

The '80s In Brunswick County

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Diana came ashore at low tide with winds from the land side and without the storm surge usually associated with Category-IV hurricanes. Ms. Usher and Pope provided award-winning coverage of the storm for the *Beacon*.

Meanwhile, the county was preoccupied throughout most of the year with completion of its new water system. Also, Ocean Isle townspeople approved the sale of \$2.8 million in general obligation bonds for the first municipal sewer system among the county's island communities.

Construction also began simultaneously on high-rise bridges at Ocean Isle and Holden Beach, to replace the islands' one-lane drawbridges.

1985

At Sunset Beach, where the ongoing debate began over whether or not to build a high-rise bridge, traffic was disrupted several times due to problems with the island's pontoon swing bridge. At one point, the bridge was closed for about a week, after it was rammed by a barge and a 50-foot section of the bridge was destroyed.

1985 was in several respects the high-water mark of the decade for the county. Figures released in March 1985 by the county Planning Department and the N.C. Department of Commerce showed that Brunswick County was the fastest-growing county in the state in terms of population and housing growth.

Several other plot lines that would enthrall the county in later years also took shape in 1985. One was institution of a county Building Inspections Department, as mandated by the state. Also, voters passed an \$8 million bond referendum to finance the current building program at Brunswick Community College's main campus at Supply.

The Odell Williamson Bridge opened at Ocean Isle Beach in November 1985, followed several months later by completion of the Holden Beach high-rise span. Also at Holden Beach, individuals protested the closing of Ocean View Boulevard West to the public and eventually initiated legal action to regain public access via the road to the island's west end through Holden Beach West subdivision. The long-running lawsuit will be reviewed in 1990 by the N.C. Supreme Court.

But perhaps the most important happening in 1985 came in July, when then 21-year-old Shallotte resident Allen Dale Brooks was arrested by local authorities in what county narcotics agent David Crocker called "the largest undercover cocaine bust in the history of Brunswick County."

Crocker told the *Beacon*, "Lately we've been seeing more and more cocaine on the streets." Brooks, who has yet to be sentenced on guilty pleas stemming from that 1985 bust, became the focal point of an investigation that in two years would again turn the county upside down, as local and state law enforcement agencies hunted down not marijuana smugglers but cocaine traffickers.

1986

Keeping pace with a decade of tremendous growth made the news in Brunswick County during 1986. Disputes over access to beaches and the county's efforts to extend water service were the top newsmakers during the year, observed *Beacon* writer Etta Smith.

Lawsuits over the Holden Beach West dispute and ownership of an oceanfront lot—Lot 1-A—at Sunset Beach formally entered the courts. In the Lot 1-A suit, which also remains to be resolved, the Sunset Beach Taxpayers Association claimed the lot as a public right-of-way for beach access.

County commissioners set up a \$1.5 million revolving fund to extend water lines in developed sections of the county through a new special assessment district program.

The Brunswick County Utility Operations Board was formed to oversee the SAD program. Also, the 24 million gallon per day Northwest Treatment Plant at Malmo was completed.

And in one of the worst fires in Shallotte's history, a pre-dawn blaze in September gutted seven stores at Lewis Shopping Center. Damages were estimated at \$2.45 million.

1987

On the very first day of 1987, Brunswick County residents got a taste of the year to come, in the form of a winter storm that brought change through turbulence.

The "January 1 storm," combined with astronomical factors, lashed the county's east-to-west aligned beaches with gale-force winds and unusually high tides, and caused island flooding and dune damage.

That summer, a 5,000-foot column of smoke from controlled burning and stagnant air was measured over much of western Brunswick County. The large stable air mass and smoldering organic matter combined to cause limited visibility on local highways and respiratory problems for some residents.

The worst nautical disaster of the decade happened in October. The five-man crew and 56 passengers of the Calabash-based charter boat *Capt. Jim* were forced to abandon ship about five miles east of Little River Inlet, when the vessel caught fire and sank. All were rescued, and no one was seriously injured.

The biggest news of the year, however, again revolved around drug trafficking. The 13th District Attorney's office used the state's first investigative grand jury to indict 32 defendants for cocaine trafficking, including two public figures—former Holden Beach Commissioner James D. Griffin Jr. and Holden Beach Board of Adjustments member Virgil Roberts.

While he was not indicted by the special grand jury, Clerk of Court Greg Bellamy also was implicated in drug involvement linked to the same investigation and was forced to resign in August 1987, after he pleaded guilty to a cocaine possession charge.

1988

1988 was a year of continued growth in Brunswick County, the state's second fastest-growing county. However, the year was marked by natural and manmade "tides" that respectively swept over positive and negative aspects of Brunswick County life.

The year opened with the county's shellfishermen battling a natural "red tide" which threatened the livelihoods they derived from once abundant coastal waters. In August, all of Lockwood Folly River was shut down because of manmade pollution unrelated to the red tide. As a result, the local river preservation group, Save Our Shellfish, formed.

In the spring, "Operation White Tide" impacted another of the county's lucrative "industries"—the drug trade—as 48 more cocaine and marijuana traffickers were indicted, including former Ocean Isle Beach Commissioner DeCarol Williamson.

In the political arena, Republicans swept the year's three county commission races and in December gave the board the first GOP majority since the mid-1970s. The turnover was attributed to a general distrust of local government, although the decade-long influx of Northern retirees with Republican leanings also apparently influenced the change.

Brunswick County had fallen behind Dare County as the fastest-growing county in North Carolina. However, Brunswick still led the state in at least two categories: environmental health site evaluations, due to increasing development; and the number of municipalities in the county. Varnantown and Sandy Creek became the county's 15th and 16th towns. Leland became the 17th town in 1989.



LEWIS SHOPPING CENTER of Shallotte sustained almost \$2.5 million worth of damage in a September 1986 fire.

1989

In Brunswick County—one of the state's fastest-growing counties—the watchword is change. But with change often comes unrest, and with growth come growing pains, stated the *Beacon* in a timeworn but fitting epitaph for the 1980s.

Of course, the major story of 1989 was September's Hurricane

Hugo, which did an estimated \$89 million in property damage here but spared Brunswick County further devastation by making landfall 140 miles to the south.

At year's end, the county was "wet" in another respect, thanks to the November passage of an ABC referendum that cleared the way for

the first legal countywide alcohol sales since 1949.

Other major stories were sewn together as familiar patches in the county's crazy quilt of the '80s: discussion of countywide zoning, monumental squabbling among county officials, more drug trafficking indictments, waste disposal and continuations of legal battles be-

tween public and private interests over beach access, to name a few of the issues still facing the county at the dawn of a new decade.

Will that quilt help keep the county warm in the 1990s? Or will we find ourselves short-sheeted in the long run? For answers to these and countless other questions about the future, stay tuned.



MODERN HIGH-RISE BRIDGES opened at Ocean Isle Beach in 1985 and at Holden Beach (pictured) in 1986.

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