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Historic Wilmington, North Carolina's Picturesque Seaport



APROPOS to stories on Fayetteville and Cheraw, we are printing the following concerning historic Wilmington, the State's chief seaport city: ¶ Wilmington has always been the leading seaport of North Carolina. Its settlement was due, strange to say, to pirates, who, sweeping into the mouth of the Cape Fear river below, harried the earlier settlements at Brunswick and Smithville (now Southport). The Spaniards in those days, towards the close of the seventeenth century, and for a good while afterwards, swept along the Atlantic seaboard and made prey of everything they could reach and conquer. They claimed all the Atlantic coast as their own. A remembrance of those times is to be found in the vestry-room of old St. James Episcopal Church, Wilmington, in the shape of a striking portrait of our Lord, which was taken from a Spanish pirate vessel in the river below Wilmington, the crew having been killed or captured and the vessel burned. ¶ Wilmington and the river below it are brimful of memories since 1640; of the settlement by Governor Yeamans, which came to so sad an end, and which is of deep interest because it marked the introduction of African slavery into this country; of the days when old Brunswick, with its stately Episcopal church, its governor's house, its forts and wharves and homes, was the most notable place in the Colony; of the time when Smithville, at the river mouth, was defended by Fort Johnston, built to protect the up-river country against the dreaded pirates; all the way to the days when the greatest of all the Confederate fortifications, Fort Fisher, held out for four years, and when it fell, on the night of January 15, 1865, marked the collapse of the Confederacy, since it was by the protection of this fort that the Confederate blockade-running vessels could enter the Cape Fear river, get to Wilmington and deliver their precious munitions of war and all sorts of other supplies for the soldiers and for noncombatants, struggling at the front or working at home to keep the soul and body of the Confederate States alive. General Lee knew when the other forts below Wilmington fell, after the fearful fighting at Fort Fisher, the end had come. The port of Wilmington was the real outlet for the Confederate cotton and the entry of all supplies needed from the outside.

In Wilmington there are the oldest family records in North Carolina. These date from 1541, being in the shape of English and French commissions of military officers of the De Rosset family. The wife of the late Mayor Alfred M. Waddell was born Gabrielle De Rosset, and is a member of that historic family. An ancestor of Mayor Waddell, General Hugh Waddell, was one of the commanders of the English expedition

against the French which resulted in the capture of Fort Duquesne, Pa., in 1758, and the end of the French claims.

One of the most beautiful homes in the South is that of James Sprunt at Wilmington, the largest individual cotton shipper in the United States, having his own line of steamers to Liverpool. During the war between the states he was the purser on one of the Confederate blockade-runners, "The Lillian," and was captured between North Carolina and Nassau by the Federal vessels. The Governor of Bermuda gave him a water-color picture of the capture, which he presented to the writer, and it is now in the Hall of History at Raleigh. It is the only picture of such an event. Mr. Sprunt's home was formerly the residence of Governor Dudley, the first governor of North Carolina elected by the people. Cardinal Gibbons, now of Baltimore, lived in this palatial home for ten years or more as the guest of a former owner.

Mr. Sprunt has in his library the only paintings of the "Lords Proprietors of North Carolina" outside of England. There are seven of the "Lords Proprietors of Carolina." In St. James church-yard is the tomb of Cornelius Harnett, who was one of the most daring spirits in the separation of the colonies from England. In the archives of St. James are some letters which have thrown a strange light upon the state of affairs at the end of the Civil War. Rev. Alfred A. Watson was then the rector. When Wilmington was occupied by the Federal forces an order was made that all rectors within the Federal lines should so change the prayer in the prayer-book that it should be for the "President of the United States" instead of the "President of the Confederate States." Bishop Atkinson of the diocese of North Carolina gave Rector Watson authority to omit the prayer altogether or to so modify it as to make it for those "in high authority;" but Rector Watson declined to obey the order of the Federal provost-marshal, so the latter took the keys, barred him from the church and took possession.

There are plenty of reminders of Colonial days in Wilmington, one of the most beautiful of these being the McCreary house, which was the headquarters of Lord Cornwallis after his retreat from Guilford Court House in North Carolina, and while he was resting and refitting his much distressed army preparatory to going northward to meet his fate at Yorktown. A staff officer of His Lordship, idling in the house one day, wrote on a window-pane with a diamond ring his own name and that of a charming young Wilmington lady. Many years after the Revolutionary War a descendant of this officer visited Wilmington and made inquiry about the writing on the window-pane. The glass had been removed, but an old negro butler said it had been put in the basement. By wonderful good luck it was found and taken to England, and is now in a castle window there.

Across the river from Wilmington are

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