle in June and July 1898, with mixed results. Though sometimes outnumbered, he was always an aggressive fighter, and he was praised for his command.¹¹⁰

After the war, Young was promoted to Lieutenant Commander and assigned as commandant of the naval station in Havana. His duties were cut short in Cuba when he gave an interview in 1901 advocating Cuban annexation, angering the Theodore Roosevelt administration.¹¹¹ Young's remarks essentially stated that only the Cuban politicians wanted independence, while most of the Cuban population wanted annexation.¹¹² Here, again, Young's tendency to speak his mind wasn't always a positive attribute. Young was removed from Havana and made lighthouse inspector in Chicago where he spent a few more months in purgatory. It was written at the time that only his record of heroism in the *Huron* and *Alaska* disasters saved his career.¹¹³

By 1905 Young was back in command. Promoted to commander, he was assigned captain of the gunship *Bennington* in San Diego. Young was ashore when a boiler explosion on the ship killed sixty-two crew members. A court of inquiry convicted Young for the technicality of failing to sign the ship's steam log and he was reprimanded for the incident.¹¹⁴ Newspapers speculated the Secretary of the

Figure 2: A North Carolina National Guard helicopter prepares to lower a special information plaque onto the wreck of the USS Huron, August 5, 1994 (Photograph courtesy of Drew C. Wilson and used with permission).



Navy, Charles Bonaparte, unfairly pressured the court into convicting Young.¹¹⁵ His conviction and the public speculation surrounding the case makes one wonder if Young wasn't still in trouble with the administration.

Young was still in San Francisco when the great earthquake of April 18, 1906, struck the city. Awakened about 5:15 a.m. by the quake, he formed a detachment of volunteers and coordinated search and rescue efforts in the surrounding neighborhood for several days straight.¹¹⁶ His work, though not extraordinary, brought him more national fame.¹¹⁷

Young was ordered to the Mare Island Navy Yard and promoted to captain in 1906. In 1910 he was made Rear Admiral and sent to the Pensacola Naval Yard and then Key West Naval Station. As an admiral, Young enjoyed

the social life and he and his wife hosted many parties. At one social the papers reported "Lucien Young's punch, famous the country over, could be had...and a beverage long to be remembered, too, it proved!"¹¹⁸

In September 1912, Young took thirty days leave. He and his wife, Mary Belle Parker, were staying in New York City at the famous Waldorf-Astoria hotel when the admiral suddenly took ill. He died there on October 2, 1912. To the end, Lucien Young was hailed as the outstanding hero of USS *Huron*, his name synonymous with that of the ship. Clearly ambitious and confident, but also prone to controversy, he was an enormously popular man and a national celebrity who seemed larger than life and a legend in his own time. The WWII Fletcher-class destroyer USS *Young* (DD-580) was named in his honor.¹¹⁹

Remembering USS *Huron*

On November 24, 1977, the centennial anniversary of the *Huron* disaster, Nags Head divers Jim Stuart and Sandy Sanderson placed a wreath over the wreck site to honor the men who were killed.¹²⁰ But long before that day, the people of the Outer Banks had been talking about the *Huron* wreck. The *Huron*'s story has never been far from the consciousness of the Outer Bankers.

From the beginning, stories about the *Huron* shipwreck have been told and told again. Fishermen and salvage divers, beach goers, vacationers, and lifesaving surfmen kept the *Huron* alive. Dozens of references about the wreck can be found in contemporary newspapers from 1877 up to present day. An 1881 newspaper said the "70 guests at the Nags Head Inn were called to breakfast each morning with the bell from the wrecked *Huron*."¹²¹

In 1901 the *Weekly Economist* of Elizabeth City revisited the issue of Lieutenant Walton and his report about the theft of personal items from bodies washed ashore. The paper condemned Walton once more and cited an 1878 letter from someone named Roosevelt which defended the Outer Bankers. According to Josephus Baum, manager of the Palmer Island Hunting Club of Currituck, the writer of that letter was probably Theodore Roosevelt, Sr.¹²² The newspaper article seemed to be proof that old animosities die hard.

Fifty years on, *Huron* was remembered by the Elizabeth City Independent when it reported that, “Litt Johnson, fisherman, says he often sees the wreck when the sea is good. She rests about 175 yards from shore...the old heap swarms with fish and is famous for its huge sheepshead.”¹²³ That paper also reported that the son of J.J. Guthrie visited the wreck site to see for himself where his father was killed.¹²⁴

The *Dare County Times* in 1938 reported that “two granite blocks may have been used to mark the *Huron* site and the Civil War battle of Roanoke Island.”¹²⁵ The blocks had been earmarked for the Wright Brothers monument but were slightly damaged for that purpose. The *Times* goes on to say, “*Huron* is remembered as one of the most famed of the countless disasters which have occurred along the coast.”¹²⁶ A 1945 article in that newspaper talked about Wanchese resident and fisherman Captain Jeff Hayman, then aged 83, as being the last known living witness to the wreck. The paper said Hayman’s family still has a silver sugar bowl that came from the *Huron* wreck.¹²⁷

Historian and author David Stick’s book, *Graveyard of The Atlantic* was published in

1952, and included a chapter about the *Huron* wreck. That same year, the state of North Carolina, as part of its highway historical marker program, placed a marker for *Huron* next to Highway 12 near the wreck site. The wreck has long been a popular site for skin diving and spear fishing. In 1955 Jerome Hines, a famous singer with the Metropolitan Opera, made local headlines spearfishing on the wreck. Newspapers said he “enjoyed this thrilling sport in waters from California to Italy,” and that he brought back from *Huron* a dozen sheepshead, tautog, and triggerfish, several weighing over ten pounds.¹²⁸

The popular North Carolina magazine *The State*, featured two stories about *Huron*, in 1945 and 1978, respectively.¹²⁹ Dennis Rogers, a writer of North Carolina regional interest stories for the *Raleigh News & Observer* visited Nags Head in 1987 and wrote two stories; one about the history of the wreck, and one about the 1987 survey and archaeology project then underway.¹³⁰ It is sufficient to say that any publication about shipwrecks along North Carolina’s coast would not be complete without a summary of the *Huron* story. Some would say North Carolina has three famous



Figure 3: The wreck of the USS *Huron* interpretation exhibit: Bladen Street public beach access, Nags Head, NC (Photo by author).

shipwrecks off its coast: *USS Monitor* at Cape Hatteras, *Queen Anne's Revenge* at Beaufort, and *USS Huron* at Nags Head.

In 1990, Richard Lawrence, head of the Underwater Archaeology Branch of the NC Division of Archives and History, began the process of setting up a state underwater preserve. *Huron* was a natural choice. Volunteers had recently conducted surveys and excavations of the wreck and completed a wreck diagram and artist's interpretation.¹³¹ The wreck site had been recently placed on the National Register of Historic Places.¹³² On November 24, 1991, the Secretary of the Department of Cultural Resources, Mrs. Patric Dorsey, dedicated the *Huron* site. Volunteers built a shaded gazebo on the dune overlooking the wreck site, complete with a series of exhibit panels that told the story of *Huron* and its crew. The panels included historic photographs and wreck diagrams. In August 1994, Richard Lawrence and Leslie Bright of the NC Underwater Archaeology Branch constructed a cement pedestal with an information placard specially designed for underwater use. The 915 lb pedestal was hoisted by an NC Army National Guard helicopter from Manteo to the *Huron* wreck site and placed underwater inside the hull.¹³³ This marked the completion of the *Huron* underwater preserve project.

Huron has been the subject of several scholarly works by students and professionals. In 2015, historian and author Dr. Anna Gibson Holloway presented a paper about *Huron* for the National Park Service.¹³⁴ Students at East Carolina University have studied, referenced, and written about the *Huron* wreck in multiple theses and doctoral dissertations beginning in the 1980s and continuing through to the present day.¹³⁵

Today, the town of Nags Head is a managing partner for the *USS Huron* site and maintains buoys over the wreck during the summer so swimmers and divers can easily find and explore the wreck.¹³⁶ As social media expanded in the twenty-first century, the University of North Carolina Coastal Studies Institute produced a twelve-minute YouTube video about the wreck in cooperation with the Town of Nags Head, complete with historic interpretation and underwater footage.¹³⁷ Vacation guides regularly include *Huron* as a tourist destination for Outer Banks visitors.¹³⁸

After almost 150 years, *USS Huron* is more than a shadow under the waves and a collection of artifacts. The vessel is a chapter in the history of North Carolina, compiled of stories about the people who were touched by the events of the wrecking. They survived the cold waters and the incredible surf. They gave

aid and comfort to the injured. They saw the bodies and debris washed ashore. They buried the dead along desolate stretches of beach and buried them again in cemeteries across the country. These people are the survivors and the bystanders, the relatives, and all the other people who knew *USS Huron* in one way or another, then and now, and in the years in between. They carried these stories with them, they remember, and they still tell them to this day.

Endnotes

1. *Evening Star*, November 24, 1877, 1.
2. Senate Executive Document No. 26. 45th Congress, Second Session, Proceedings of Court of Inquiry on Loss of *Huron*, December 17, 1877.
3. Up until about 1918, hunting ducks and geese involved finding them roosting on the water and shining a light in their eyes until the hunter was close enough to shoot them. It was the most effective way to assure killing lots of birds, and the idea of sportsmanship was not considered. Goose hunting at 1 or 2 am would not be unusual. Harry M. Walsh, *The Outlaw Gunner* (Tidewater Publishers, 1971), 71.
4. *The Baltimore Sun*, December 28, 1877, 1.
5. *The Baltimore Sun*, December 28, 1877.
6. *Coastland Times*, June 24, 1949, 7.
7. Edgar Warburton, "The Wreck of the *Huron*," The United Service, Volume 1, January 1879, 105.
8. *Norfolk Landmark*, November 27, 1877, 1.
9. *Norfolk Landmark*, November 27, 1877, 1.
10. *Public Ledger*, November 26-27, 1877.
11. *Richmond Dispatch*, March 23, 1878, 3.
12. *Baltimore Sun*, December 28, 1877, 1.
13. *Baltimore Sun*, December 28, 1877, 1.
14. *The News and Observer*, January 27, 1878, 2.
15. 45th Congress 2nd Session Congressional Record US House of Representatives, Volume 7, Part 1, January 28, 1878, 625.
16. *The Coastland Times*, June 24, 1949, 7.
17. Annual Report of the Operations of The United States Lifesaving Service for Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1879, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1879, 5.
18. This author has seen two different spellings of this person's name: Wight and Wright.
19. *Norfolk Landmark*, April 20, 1878.
20. *Norfolk Landmark*, January 25, 1878, 1.
21. *Norfolk Landmark*, December 4, 1877, 2.
22. Salvage efforts conducted by the Baker Wrecking Company had already started. "The Wreck Examined By Divers," *The Norfolk Landmark*, December 2, 1877, 1.
23. Report of Lieutenant Commander James G. Green to Commodore J. Blakeley Creighton, USN Commanding Naval Station, Norfolk, VA. December 14, 1877. Report is attached to the USN Court of Inquiry into the loss of the *Huron* as part of Senate Document No. 26.
24. *Norfolk Landmark*, December 4, 1877, 2.
25. *Virginian Landmark*, December 2, 1877, 1.
26. *Public Ledger*, December 15, 1877, 1. Baker Wrecking Company reported that the *Huron* wreck was filling up quickly with sand, and divers had used a hoe to dig out one of the bodies they found.
27. *Army and Navy Journal*, March 16, 1878.

28. *Public Ledger*, December 8, 1877, 2.

29. "US Naval Academy Virtual Memorial Hall," accessed May 30, 2025, https://usnamemorialhall.org/index.php/GEORGE_P._RYAN,_CDR,_USN.

30. *Washington Chronicle*, May 3, 1874, 8.

31. *Boston Evening Transcript*, December 6, 1877, 5.

32. *Army and Navy Journal*, December 1, 1877.

33. "US Naval Academy Virtual Memorial Hall," accessed May 30, 2025, https://usnamemorialhall.org/index.php/LAMBERT_G._PALMER,_LT,_USN.

34. *National Republican*, December 7, 1877.

35. "Lieut Lambert Gittings Palmer," Find a Grave, accessed September 13, 2025, https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/39717218/lambert_gittings-palmer.

36. *Public Ledger*, December 8, 1877, 2.

37. Annual Report of the United States Lifesaving Service for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1878, US Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 30.

38. *Smyrna Times Newspaper*, November 28, 1877, 2.

39. *Norfolk Landmark*, December 4, 1877, 2.

40. *Norfolk Landmark*, December 15, 1877, 1.

41. *The Norfolk Virginian*, November 29, 1877, 1.

42. These were the bodies of Armstrong and Carson, which Green mentions in his reports. *Public Ledger*, November 27, 1877, 1.

43. *Public Ledger*, December 1, 1877, 1.

44. *Norfolk Landmark*, December 2, 1877, 1.

45. *Public Ledger*, November 30, 1877, 1.

46. *Public Ledger*, December 13, 1877, 1.

47. This body was identified as paymaster's yeoman, Charles Chapman. *Public Ledger*, December 15, 1877, 1.

48. *Norfolk Landmark*, December 19, 1877, 1.

49. *Norfolk Landmark*, January 22, 1878, 3.

50. *Norfolk Landmark*, April 28, 1878, 1.

51. *Public Ledger*, June 3, 1878, 2.

52. *Staunton Spectator*, May 21, 1878, 2.

53. The Virginian-Pilot, March 1, 1879, 2.

54. *Baltimore Sun*, March 26, 1879, 1.

55. Bengal had been owned by the Baker Wrecking Company. It was sold at auction during the change in ownership of June 1878. James Power & Company sold the schooner in 1880. Whitney had apparently been a Baker wrecking company employee who perhaps went into business for himself following the sale of the Baker company. *The Norfolk Virginian*, May 16, 1879, 1.

56. *Norfolk Virginian*, May 16, 1878, 1.

57. *The News and Observer*, June 29, 1881, 2.

58. *The Virginian Pilot*, July 23, 1880, 1.

59. *The Weekly Economist*, July 26, 1881, 4.

60. *The Norfolk Landmark*, July 22, 1880, 1.

61. *The News and Observer*, June 29, 1881, 1.

62. *The Norfolk Virginian*, November 27, 1877, 1; Senate Executive Document No. 26. 45th Congress, Second Session, Proceedings of Court of Inquiry on Loss of Huron, December 17, 1877.

63. *The Peabody-Gazette Herald*, December 21, 1877, 2.

64. *Army and Navy Journal*, December 22, 1877, 311.

65. Records of The Department of Veterans Affairs, NARA RG 15, Disapproved Pension Application File for Seaman Daniel Burgan, USS Huron (Application #14677).

66. Report of the Secretary of the Navy, Third Session, 45th Congress, Washington, DC, Government Printing Office, 1878, 61.

67. *Western Daily Press*, July 25, 1908, 9; US Navy Survivors Certificates, 1861-1910, Antonio Williams File, National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 15, NARA catalog ID #580580.

68. In modern terms the condition is called secondary drowning, and it occurs when saltwater in the lungs damages the lung tissue and causes fluid to build up.

69. *Norfolk Landmark*, April 28, 1878, 1.

70. *Daily Graphic*, December 7, 1877.

71. *Virginian - Pilot*, October 12, 1883, 4.

72. "Commodore Denig Post, American Legion," Sandusky History, accessed May 21, 2012, <https://sanduskyhistory.blogspot.com/2012/05/commodore-denig-post-american-legion.html>.

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74. "Wyoming I (1859-1892)," Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships, Naval History and Heritage Command, accessed September 13, 2025, <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/w/wyoming-i.html>.

75. *National Republican*, November 28, 1881, 1.

76. *Army and Navy Journal*, January 7, 1888, 465.

77. *Army and Navy Journal*, October 29, 1887, 259.

78. *Semi-Weekly South Kentuckian*, October 30, 1888, 3.

79. *Norfolk Landmark*, July 30, 1890, 4.

80. *Army and Navy Journal*, July 30, 1890, 4.

81. *The Reporter*, October 13, 1893, 7.

82. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 15, 1893, 5.

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84. US Navy Widow's Certificates 1861-1910," Record of the Service of Late Lieutenant-Commander Edgar T. Warburton, US Navy," National Archives and Records Administration Record Group 15, 23.

85. *Army and Navy Journal*, October 26, 1878, 186.

86. Warburton, "The Wreck of The Huron," 107.

87. *Army and Navy Journal*, December 7, 1878, 86.

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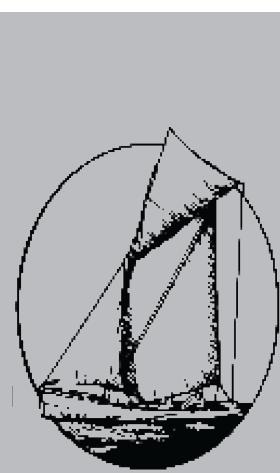
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“Nathan Keais led part of our militia tour through Beaufort County. He was a respected figure even then.”

— William Woodard, 2nd North Carolina Regiment, Beaufort County (1834)



Patriot on the Pamlico:

Captain Nathaniel Keais, 1740-1795

by Gillian Hookway-Jones

Introduction

Capt. Nathan Keais (b.1740 - d.1795) was an influential sea captain, regimental captain, and North Carolina (N.C.) colonial port official. Keais spent many of his 54 years on the waterfront in the two neighboring towns of Bath and Washington. Only fourteen miles apart, these early villages were both on the north shore of the Pamlico River and, respectively, 53 miles and 67 miles inland from the Atlantic Ocean. These locations were originally considered advantageous, out of reach from enemies and pirates, or any navigator unfamiliar with the tricky shallow waters, sandbars, and shifting channels of Ocracoke Inlet and the Pamlico Sound.

Bath, North Carolina's oldest town, enjoyed its 300th anniversary celebration in 2005.¹ In 1776, James Bonner founded the town of Washington about fourteen miles upriver. Its upcoming 250th milestone highlights the town's pride in being the first community named after George Washington.² A local veteran of the war Washington won, Keais' military and civic achievements, told here through primary source documents, help in part to explain this early growth of the port and Washington after the American Revolution. Reviewing Keais' career as a sea captain, an enlisted Continental soldier, and as a government official, all illustrate new insights about the region's early development. A secondary aim of this study is to highlight provisioning out of the Tar-Pamlico port district which supported the Continental Army and the North Carolina interim government before and after 1783.³

Through his customs collector duties, Keais was

charged with supporting maritime commerce and navigation safety, facilitating trade and supporting civic initiatives. Thus, Keais played a quiet unseen role in protecting and transforming early Washington. From a modest river settlement, the village grew into a vital port town, known up and down the coast for a wide variety of export commodities (lumber, staves, shingles, and pork) and for West Indian imports, (rum, molasses, sugar, and salt). Keais also had a role at the end of his career in the town's growth in the shipbuilding industry. His legacy endures not only in the physical landscape of the town, but also in the collaborative spirit he enjoyed. This collaboration between local merchants, sea captains, and interim government leaders ensure Keais' and Washington's enduring place in North Carolina and the new nation's history.

The review below of Keais' life aims to add to the body of knowledge about Washington's first Early Republic port official: his life and many contributions. The study also highlights his connections to the shipper-merchant Blount brothers, giving insights into the towns and Tar-Pamlico region's shipping during the Revolutionary War and the first decade afterwards. For study methods, a 30-year period 1765-1795 was chosen, reviewing Beaufort County courthouse records, North Carolina colonial port records, and state archives. Due to gaps in surviving colonial port records, vessel references were also identified using the John Gray Blount Papers. The Blounts' correspondence was useful, given their many vessels sailing from the Tar-Pamlico port to coastal ports from Boston to Charleston, as well as to the West Indies and Europe.⁴

Tributaries

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History Council

Keais and his Sea Captain Years

According to British American economic history specialists McCusker and Menard, “almost the entirety of colonial life was linked to seaborne trade.”⁵ This situation was certainly the case for Nathan Keais, born in Rhode Island on October 12, 1740.⁶ He was the son of New Hampshire seafarer William Keais, born in 1699. Nathan Keais married Barbara Low in Warwick, Kent, Rhode Island on August 20, 1769 and the couple had six children.⁷ There were three girls, and three boys as follows:

1. William (Billy) Keais, 1773-1808, married Sally Hunter Bryan.
2. Sarah (Sally) Keais, 1775-1810, married Benjamin Brickell.
3. John Low Keais, 1777-1807.
4. Henry H. Keais, 1779.
5. Barbara Low Keais, 1781-1842, married Slade Pearce.
6. Nancy Keais, 1783.

Keais met his wife on a voyage through North Carolina from Rhode Island, and his ultimate decision to relocate and build a new life in Washington derived from his years as a sea captain. He began his career as a captain who was sometimes for hire, and sometimes at the helm of his own vessel. Newspapers from these entrepreneurial sea captain days show Keais imported chests of tea, wine, and rum, advertised for freight shipping customers; he sailed to a variety of coastal ports such as Philadelphia, P.A., Beaufort, N.C., and Charleston, S.C., making even longer voyages to Grenada, the West Indies and London (Figures 1-4).

These four newspaper notices, plus surviving port records below, confirm Keais captained

Figure 1. Advertisement for Bohea tea shipped from London in ship Nancy and Sukey, with Capt. Keais as captain.

Figure 2. Sloop Sally advertisement for soliciting freight.

Figure 3. Sloop Sally advertisement to import Rum, loaf and brown sugar, and small boats.

Figure 4. Marine list showing Keais captaining the sloop, Sally.

several voyages out of Rhode Island and Charleston. Keais appears with at least four vessels that listed his name as Master or Captain: *Friendship*, *Nancy and Sukey*, *Defiance*, and sloop *Sally*. Business records of 1779 show a bill from Nathan Keais listing provisions, brandy, brass compass, and pilotage for the Tar-Pamlico merchants John Gray and Thomas Blount, who owned the sloop *Friendship*. In 1783-87, Keais was making deliveries on the Pamlico River with the schooner *Tarborough Packet*, built by Henry Tuley and launched in 1783.⁸ Identified North Carolina and South Carolina port customs clearances by Keais as captain/master are:

- 1 Port Beaufort, Outbound, July 31, 1767, *Friendship*, Owner Thomas Sitgreaves, Bound for Rhode Island.⁹
- 2 Port Beaufort, Inbound, July 18, 1768, *Sally*, Sloop, Wine, 220 gallons.¹⁰
- 3 Port Beaufort, Outbound, November 14, 1768, *Sally*, Sloop, Owner Richard Cogdell, Bound for Rhode Island.¹¹
- 4 Port Beaufort, Outbound, March 1, 1769, *Sally*, Sloop, Owner Edmond Wrensford, Bound for Grenada.¹²
- 5 Port Beaufort, Outbound, April 1, 1769, *Sally*, Sloop, Owner Edmond Wrensford.¹³
- 6 Port Beaufort, Inbound, January 2, 1770, *Defiance*, Rum, 236 gallons.¹⁴

Keais first made his home in the Bath area purchasing his first piece of farmland property there in 1774, he purchased 300 acres on the north shore of the Pamlico, five years after his marriage.¹⁵ Since the land was paid for in proclamation money (abbreviated p.m. and not paid in specie, gold or silver monies), presumably he paid an equivalent value of commodities equaling £75.0.0. (land values are in pound, shillings, and pence). Eight years later,

Bohea Tea,

In large or small Chests, just imported in the Ship *Nancy and Sukey*, Capt. Keais, from London, and to be sold by

Christopher and Charles Marshall,
At their Drug and Colour Store, in Chestnut-street, Philadelphia,
Who have likewise remaining on Hand, a few small Chests of choice

1.



For RHODE-ISLAND,
The Sloop *SALLY*,
NATHAN KEAIS, Master,
(sailled in fourteen days)

FOR Freight apply to the said
Master, c. 10

NATHANIEL RUSSELL.

2.

Just imported in the Sloop *SALLY*, Nathan Keais, Master, from Rhode Island, and to be SOLD by

NATHANIEL RUSSELL,
At his STORE on Colston Beach's Wharf;

NORTHWARD Rum, Cordials, Loaf and brown
Sugar, Glycerine, Candles, Soap, Train Oil, Cheeses,
Oats, Dried Riding Chaff, from the Kitchens, Quarters,
Oats, Cycles, Three Masts built Boats, from Twelve to
Seventeen Feet.

For RHODE-ISLAND,
**THE SLOOP
S A L L Y**,
NATHAN KEAIS, Master,
Master, of
NATHANIEL RUSSELL.

3.

April	Custom-House, ENTRIES INWARD.	From
2d.	Sloop Sally, Nathan Keais,	Rhode-Island
5th.	Schooner Polly, Richard Churchill,	Georgia
Sloop Ruth, Edward King,	Ship Heart of Oak, Henry Gunn,	Sal Tortuga
April	ENTRIES OUTWARD.	London
9th.	Ship Martha, Gideon Manchester,	For
Brig Eagle, William Gickie,	Jamaica	Barbados
3d.	Schooner Margaret, George Mitchell,	Antigua
5th.	Sloop Six Sisters, Downham Newton, New Providence	

4.

Keais purchased Bath town lot #12 in 1782 for £60.0.0 p.m. from Benjamin Bernard.¹⁶ Lot #12's location appears on the Bath town plan of 1723¹⁷ and on the 1766 Forbes map version of the Bath Town Plan.¹⁸

James Eckols	1774 Dec	Deed	4	408
James Bonner etux	1778 Mar	Deed	4	514
Thomas Cook etux	1779 June 12	Deed	5	131
Benjamin Barnard etux	1782 Dec	Deed	5	208
Thomas Rispeas	Dec	Deed	5	208
John Ermul	1785 June	Deed	5	414
State of North Carolina	1786 Apr 13	Grant	5	488
State of North Carolina	Apr 13	Grant	5	489
Edmond McKeel Shff etal	1787 Sept	Deed	6	261
Ann Patten	1789 Sept	Deed	6	114
John Snow Shff	1791 Sept	Deed	6	402
John Snow Shff	Sept	Deed	6	403
John Kennedy Shff etal	1792 Dec	Deed	6	446
William Jones	1793 June	Mtg	6	513
	1794			

Beaufort County deed records show at least 14 conveyances to Keais with twelve purchases and two land grants from the State of North Carolina (Figure 5).¹⁹ Historically, colonial customs offices were rented or built in the county seat which had a courthouse.²⁰ Courthouses were important amenities for colonial port transactions involving oceanic or inter-coastal

voyages, such as the recording of a will before vessel departure or recording and providing witnesses to a merchant promissory note.²¹ The 1769 Sauthier map does not show lots, but does show the old Beaufort County courthouse location beside St. Thomas Episcopal Church (Figure 6). The Keais home would have been ideally situated, near the intersection of Water Street (now Main) and Craven Street, close to the courthouse and church. His purchase would have included the frontage waterfront area opposite lot 12, located between Willis Wharf and Oden's Wharf (Figure 7).

Land and Sea Travel When Keais Arrived

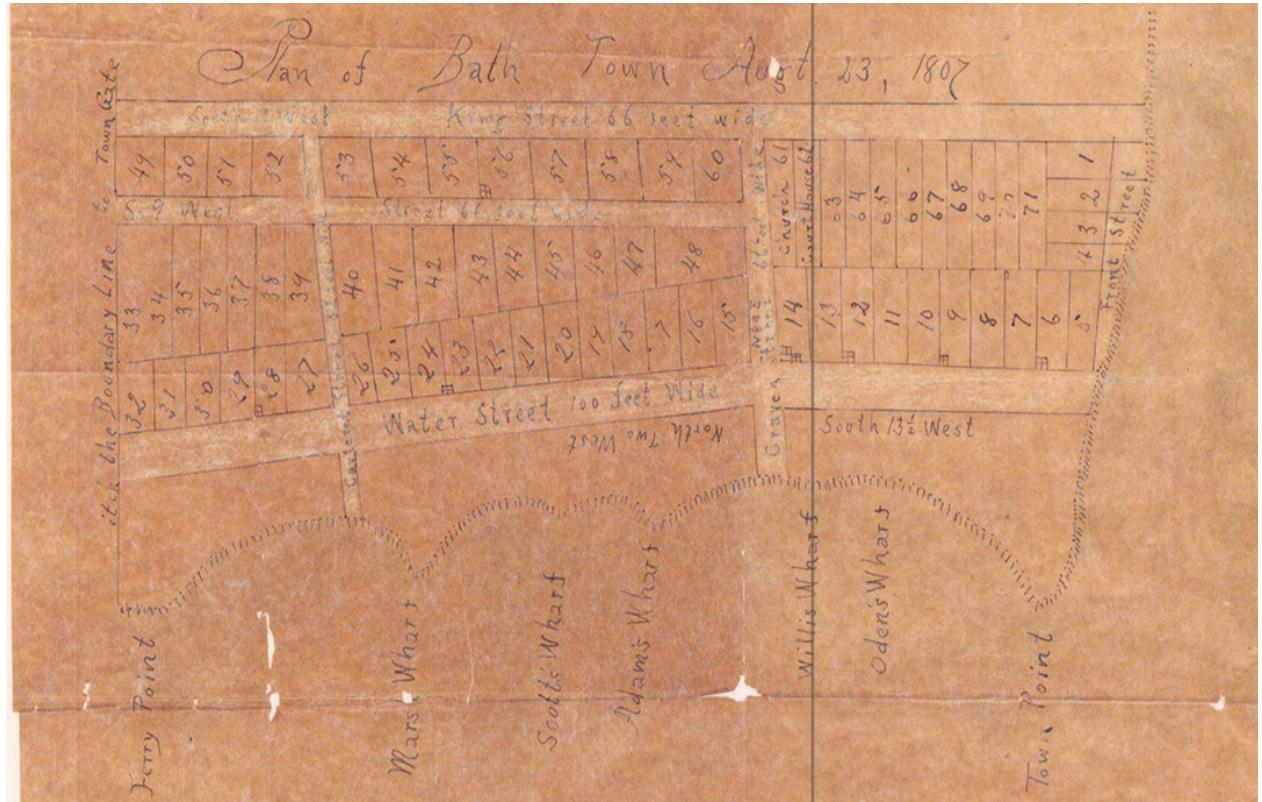
An unknown French traveler to the mid-Atlantic colonies in the year 1765 gives a good description of what 1760s oceanic and overland travel to eastern North Carolina might have been like for Keais as a young sea captain.²² Journal entries in 1765 give details about travel from New Bern to Bath and a visit to Williamsburg where the traveler overheard Patrick Henry speak against the Stamp Act. This unknown Frenchman's voyage began in Haiti, but he was unexpectedly put ashore at Cape Lookout with one servant to carry his bag. He described the variety of North Carolina exports he saw and his overland trip northward, including comments about Beaufort, New Bern, and Bath. In Bath, he dined with loyalist Robert

Figure 5. Index to Nathan Keais Conveyances with deed book and page numbers 1774-1793 (Image by author).



Figure 6. Map by Claude J. Sauthier showing the port at Bath in 1769 (Map Courtesy of Norman B. Leventhal Map Collection).

Figure 7: Section of the 1807 Forbes town plan of Bath, North Carolina showing the location of Keais' purchase of lot 12 (Image courtesy of North Carolina State Archives).



Palmer, the Port Bath customs collector at the time:

Saturday march the 23d 1765.
Set out from Newburn (where I eat my St. Patricks Dinner which lasted untill 4 next morning), took fery a mile from the town and Crossed News River, which is about 2 miles broad here, but full of shoals. saw several flats Coming Down with pitch and tar, Corn, shingles, etc. Came this night to Mrs. bonds fery oposit to bath town,

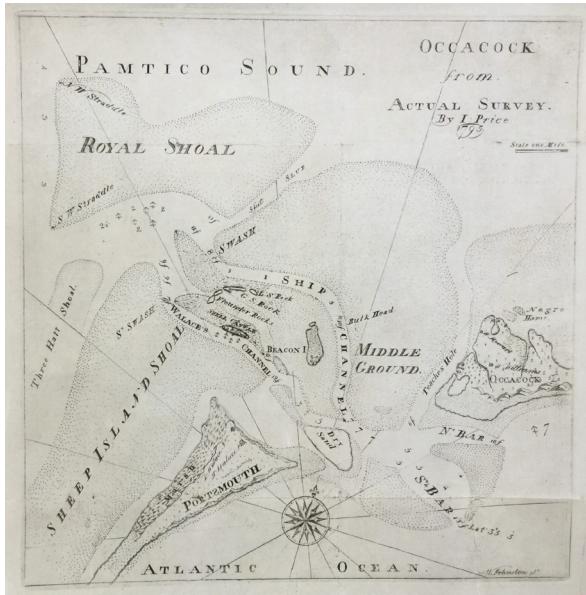
Do 24th. Crossd over to bath. the fery is three miles Including one mile up the Creek on which the town lies. bath is small but little or no trade. the vessels Can go 20 or 30 miles above the town. There are several vessels built here, and on other parts of this as well as on News river, but all small on account of the swash; the town in 80 miles from the Bar. I went to weat on Colonel Palmer after Dinner, who is Colonel in the militia, Colector and surveyor general for this part of the province. He invited me to spend the even'g with him, which I Complied with. He is very agreeable scots gentleman. Dureing three Days that made here we spent most

part of the time together; the produce, and trade here, is of the same nature as at Newburn.²³

On the eve of the American Revolution in 1775, Ocracoke Inlet was Port Bath's only passage to the Atlantic Ocean.²⁴ While British ships threatened Ocracoke and other nearby port towns, Ocracoke Inlet remained open during the war. The fact that the British were unable to effectively blockade Ocracoke proved to be of considerable importance to the Continental cause. On March 3, 1778, the governor of Virginia, Patrick Henry, wrote to Benjamin Franklin that, "at present the Inlets on our Eastern Shore, and that at Occacock [Ocracoke] in North Carolina are the best Channels thro' [sic] which our Trade can pass."²⁵

In 1795, Jonathan Price surveyed Ocracoke for John Gray Blount, who published an eight-page pamphlet containing the map of the island (Figure 8).²⁶ Blount described Ocracoke Island, detailed the depths of the shipping channels, and included a map of the landform, inlet and shoals, writing:

Small live oak and cedar grow abundantly over it...; its inhabitants, depending on another element for their support, suffer the earth to remain in its natural state. They are all pilots; and their number of head of families is about thirty.²⁷



Coastal vessels sailing inbound and outbound from the Tar-Pamlico waterways used Ocracoke Inlet after “crossing the bar,” as did vessels sailing to and from North Carolina’s Albemarle and Currituck Sounds.²⁸ Vessels outbound from the Pamlico region, especially those carrying ammunition and troop provisions needed for the war effort, also traversed the sounds to other southern Virginia ports like South Quay, Virginia near Williamsburg. That cargo was typically first shipped by water inside the barrier islands to avoid British ships patrolling the Atlantic, then offloaded and transferred overland by wagon to the north.²⁹

Keais and his Militia Years during the War for Independence 1775-1778

On Saturday, September 9, 1775, the North Carolina Provincial Congress authorized the organization of county militias. The initial Beaufort County minutemen who held field officer appointments were Colonel James Bonner, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Bonner, First Major Roger Ormond, and Second Major William Brown.³⁰ One thousand men were to be raised from regions in North Carolina: 200 in New Bern, 200 in Edenton, 200 in Salisbury, and 400 at Cape Fear. James Moore and Robert Howe were also appointed as Colonels and Robert Salter was appointed as Commissary for the New Bern district.³¹

Keais spent three years in military service, from September 1, 1775, to June 1, 1778, as captain of the Beaufort County militia – one of seven companies belonging to the Second North Carolina Continental Army Regiment.³² He and his company of fifty men initially served as minutemen under Colonel Robert Howe.³³ Pension interviews with William Goff and Isaac Buck (see below) indicate Keais re-enlisted with an Edenton group by 1780, then serving under a “Captain Vail.”³⁴

More than 35 years after Keais' death in 1795, seven surviving Beaufort County enlistees remembered him. Their pension interview statements shed light on the Beaufort County company under Keais and their movements from Virginia to South Carolina. Their edited individual statements are below:

1. **Phineas Latham:** That the said Phineas enlisted in the said County, in the Company commanded by Nathan Keais...., ...he was marched to Newbern [sic, New Bern], whence he was marched to Norfolk Virginia at this post he remained the winter ensuing where he witnessed its conflagration by the Common Enemy. He was marched from this post to Wilmington North Carolina, thence to Charleston South Carolina thence to the City of Philadelphia, thence to Stony Point, where he was taken prisoner and carried to New York, in which place he remained till Stony Point was taken by General Lane, when read taken, it was the fortune of this deponent to be among the prisoners, then exchanged and rejoined the Army at West Point.³⁵
2. **James Masterson:** He first entered the service under Capt. Keys [sic, Captain Nathaniel Keais] at Bath town on the Pamlico River in North Carolina at the commencement of the revolution, and immediately marched to New Bern in said State, where the company remained during six months in which time they built a Fort at Hanging Point three miles below New Bern. During his service with Capt. Keys, a battle with the Scotch Tories under McDonald was fought at the Long Bridge (Ed. Moore's Creek bridge.) Keys' Company was engaged in it...³⁶
3. **William Goff:** He served under Captain Nathan Keais and Colonel Jarvis in a company that marched to Kingston and then to Halifax... "I served under Captain Vail in the summer of 1780. Nathan Keais was in the same company, stationed near the Pungo River."³⁷

Figure 8. Map of Ocracoke Inlet included in Jonathan Price's 1795 pamphlet describing the island.

4. **William Woolard:** Woolard stated he was born in Beaufort County and served in the North Carolina militia. He named Captain Nathan Keais as one of his commanding officers. His service included guarding British prisoners and marching to various posts in North Carolina. "Nathan Keais led part of our militia tour through Beaufort County. He was a respected figure even then."³⁸
5. **Jesse Windley:** stated he was drafted and served in the North Carolina militia. He named Captain Nathan Keais as his commanding officer. His service included marching to Kingston and Halifax, guarding British prisoners, and serving under Colonel Jarvis.³⁹
6. **Isaac Buck:** "We marched from Kinston to Charleston, passing through New Bern. Nathan Keais was among the men in Captain Vail's command."⁴⁰
7. **James Singleton:** "Keais was present during our southern expedition. I recall him clearly at Fort Moultrie."⁴¹

A November 6, 1818, interview with veteran soldier Phineas Latham confirmed his Beaufort County company commander was Nathan Keais. He was, "...marched first south to New Bern, then to the Battle of Great Bridge and saw the burning of Norfolk."⁴² James Masterson added that his first orders were to march to New Bern from Bath, to build a fort below the Neuse River at a place called Hanging Point, but was then he was marched to the Cape Fear area when they saw combat during the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge.⁴³ Two of the interviewees say they were at Kingston (Kinston) and Halifax with Keais, guarding British prisoners. Three of the interviewees said they marched and fought with Keais at the siege of Charleston.

Keais' company marched north from New Bern through the Great Dismal Swamp to the outskirts of Norfolk, Virginia, and joined the Virginia militia at dawn for the pivotal Battle of Great Bridge, which took place on December 9, 1775.⁴⁴ This Patriot victory resulted in the flight of royal governor John Murray, 4th Earl of Dunmore, and the retreat of the British fleet to end the blockade of Norfolk. For that reason, the battle is sometimes called the "second Bunker

Hill."⁴⁵ A Great Bridge, V.A. incident appeared in Congressional records of April 1776, naming Keais and confirming he was there:

Taken from Gen'l. Woodford's brigade, a bay horse has a bald face, a white left hind foot, a white streak.... whoever shall bring him to Gen'l Woodford's brigade, reward of ten dollars from William Heath. Resolved that William Heath be allowed twelve pounds for a horse "pressed" from him and delivered to Capt. Nathan Keais of the 2nd regiment.⁴⁶

By late June of 1776, Keais and his company marched south to Wilmington, N.C., and Charleston, S.C., to aid Col. William Moultrie's fight against a British fleet at Sullivan's Island. As shown above, James Singleton stated under oath that, "Keais was present... I recall him clearly at Fort Moultrie."⁴⁷

The southern tip of Sullivan's Island and Fort, shown in Figure 9, was the location where three soldiers identified above confirm that Keais' militia company fought on June 28, 1776. North Carolina and Virginia Continental regulars had been called up and marched south to support Col. William Moultrie's Charleston garrison.⁴⁸ The Patriot defenders fought from an unfinished palmetto log fort, built by artisans and enslaved laborers. Facing off against a fleet of British war ships by sea, and 2,200 British troops, the battle at Sullivan's Island became known as the "first siege of Charleston."⁴⁹ In that battle, Moultrie and around 400 of his soldiers, with the help of neighboring state's militia, successfully faced the British fleet. In that one-day battle, 90 British were killed and 171 wounded; in contrast, only 12 Patriots were killed and 24 wounded. It was reported that cannon balls bounced off the Patriot fort's palmetto logs, were gathered up, and then fired back at the British warships. This military vigor combined with an error in British troop landings (whereby the British attempted to cross over at low tide, but found the water to be seven feet deep) helped the Americans secure victory.

Based on locations given by seven Beaufort County soldiers who mentioned Keais in their pension interview statements, Figure 10 was generated using artificial intelligence. Although not perfect, the line drawing illustrates the movements over three states by Nathan Keais' company 1775-1778 (excluding his apparent re-enlistment by 1780 under Captain Vail). Arrows trace various militia tours from Bath: first to New Bern, the regiment's district headquarters, where they built a fort on the Lower Neuse, then

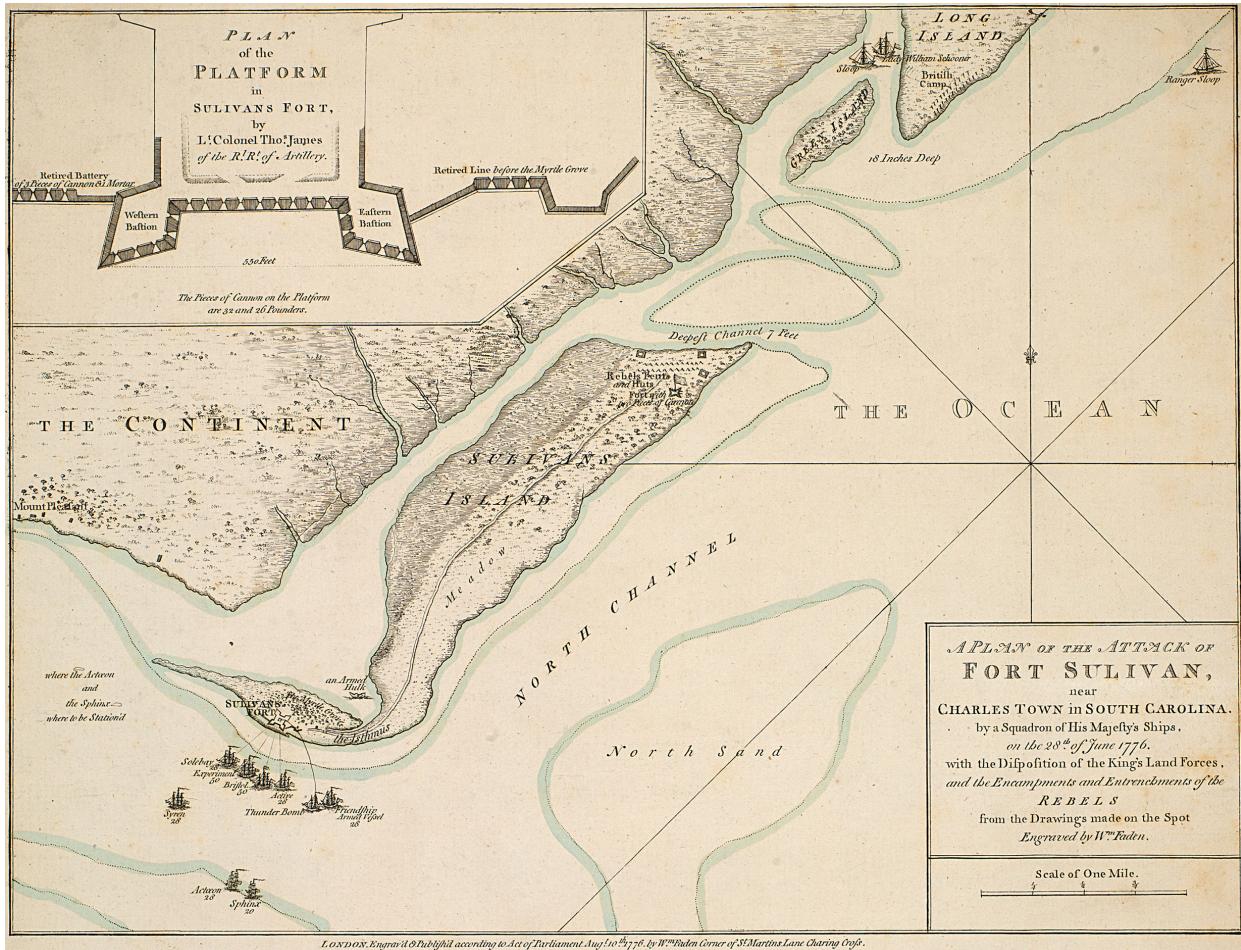
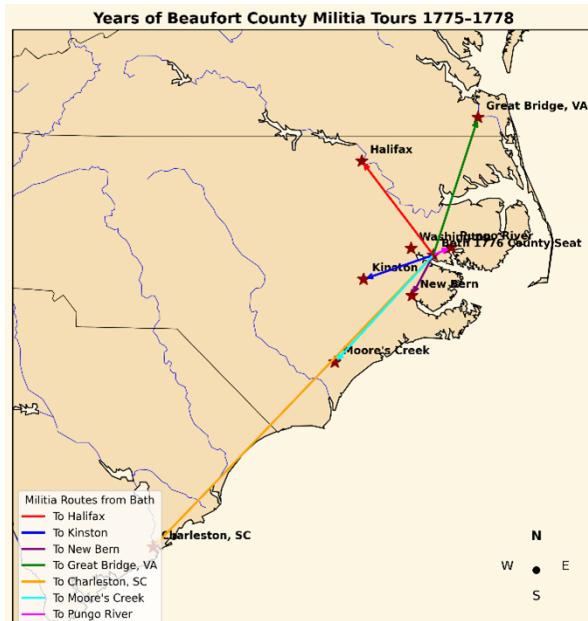


Figure 9: British Plan of Attack on Sullivan's Island June 28, 1776 (Image © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2025 | Royal Collection Trust).

marched on to three battles and other towns (Great Bridge, V.A., Halifax, Kinston, Moore's Creek, Wilmington, and Sullivan's Island).



Keais' New Role in Provisioning

During the war, the shortage of food and supplies for the militia and the Continental Army became a boon to the Port Bath district merchants and shippers.⁵⁰ The port's small coastal vessels were familiar with the shifting channels and shallow sounds so the boats could slip through the waters and evade the British

warships. In 1783, Britain issued an order limiting trade with the West Indies to British-only ships.⁵¹ This order hurt North Carolina's export trade, but over time commerce slowly expanded trading with Dutch and French-owned islands such as St. Eustatius, Martinique, and Guadeloupe.⁵²

Two months prior to the Sullivan's Island battle, sources indicate that Keais likely held a new provisioning role in support of the North Carolina Council of Safety, and later North Carolina's post-war government. In an April 1776 document, Keais presented five claims for reimbursement of £87.18 (Figure 11).⁵³ During the November-December 1777 session of the General Assembly, the minutes (quoted below) note Keais' appointment to outfit *King Tammany*, one of the three state-proposed armed brigs then being built.⁵⁴ This brig was one of three merchant ships purchased to be converted to a warship.⁵⁵ The brig *King Tammany*'s size is unknown, but a similar two-masted brigantine, believed smaller than the armed brig *Pennsylvania Farmer* of 120 tons, carried twelve carriage guns and ten swivel guns.⁵⁶

Resolved... also, that Robert Bignall and Nathan Keaise [sic], Esqrs., be appointed Commissioners for loading and fitting out the Brigantine

Figure 10: Militia movements of Nathan Keais' company in three states, 1775-1778. (Image generated by ChatGPT AI, prompt by author).

King Tamminy, [sic] so soon as she shall return from the voyage she is now on, for some foreign port for the purpose of purchasing arms, clothing, &c., for the use of this State.⁵⁷ ...We herewith send for your concurrence a resolve of this House empowering certain Commissioners therein mentioned to sell a part of the public salt at Edenton and New Bern, and to invest the proceeds thereof in tobacco, &c., to be shipped on board the *Pennsylvania Farmer* and *King Tamminy* [sic], to be sent to some foreign port for certain purposes therein mentioned.⁵⁸

Debt Date of Chase Claim	No. of Person to whom Granted	K (29) Person to whom Granted	Amount of each Person Claim
1776 April	57	King John -	66 77 8
1776 April	163	Kieran Barnes - (Dolphin)	65 7 1 2
1776 April	5	Rever Nathan	37 18
1776 April	10	Knoc Willard	9 6
1776 April	27	- D. D. -	37 5
1776 April	65	Hemb James	10 10
1776 April	102	Angler Embrose	315 77
N. 2.	37	Kenan James	636 19

Figure 11. April 1776 claim submitted by Keais to the North Carolina Council of Safety (Image Courtesy of State Archives of North Carolina).

Figure 12. Extract of an order for Nathan Keais to ship large quantities of the public stores of tobacco aboard the brig *Dolphin* to St. Eustatius in exchange for munitions (Image Courtesy of State Archives of North Carolina).

In 1781, Robert Bignall of Edenton wrote to Alexander Martin, then Speaker of the North Carolina Senate, referencing Keais' role in collecting tobacco for shipment aboard vessels like *Nancy* through Ocracoke Inlet. Bignall noted that, "on the 7th [of] September, Governor Burke wrote me to impress all the Tobacco at this Place and Washington and wherever else I could discover any."⁵⁹ His letter reflects the urgency of provisioning during the American Revolution and Washington's role to assist on behalf of the state, which was seemingly facilitated by Keais. That same year, another letter by Bignall to Martin mentions Keais. Bignall wrote:

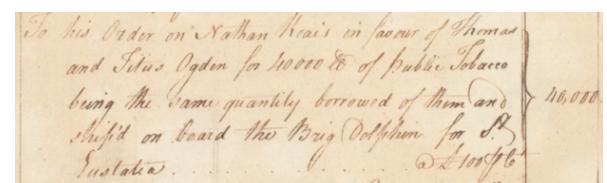
A considerable quantity of tobacco was purchased by Col. Robert Salter on this River, for the same Purpose. What became of it I know not. It is possible that Mr. Nathan Kears [sic], of Washington, can give you some account of it. I am uneasy for fear the Tobacco for the Arms and Powder should not be delivered agreeable to Promise, Boats and Hands to convey it down... On the 7th September, Governor Burke wrote me to impress all the Tobacco at this Place and

Washington and wherever else I could discover any."⁶⁰

Keais, by then, was authorized to sell all the public salt at New Bern warehouses (apart from one hundred bushels that was to be kept in storage). He was then ordered to buy tobacco for shipment out of Ocracoke Inlet on vessels bound for ports in the Dutch West Indies.⁶¹

Even after Keais was appointed as customs collector in 1784, he still was aiding the state with public stores. By November 1777, the General Assembly had set up public storehouses in places like Edenton, New Bern, Wilmington, and Halifax. Public stores were state-owned commodities stored in state warehouses across eastern North Carolina. They had also set up for the reception of provisions and other "necessaries" for the use of the army.⁶² Almost a decade after his 1778 militia discharge, Keais' name appears in a 1787 North Carolina Treasury Comptroller account:

Resolved, That His Excellency the Governor be requested to order Six of the Eighteen- and Six of the Twenty-four-pound Cannon Guns imported in the Ship *Holy Heart of Jesus*, from Edenton to Fort Johnston, for the defence of that place and.... That it appears to your Committee that there is about... hogshead of tobacco, belonging to the public and in the hands of Nathan Keais; that from the quantity of salt in the hands of Keais, your committee are of the opinion that the quantity of tobacco ought to be greater...⁶³



Another Keais document from North Carolina's Comptroller and Treasury Reports is a 1785 receipt for the storage of tobacco in the amount of £745.18.11, dated February 23, 1785 (the equivalent of \$127,000 today).⁶⁴ The Comptroller's office in Kingston (Kinston, N.C.) reported on October 13, 1787, that a valuable quantity of tobacco with Keais as consignee was shipped aboard the brig *Dolphin* to Saint Eustatius, a Dutch-controlled island in the West Indies (Figure 12).⁶⁵ The document references two shipments of tobacco, 40,000 pounds shipped aboard *Dolphin* and also, a smaller quantity of 17,517 lbs. shipped aboard the vessel *Betsey*.⁶⁶

These documents confirm Keais had transitioned into a trusted provincial official for the North Carolina interim government. Even prior to his 1778 militia discharge, he was working for the state's fledgling navy, in both provisions and armament procurement. As a natural continuance, Keais continued operating as a government provisioning agent during his first years as a district port customs collector. In these roles he also aided others, like John Gray and Thomas Blount, in supplying the Continental Army during the war effort.

There are several examples of Blount family business records from 1780-1787 that demonstrate the merchants' involvement in arms, ammunition, horses, and general militia provisioning. The first set of records in 1780 contains receipts to John Gray Blount for furnishing guns, horses, rum, port for use of militia marching southward under Gen. Richard Caswell. In a 1783 accounting to the comptroller, the Blounts received "twelve thousand pounds paid for militia sundries." Listed in other accounts from the same year, the Blount-owned schooners *Eliza* and *Trueblue*, as well as the sloop *Active*, also supplied cargoes of meat, turpentine, deer skins, pitch, tar, sweet potatoes, and rum.⁶⁷

The 1785 receipt for public store shipments mentioned earlier, confirmed Blount vessel *Betsey*'s role in Keais's provisioning network. That document, and others like it in N.C. Comptroller's and Treasury Reports, tie in directly to Keais' "tobacco for arms and powder" logistics. Other Port of Washington-based provisioning voyages by six Blount vessels are shown in Table 1, below. None of these would have been identified as incoming Port Bath clearances since they arrived clearing customs in other coastal ports. All these vessels were likely used in the network set up by

people like Keais and the Blounts to supply the Continental Army during the war.

Four years later in 1787, Monsieur dela Forest, consul general of France at New York, informed the Blounts that the state was indebted to the naval department of France for arms and ammunition supplied by government of Martinique, suggesting their involvement in procuring or at least paying for these arms.⁶⁸ Correspondence and other port records illustrate merchant vessels inbound from the Dutch West Indies and French West Indies were quietly funneling supplies into North Carolina colonial ports such as Port Bath, often under neutral flags to avoid British seizure. These arrivals from the West Indies not only sustained militia operations but also reveal the deep entanglement between Beaufort County's merchant networks and Caribbean supply routes.

Several Blount vessels – including *Nancy* in 1781 – also sailed inside the barrier islands of North Carolina's Outer Banks, navigating through Pamlico Sound and Albemarle Sound, then up the Chowan River to bring supplies to South Quay, Virginia. Thomas Blount at one time even maintained a residence at that port in the 1780s.⁶⁹ This route avoided British patrols off Cape Hatteras and allowed for discreet provisioning of militia near Norfolk, at the time Virginia's biggest seaport. From South Quay, weapons and provisions were transferred overland via wagon roads into southern Virginia and onward to Continental Army outposts.⁷⁰ These inland routes connected with supply depots near Halifax and Petersburg, V.A., reinforcing the broader war effort. The wagon road system was critical for moving Caribbean-supplied munitions from ports like Bath and Washington, to the benefit of coastal militia units or any regular army forces

Vessel Name	Destination	Date	Cargo / Notes	Source
<i>Polly</i>	Bath	August, 1784	Blount-owned; provisioning, correspondence.	Keith, <i>John Gray Blount Papers</i> , 2: 112.
<i>Trueblue</i>	Bath	1786	Blount-owned; militia provisioning.	Keith, <i>John Gray Blount Papers</i> , 2: 198.
<i>Active</i>	Washington	1787	Pitch, tar, sweet potatoes.	N.C. State Archives, Comptroller's Papers, Collection 193.28.
<i>Eliza</i>	Washington	1785	Pitch, tar, sweet potatoes.	N.C. State Archives, Treasury Papers, Collection 193.17
<i>Betsey</i>	Bath	1785	Tobacco shipment (17,517 lbs) to exchange for Guns and Ammunition.	N.C. State Archives, Comptroller's Papers, Collection 193.22.
<i>Nancy</i>	Ocracoke	1781	Blount-linked; provisioning route.	Saunders, <i>Colonial Records of North Carolina</i> , 17: 1032.

Table 1. Six examples of Blount vessel arrivals in the Port Bath district 1781-1787 (from sources other than Port Bath customs clearances).

operating deeper inland.

The above examples tie the whole supply chain together that Keais and other local leaders were aware of and facilitated – from West Indian islands through Ocracoke Inlet, over the sounds and rivers to either Washington, New Bern, Edenton, or sailing perilously inside the barrier islands of the Outer Banks to the Chowan River and unloading at ports in southern Virginia. Through this network, provisions and arms found their way to the Continental Army.⁷¹ These combined waterway and overland routes connected with Patriot supply depots and provided critical supplies that augmented the broader war effort.

Establishment and Growth of Washington

In 1776, the new town of Washington was established at the juncture of the Tar and Pamlico Rivers from a small group of homes and wharves formerly known as “Forks of the Tar” in Beaufort County.⁷² The new town and port activity grew and thrived due to its location at the head of navigable waters, located where the Pamlico River switches to the Tar River and deep draft vessels could no longer safely sail. Thus, it was a perfect “entrepôt” ninety miles inland, ideal for trans-shipment of both passengers and cargo up and down river.⁷³ The entrepôt served established and growing communities along the entire waterway from Ocracoke to Tarboro.

By the end of the American Revolution, large wharves had been constructed in Washington to accommodate around twenty trading vessels.⁷⁴ After the American Revolution, three main factors contributed to the growth of the early the port of Washington. In 1782 Washington was incorporated as a town by the Assembly at Hillsborough, some ten years after its first petition.⁷⁵ Nathan Keais, Richard Blackledge, John Bonner, James Bonner, Jr., and John Gray Blount became Washington’s first town commissioners to lay out and name streets.⁷⁶ For the growing interior communities, Keais, together with merchant and land speculator John Gray Blount, petitioned to build a new county courthouse and move the county seat upriver from Bath to Washington (Figure 13).⁷⁷ The General Assembly approved this legislation in 1785, and in turn, the pair were charged with raising construction funds.

This was good news for Washington, but not for Bath. In a 300th anniversary commemorative book published for the town of Bath in 2005, the author noted that, “the meteoric rise of Washington as a port and county seat relegated Bath to the small community that it was destined to remain.”⁷⁸ On December 6, 1785,

state legislation passed to move the Beaufort court sessions temporarily into a school in the town of Washington. Nathan Keais, Richard Blackledge, and Joseph Palmer were charged as commissioners to raise funds and to build the new courthouse.⁷⁹ The courthouse they built has survived and today is referred to as the second oldest Early Republic courthouse in the state of North Carolina.⁸⁰



Figure 13. The Beaufort County Courthouse, c. 1908, on the corner of Market and Second Street (Image Courtesy of East Carolina University Digital Collections).

A second factor that contributed to the town’s growth during its Early Republic period was improvement in overland transportation, alternatives to Pamlico and Neuse River ferries. Merchant William Attmore in his 1787 journal described the challenges of transportation both by land and sail in eastern North Carolina, where he hoped to collect debts for his Philadelphia firm Attmore and Kaigher.⁸¹ For the port at Washington, improvements were made by adding a new log and sand-filled road, built through Tar-Pamlico swamp outside Washington in 1783 by James Bonner.⁸² Prior to the new log and wooden bridges, travelers between Virginia and South Carolina in poor weather would bypass the old Post Road through Bath, taking a longer and more westerly route to avoid the three-mile ferry road.⁸³

The third factor was the continued importance of the Port of Washington, despite a slowdown during the first year of the War, as mentioned earlier. During the period 1784-1790 as trade opportunities increased, Beaufort County merchants were shipping and receiving more goods and operating additional stores along

the Tar-Pamlico, all supporting growth towards the interior of the state. For example, in this era the Blount family held stores at Ocracoke, Washington, Piney Grove near Greenville (formerly Martinborough), and Tarboro.⁸³ Thomas Blount's home was in Tarboro, and he focused on the upriver business, while John Gray Blount's home and base of operations was in Washington.⁸⁴ The town of Washington continued to grow, and therefore a revised larger town plan was drawn up doubling the size of the original 60 lots first sold (Figure 14).⁸⁵

By 1790, Beaufort County's population more than tripled from 1723, growing from 1200 to 5462 (3701 White/1761 Black)⁸⁶ and Washington had grown since its founding from only a few houses and businesses to become a thriving port. In comparison, the population of nearby Edgecombe County, reached 10,255, which included 3,000 enslaved persons.⁸⁷ This high enslaved population was the lynchpin for preparing agricultural export goods that were shipped downriver to ports like Washington. Washington benefited as demand for upriver goods and river transport increased with the demand for improvements in water transportation.⁸⁸

Few merchants had a larger share in determining the course of North Carolina from 1783 to

1800 than the Blount family merchants.⁸⁹ At the end of the American Revolution in 1783, three Blount brothers John Gray, Thomas, and William formed the company “John Gray and Thomas Blount, Merchants.” John Gray was the senior partner, and Thomas operated a branch and store in upriver Edgecombe County. William, the silent partner, lived first in New Bern, then Piney Grove (between Greenville and New Bern), and eventually moved to Tennessee where he became territorial governor of Tennessee (1790–96) and later one of the state’s first two U.S. senators (1796–97). John Gray Blount was also in partnership with “Governor” James Wallace at Shell Castle Island at Ocracoke Inlet, where they maintained warehouses, wharves, lighters, a tavern, dwelling house, and notary public’s office.⁹⁰

Surviving port clearance records and Blount correspondence confirm that their vessels tended to follow fixed routes between a limited number of ports, whether on the Atlantic seaboard, West Indies, or Europe.⁹¹ Correspondence also confirms the Blount brothers used “repeat” trusted mercantile partners and sought current commodity market pricing from trusted captains about port markets.⁹² The Blounts and their network of agents seemed to exemplify “sophisticated commerce practices... as part

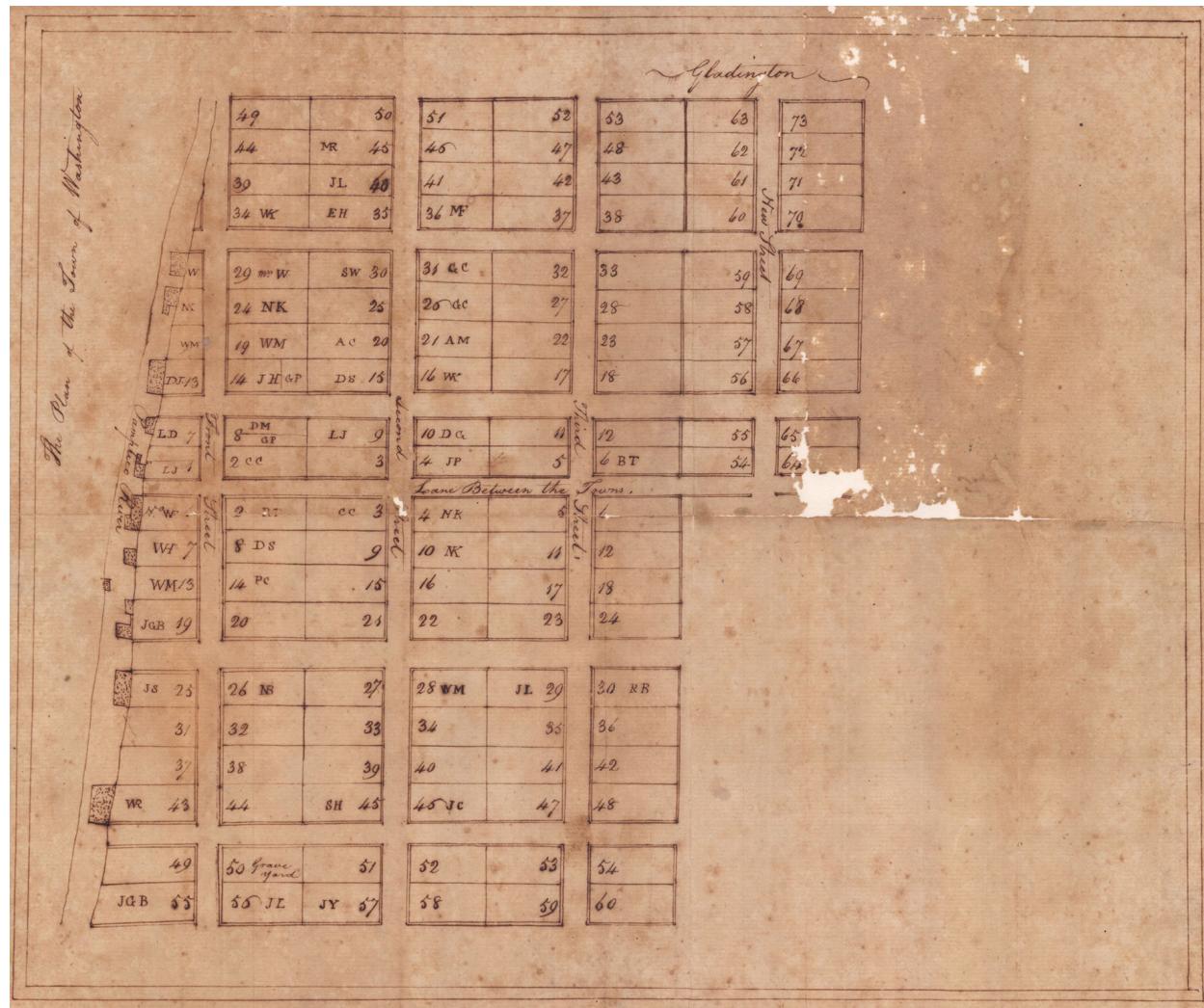


Figure 14. The 1794 Town Plan of Washington, North Carolina, drawn by Jonathan Price (Map Courtesy of University of North Carolina Digital Collections Repository).

of the larger Atlantic economy of its time... supporting colonial economic development.”⁹³

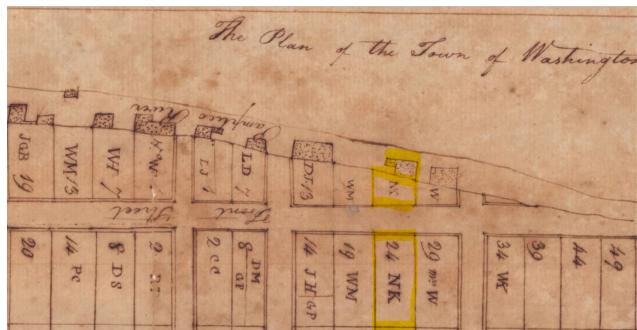
Keais Settles in Washington

Captain Nathan Keais was a part of this coastal trade network and in 1782 bought Lot #24 on Front Street of Washington (today Main Street) for £85 specie (i.e., hard money, and not proclamation money equivalents). Lot #24 was his most expensive lot purchase – likely because it was a large lot with river frontage. Twelve years after his purchase, a 1794 town plan showed a L-shaped dock or wharf (Figure 15).⁹⁴

Figure 17 (top right). 1789 Beaufort County Tax List Washington for Four lots 4,10, 28, 24.

Figure 18 (bottom right): 1789 Beaufort County Tax List (Unimproved Land) for Nathan Keais.

Figure 15. Detail of the 1794 Town Plan of Washington showing Keais' lot highlighted (Map Courtesy of University of North Carolina Digital Collections Repository,



In 1785 Keais paid tax on 1,000 acres in addition to owning a total of five town lots in Washington. Keais' five Washington town lots were valued as follows: Lots #24 £370, #4 £250, #19 £10, #28 £60, #36 £20-, totaling £710 tax value (Figure 16).⁹⁵ Both the 1789 county tax list and 1790 census, respectively, showed Keais had by then sold one lot, but retained ownership over lots 4, 10, 24, 28 (Figure 17). A portion of the farmland owned by Keais was located between Washington and Bath on the Pamlico's north shore. Keais declared that one free person and three enslaved people resided on his acreage. However, in a 1789 unimproved land tax list, Keais was shown as owning 2,000 acres of unimproved land, which indicates that he had doubled his farm acreage by that time (Figure 18). He also declared two head of households, two young men, three females, two free men and six enslaved that showed an increase in the numbers of both his free and his enslaved workforce.

Figure 16. 1785 Beaufort County Tax List for Five Lots 324, 4, 10, 28, 36.

Nathan Keais	1 Acre 24	370	£
	120 4	250	
	120 10	10	710
	120 28	60	

Keais John	37	100	£
Keais James	43	140	£
K			
Keais Nathan	4	200	£
dillo	10	30	£
dillo	28	20	£
dillo	24	130	£
Keais John	34	100	£
L			
Lathem John	5	60	£

Keais K. Philip	220	1	3
Keais Willoughby	1000	1	3
Keais Nathan	2000	1	6
Keais John.	1400	1	15
Keel James.	1268	1	—
Larin L. Hitten	1000	1	2

Keais in the Colonial Customs House and District Port Office Years

“Mr. Nathan Keais has been very assiduous in the discharge of his duty as Collector at Washington... he has conducted himself with great propriety and attention.” - Letter to Gov, Richard Caswell, April 22, 1786.⁹⁶

Captain Nathan Keais was a part of this coastal trade network and was officially appointed as the port customs collector for Port Bath in on June 4, 1784, by Governor Alexander Martin.⁹⁷ This customs district stretched from Ocracoke Inlet, across the Pamlico Sound, and up the Pamlico and Tar Rivers. After Washington grew to prominence in the decade after the American Revolution and the bulk of trade shifted, President George Washington appointed Keais to serve as customs collector at the Port of Washington post in 1790.⁹⁸

When a ship arrived at port, it anchored in the harbor if there was no room at wharf, which cost less for the captain. The customs officer boarded to review ship's registry papers, review details about vessel, cargo, and crew. Then the collector assessed duties payable, based on ship tonnage (for example, a duty may be placed at 3 pence per ton), with different rates for foreign vessels. The naval officer also inspected the bill of lading and cargo, then recorded quantities of goods and merchandise on board. Any maritime infractions were reported to relevant authorities. For example, captured ships of enemy nations brought in as prizes were referred to admiralty

court, while any civil or criminal infractions were referred to local law enforcement and local courts. An example of Keais' accounting paperwork from his ledger book is shown in Figure 19 and 20. Keais' first six quarters of Port Bath customs paperwork, beginning July 1784 to December 1786, can be found online.⁹⁹

Keais and the port commissioners were also responsible for hiring the Ocracoke pilots and paying for navigational aids, such as channel markers and beacons near places like Ocracoke Inlet, Beacon Island, or Portsmouth Island. This aspect of Keais' duties sometimes going outside the Tar-Pamlico district is revealed in an August 29, 1791 letter to Alexander Hamilton:

"Inclosed is a Copy of John Braggs & Stephen Tinkers Bond, taken in Consequence of a Contract for Staking out the Channel of news River leading to New Bern. I have also Contracted with John Payne for Staking out the Channel leading to Edenton for Fifty dollars...."¹⁰⁰

Keais, as the district officer handling duties collected from port clearances, was required to also be bonded. His bond document above was signed by following three Washington merchants and leaders: John Kennedy, Jonathan Loomis, and John Gray Blount, with his son, William, serving as the witness. Keais also supervised the naval officer, as well as any dockhands, stevedores, or pilots. Naval officers were required to submit reports to Keais that described each vessel rig type, review their bills of lading, and list the contents of their cargo for both inbound and outbound vessels.¹⁰¹ A typeset form was in use from 1780 to 1786 for the Port Bath naval officers to administer the ship owner's oath, which attested to the veracity of ship tonnage, number of crew, and name of the ship's owner. One faded copy has survived, with William Brown's name written faintly at the bottom (Figure 21).

As busy as Keais must have been with port duties and family after his 1784 appointment to the Port Bath customs house, he still found time on the river to make personal deliveries

for his friends, the Blount brothers. On at least one occasion, in 1786 Captain Keais made a December delivery aboard the *Tarborough Packet* sailing from Tarboro to Washington with a load of tobacco.¹⁰² As if a member of the Blount family, he also brought along a barrel of flour for Blount's wife as well as a care package. The personal package was sent from a Mrs. Harvey to Mrs. Blount that contained five yards of calico, a colander, celery, and assorted garden herbs.¹⁰³

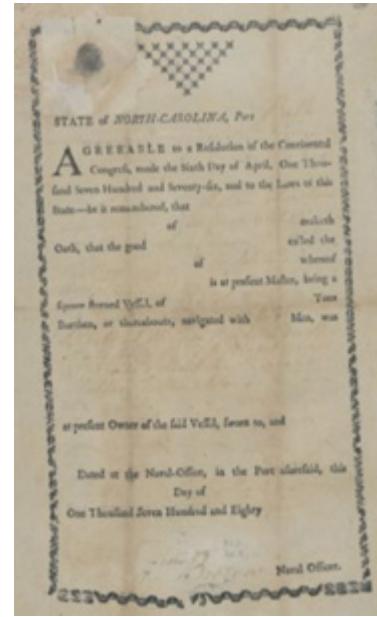


Figure 21: Shipowner's oath typeset form used by colonial port naval officers (Image courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina).

There were two notable occurrences during the terms Keais served as port district supervisor. First was the capture and sale of enemy vessels by privateers. Since Washington was established during the American Revolution, for a time its port, like others, joined in privateering.¹⁰⁴ Leading merchants with means would outfit their ships with guns and arms to cruise the Atlantic and prey on the British shipping. When the state's interim government was short of funds, it even turned its fledgling navy vessels like *King Tammany* into a privateer in hopes of bringing in resources.¹⁰⁵

After the war ended, North Carolina port records for Port Bath from 1785 to 1787 hold multiple mentions of vessel prizes captured and brought into Keais' customs district by privateers. For example, on April 2, 1787, one entry noted "1 brig" and another said, "sloop a

Account of Duties Received By Nathaniel Keais			
Time of Day	Names of Vessel	Master Name	Port of Lading
July 1	Schooner Betty	David Loughley	Charleston
12	Schooner Betty	Richard Parker	Portsmouth
12	Sloop Betty	Richard Ging	Bermuda
11	Sloop Betty	Benjamin Benham	Canada
22	Sloop Betty	Thomas Vesey	St. Thomas
22	Schooner Betty	Hugh Mansell	Charleston
22	Schooner Betty	Hugh Mansell	Charleston
22	Schooner Betty	Richard Parker	Portsmouth
22	Schooner Betty	Richard Parker	Portsmouth

N. Keais Collector of Port Bath				
Importer	Am't of Dut	Bonds	Money Rec'd	Am't of Dut
David Loughley	2 3 3	—	2 3 3	
John Parker, R. Parker	5 4 10	—	5 4 10	
Richard Stowe	—	1 2 20 00 11	—	
National Rose	19 14 9	3		
Richard Blackton	3 0 0	7 40	64 10 2	
Richard Blackton	3 7 12 2	7 40	64 10 2	
James Betty	4 1 0 0	—	41 16 1	
James Betty	12 1 2	—	12 1 2	

Figure 19 (left) and 20 (right). Inbound Port Bath account of duties collected by Keais in the Port of Lading Account of Duties Ledger, July 1784 (Image Courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina).

prize.”¹⁰⁶ Confiscated cargo from these ships were inventoried and sold. For example, one such sale included 25,000 shingles, 2,000 staves, 1,500-inch boards, 200 staves, and 300 head of livestock.¹⁰⁷

Second was the construction of *Diligence*, one of the nation’s first revenue cutters patrolling the Atlantic coast looking for smugglers. The United States Coast Guard had its beginnings in 1790 as the United States Revenue Marine. Alexander Hamilton, Treasury Secretary under President George Washington, proposed to Congress that a fleet of ten cutters be built and manned to counter the threat posed to the revenue by smuggling.¹⁰⁸ During his tour of North Carolina in 1790, Keais took the initiative to meet with Washington’s retinue. Soon thereafter, correspondence began between Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and Nathan Keais.¹⁰⁹ After Congress approved funding to build the ten revenue cutters Hamilton had proposed, Keais was then sent the plans to build one of the ten vessels.

Hamilton was able to buy materials for Keais to construct the cutter, such as live oak, red cedar, and pitch pine materials from Savannah, cannon balls, cordage, blocks, and sailcloth. *Diligence* was completed on the Washington waterfront and moved to New Bern in February 1792 where it was fitted out and commissioned in late June-July.¹¹⁰ Due to Keais’ action, *Diligence* was built in a Washington shipyard to patrol waters off North Carolina.¹¹¹

Conclusion

Capt. Nathan Keais will be remembered for being a Patriot, enlisting in the 2nd North Carolina Regiment in September 1775,

and serving as a company captain in the American Revolution. Keais was involved as a government agent that dealt in the procurement of arms and ammunitions for the wartime and Federal period military along with the shipment of salt and tobacco both during the war and afterwards. He was one of four Beaufort County delegates who attended the 1788 Convention in Hillsborough, N.C., where he voted to ratify the newly drafted U.S. Constitution. Following ratification, President George Washington in 1790 appointed Keais Inspector of the Revenue and Customs Collector for the new Port of Washington. Another key accomplishment was his 1791 appointment by Alexander Hamilton to supervise construction of one of the nation’s first ten revenue cutters, *Diligence*, built in one of the Washington waterfront’s early colonial shipyards.

On October 12, 1795, Keais died at age fifty-four. Keais, a devoted father, left instructions to “maintain and school the children until the youngest shall arrive at age 14.”¹¹² The sole household artifact from Keais’ family years can be found today in the Winston Salem NC’s Museum of Southern Decorative Arts: their sampler collection contains a nautical-themed sampler of silk on linen, completed May 1793 with a sailing ship and a mermaid, stitched by Sally Keais.¹¹³

He was interred with his wife Barbara Low along with other veterans from the American Revolution in the St. Peter’s Episcopal Church graveyard in Washington, N.C. Edmund Hoyt Harding, Keais’ great-great grandson, was recently involved with the successful restoration of historic houses in the state’s first town, Bath, where Nathan Keais once lived and worked.



Figure 22. Silk on linen sampler stitched by Sally Keais, circa May 1793 (Image Courtesy Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts).

As the Town of Washington approaches its 250th anniversary (1776-2026), the contributions of Capt. Nathan Keais – patriot, civic leader, and district port official – along with the contributions of his friends the Blount brothers, who shipped both provisions and munitions to the continental army, will together remain an entwined and integral part of the early history of Washington, North Carolina and the birth of the new Republic.

Endnotes

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3. U.S. Congress. *U.S. Statutes at Large, Volume 8. Treaties Between the United States and Foreign Nations -1845*. United States, - 1845, 1789. Periodical. <https://www.loc.gov/item/llsl-v8/>; On September 3, 1783, the United States and Great Britain signed the Treaty of Paris, formally ending the Revolutionary War.
4. John Gray Blount (1752–1833) Papers, 1706–1900. North Carolina Digital Collections, State Archives of North Carolina and State Library of North Carolina. Accessed August 4, 2025 <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/john-gray-blount-1752-1833-papers-1706-1900/372318>; hereafter, Blount Papers.
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6. "Rhode Island, Marriages, 1724-1916," FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:F8K1-L3V>; January 22, 2020), Nathan Keas, 1769; One of his paternal forebears, Thaddeus Riddan, emigrated to New England in the 1650's from Ireland.
7. Ibid.
8. Alice Barnwell Keith, ed., *The John Gray Blount Papers*, 4 vols. (Raleigh, N.C.: State Department of Archives and History), 1952, 1: 433; *Tarborough Packet* ran once a week between Washington and Tarboro.
9. North Carolina Underwater Archaeology Branch, "Port Records, 1700-1800," Treasurer and Comptroller's Papers MARS ID 13, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, N.C. Accessed August 4, 2025. <https://archaeology.ncdcr.gov/programs/uab/education/portrecords>
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17. Norris, Allen H., and John Oden III, eds., *Beaufort County Deed Book I, 1696-1729* (The Beaufort Genealogical Society: Washington, N.C.), 2003, 112.
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22. "Journal of a French Traveller in the Colonies, 1765, I." *The American Historical Review* 26, no. 4 (July 1921): 735.
23. Ibid., 731.
24. "Ocracoke Inlet in 1775 was the only channel to the ocean (except for very small vessels) from the entire region of Albemarle, Currituck, and Pamlico Sounds and their tributaries" in Delaney, Norman C. "The Outer Banks of North Carolina During the Revolutionary War." *The North Carolina Historical Review* 36, no. 1 (January 1959): 11.
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26. Stevenson, George, revised by SLNC Government and Heritage, "Price, Jonathan." NCpedia. Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage, January 2023. <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/price-jonathan>. Accessed August 4, 2025; Corbitt, D. L., "A description of Occacock inlet." *The North Carolina Historical Review* 3, no. 4 (October 1926): 624-634; This eight-page portolano was originally printed in New Bern by Francois X. Martin and included Price's chart to illustrate his sailing directions.
27. Corbitt, "A description of Occacock inlet," 625.
28. Ibid., 633.
29. Rees, John U. "Employed in Carrying Cloathing & Provisions: Wagons and Watercraft during the War for Independence." *The Continental Line* 1, no.1 (1999), 3. <https://www.continentalline.org/CL/article990202/>.
30. William L. Saunders, ed., *The Colonial Records of North Carolina*, 10 vols. (Raleigh, N.C.: State of North Carolina, 1886-1890), 10: 206.
31. Saunders, *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, 10: 273, 275; Salter was given 500 pounds p.m to purchase provisions for the New Bern district troops, which included Keais' Beaufort County company, estimated at 50 men.
32. "2nd North Carolina Continental," NCGenWeb. <https://www.ncgenweb.us/ncstate/amrev/2ndContinental.htm>. Accessed August 4, 2025; Data originally found in Walter Clark, ed., *The State Records of North Carolina*, 16 vols. (11–26) (Raleigh: State of North Carolina, 1895–1906), 16; Captain Nathaniel Keais was commissioned on September 1, 1775, and retired on June 1, 1778.
33. Saunders, *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, 10: 499-500; Robert Howe went on to become the only Major General in the Continental Army from North Carolina.
34. "Edward Vail" <https://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/edward-vail-1717-1777>.
35. "Pension application of Phinehas (Phineas) Latham S41752," Southern Campaigns Revolutionary War Pension Statements & Rosters. <https://revwarapps.org/>. Accessed October 20, 2025.
36. Ibid., "Pension application of James Masterson W8422."
37. Ibid., "Pension application of William Goff S6916."
38. Ibid., "Pension application of William Woolard S7882."
39. Ibid., "Pension application of Jesse Windley S7882."
40. Ibid., "Pension application of Isaac Buck 6694."
41. Ibid., "Pension application of James Singleton S7523."
42. Ibid., "Phinehas (Phineas) Latham S41752."

43. Ibid., "James Masterson W8422."

44. American Battlefield Trust. "Great Bridge." Battle Facts. Accessed October 17, 2025. <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/revolutionary-war/battles/great-bridge>

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46. Congressional records of April 1776 Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789, Vol. 4.

47. Southern Campaigns, "James Singleton S7523."

48. Ibid., "James Singleton S7523"; Major General Charles Lee arrived in Charleston with 2,000 Continental soldiers from Virginia and North Carolina, including Keais' men.

49. American Battlefield Trust. "Charleston: Siege of Charleston." Battle Facts. Accessed October 17, 2025. <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/revolutionary-war/battles/charleston>; the British fleet included Bristol and Experiment, mounting fifty guns apiece; *Active* and *Solebay*, each with twenty-eight guns; three frigates – *Actaeon*, *Sphinx*, and *Syren*.

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52. "These islands offered alternative markets for American goods like flour, pork, and naval stores, and helped sustain Atlantic trade despite British limitations," in McCusker and Menard, *The Economy of British America*, 368–370.

53. April 1776 Claims to the North Carolina Council of Safety, Treasurer and Comptrollers Reports, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, N.C.

54. Clark, *State Records of North Carolina*, 12: 398.

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56. Still Jr., William N., *The North Carolina Navy of the American Revolution* (Raleigh, N.C.: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Division of Archives and History, 1976), 85.

57. Saunders, *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, 10: 827.

58. Ibid., 829.

59. Saunders, *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, 17: 1032.

60. Clark, *State Records of North Carolina*, 22: 598.

61. Ibid., 598–600; "There is a considerable quantity of salt in the hands of Mr. Nathan Keais at Washington, and about sixty thousand pounds of tobacco, which was to be exchanged for arms..."

62. Clark, *State Records of North Carolina*, 22: 45–48.

63. Saunders, *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, 10: 830.

64. Receipt no. 273 from Richard Caswell, Comptroller, February 23, 1785, Keais Army Record, Treasurer and Comptrollers Reports, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, N.C.

65. Army Record, October 13, 1787, Treasurer and Comptrollers Reports, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, N.C., 78.

66. Ibid., this tobacco shipment was valued at £100.6.0 each.

67. Blount Papers, 33.

68. Saunders, *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, 21: 473.

69. Ibid., 17: 1032; Several letters refer to the Blount family's use of South Quay, for example in Ibid., 13: 330.

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72. Hill, Michael R. *Historical Research Report: The Waterfront Area of Washington, North Carolina*. 1984. Microfilm. Historical Research Reports, Series 2, no. 34. Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 2- 3; in 1758 James Bonner sold a large river-front lot west of later Market Street to Aquila Sugg, an Edgecombe County merchant. Sugg's wharf, warehouses and other buildings represented the beginnings of the later town; Midgett, Ray. Quoted in "History, Stories, Waterfront Define 'Original Washington'" *WRAL*, February 20, 2019. Accessed October 19, 2025 https://www.washingtonnc.gov/residents/community_information/history.php

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75. Ibid., 524.

76. Ibid., 3-9.

77. Watson, Alan D. *Bath: The First Town in North Carolina* (Raleigh, N.C.: North Carolina Office of Archives and History, 2005), 110.

78. Clark, *State Records of North Carolina*, 24: 752.

79. National Archives Historic Nomination Form pdf. [North Carolina SP Beaufort County Courthouse](https://www.archives.gov/submit-a-nomination/national-historic-landmark)

80. Attmore, William. *Journal of William Attmore, 1787*, ed. Charles L. Coon (Raleigh, N.C.: Edwards and Broughton Printing Company, 1929).

81. General Assembly Session Records, Apr–May 1783, Box 2, 66.8.30.44, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, N.C.; on April 23, a House bill allowed John Bonner and James Bonner Jr. to construct a road through a swamp in Beaufort County.

82. Loy and Worthy, *History of Washington and the Pamlico*, 3-4; The estimated distance from Petersburg, Virginia to Charleston South Carolina through Edenton and Washington, North Carolina was about 504 miles. The route through Halifax and Greenville was 460 miles.

83. Keith, *John Gray Blount Papers*, 2: xxii-xxiii.

84. Ibid.

85. Plan of Town of Washington NC. Manuscript. Map shows cemetery, town lots by number, and the initials of some of the landowners. [The plan of the town of Washington :: North Carolina Maps](https://www.ncdcr.gov/nc-state-archives/plan-town-washington-north-carolina-maps). NC State Archives Call number MC.195.w 317.1794, MARS ID 3.2.1 138.2.

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Thanks to Former Board Members!

We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to several individuals who previously served on our executive board for many years. While serving on our board, these members provided vital assistance in making the Council what it is today, and we would like to recognize them here:

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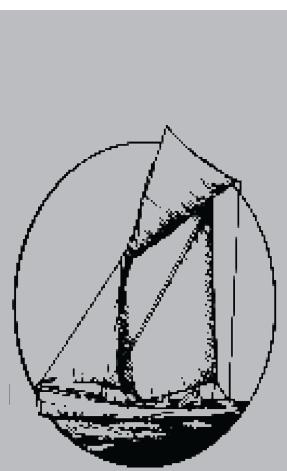
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Thank you for your passionate stewardship of North Carolina's maritime heritage!

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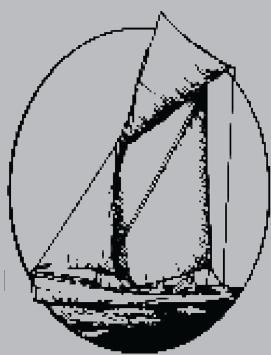
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Style Appendix: Resources for Bias-Free Writing

Please note that the conversations we are having now about bias-free writing will continue to change and develop over time. Our standards and best practices must continue to change and develop as well to ensure our language does not cause harm to others. Please refer back to these sources regularly to incorporate any new changes, and continue to develop sources of your own to inform your writing.

General

- National Park Service, Interpretive Development Program, Identifying and Removing Bias, <https://www.nps.gov/idp/interp/201/identbias.htm>

Ethnicity, Race, and Nationality

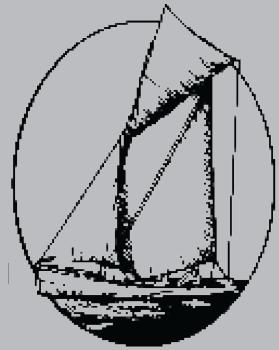
- Asian American Journalists Association, Guide to Covering Asian America, <https://www.ajaja.org/ajajahandbook>
- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Guidelines for Ethical Publishing, <https://aiatsis.gov.au/aboriginal-studies-press/getting-published/ethical-publishing-guidelines>
- P. Gabrielle Foreman, et al, "Writing about Slavery/Teaching About Slavery: This Might Help," community-sourced document, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1A4TEdDgYsIX-hlKezLodMIM71My3KTN0zxRv0IQTOQs/edit>
- National Association of Black Journalists, Style Guide, <https://www.nabj.org/page/styleguide>
- Native American Journalists Association, Guide on Terminology, https://najanewsroom.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/NAJA_Reportng_and_Indigenous_Terminology_Guide.pdf

Gender, Sex, and Sexuality

- American Philosophical Association, Guidelines for Non-Sexist Use of Language, <https://www.apaonline.org/page/nonsexist>
- NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists, Stylebook Supplement on LGBTQ Terminology, <https://www.nlgja.org/stylebook/terminology/>
- Trans Journalists Association, Style Guide, <https://transjournalists.org/style-guide/>

More resources and discussion articles on Ability and Disability, Age, Religion, and more, may be found at the Conscious Style Guide: <https://consciousstyleguide.com>.

If there are resources you'd like to see included in this list, please contact the *Tributaries* editor, Jeremy Borrelli, at borrellij16@ecu.edu.



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Student Paper Prize

Student participation in the advancement of North Carolina maritime history is strongly encouraged by the North Carolina Maritime History Council. The Annual North Carolina Maritime History Council Conference regularly features students presenting papers related to undergraduate and graduate research on maritime historical and archaeological topics. To recognize this engagement, the Council awards a Student Paper Prize for the student who gives an insightful, well-researched, and well-presented paper at the Annual Conference. Awardees are given a one-year membership to the NCMHC, preference for publication in *Tributaries*, and receive free registration for the following year's conference.

In 2024, the Student Paper Prize was awarded to Addison Costa, from the Program in Maritime Studies, East Carolina University who presented a paper titled: *“Archaeological Remains of the Galley General Arnold.”*

Abstract:

Months before the end of the Revolutionary War, the town of Edenton, N.C. was attacked by Michael Quinn, a Continental Army Officer turned traitor. Quinn approached Edenton by floating a large galley he named General Arnold through the marsh. He attacked the town, burning plantations and warehouses and absconding with a merchant sloop. Seeking justice for Quinn's raid, the residents of Edenton outfitted a small fleet of privately owned boats and pursued Quinn. Capturing Quinn, the town took possession of his galley and used it as a communal storehouse until it became derelict and was burned. Located 300 meters from Edenton's waterfront, “John's Island Wreck” has undergone archaeological assessment twice before. It was investigated to ascertain if it could be identified as the Holy Heart of Jesus, a gun smuggling ship during the American Revolution. Using modern technology and historical databases, ECU's Maritime Studies 2024 field school observed that the archaeological remains of “John's Island Wreck” more closely resemble those of a galley as opposed to a ship. Artifacts found on site date to the 18th century and are indicative of warehouse items. Together, the present material culture and structural similarities make the site a strong candidate for the remains of the infamous General Arnold.

Congratulations to Addison on a job well done!