

Stew In Brunswick

(Continued From Page 41)

Along its east-west trending barrier islands, maritime forests dominated by live oaks and yaupon once grew. Inland, several miles of estuarine marshes border the lower stretches of south-flowing blackwater rivers such as Lockwood Folly River and Shallotte River. The ridge and swale systems in the upland areas near the Intracoastal Waterway used to bristle with longleaf pine forests and quake with pocosins.

And positioned on the low-lying Coastal Plain, the county embraces almost the entire inventory of the state's wetland habitats. There's the Green Swamp and its associated longleaf pine savannas and pocosins. There are the limesink ponds in various spots around the county, and a complex of wetlands near Boiling Spring Lakes. In the Cape Fear River are extensive tidal marshes—saltwater marshes at its mouth and freshwater marshes near Wilmington. The Waccamaw River is a blackwater river with extensive bottomland swamps and stands of Atlantic white cedar; the Cape Fear is a brownwater river. There are oxbow lakes and 200-year-old millponds like Orton Pond.

One of the only land forms it doesn't have is a mountain, but perhaps if it had, William Hilton might not have found the weather as much to his liking on the first English voyage of discovery up the Cape Fear River in 1662. The county's temperate climate had a lot to do with its role as one of the earliest areas in the state to be explored and settled, bestowing a rich cultural history on the county. Large plantations once lined the river, crowned by Orton Plantation featuring its famous gardens. Fort Caswell's Civil War redoubts lie at the end of Oak Island, while the ruins of Old Brunswick Town, the earliest settlement in the county, are located not far from another old city, Southport, with its lovely live oak-lined streets.

Back at Sunny Point, we move from pond to pond, chatting, admiring the surrounding longleaf pine flatwoods that are open and airy. This was the way most Brunswick County was not too long ago—biologists say that most of the county was longleaf pine savanna—and we're able to catch a glimpse of the past here because Tony Gaw, Sunny

Point's natural resource manager, keeps his woods in fine fettle with regular burning. "I burn what I can," he says with a laugh, "but with all that ordinance rolling around here all this winter, we couldn't burn and I'm a little behind schedule."

We're back at the last checkpoint, our ID cards removed. The wary young GIs wave us through, this time without a camera check.

We're off public land now, back in Brunswick County. Back to the future.

The Brunswick Bustle

You can hear it on NC 133, on the outskirts of the base. You can hear it on US 17, hear it in the traffic around Shallotte, around Lockwood Folly, where the congestion gets worse each year. You can see it on Oak Island and other island communities, in the subdivisions and golf courses that weren't here five years ago. Tourist brochures tout the more than 100 golf courses within an hour's drive. It's a steady din of more and more: houses, marinas, golfers. But it's a din that threatens fewer fox squirrels, magnificent ramshorns, crawfish frogs. It's the Brunswick bustle.

Some experts predict that in the coming years, more than 75 percent of all Americans will live within 50 miles of an ocean or Great Lakes coast. It's as if the country were creased in the middle, with both halves tilted toward the coasts, people from Ohio and Minnesota sliding oceanward year by year. Brunswick County, like other coastal counties, has experienced a lot of that in-migration in the past 20 years, and most observers say that the completion of I-40 to Wilmington will hasten the process. State and county planners see Brunswick's growth as a natural spin-off from Wilmington's growth and the inexorable commercial march northward from Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, along US 17.

The county's population grew 42.5 percent from 1980 to 1990, next to Dare County the fastest-growing county in the state. (Although this rate is high by any measure, it's actually less than the

Brunswick's Dazzling Diversity

A sampler of outstanding natural areas, from barrier island to inland swamp, that distinguish Brunswick County.

Orton Pond

Millpond and surrounding uplands provide breeding habitat for anhinga, osprey, fox squirrels, alligators, red-cockaded woodpeckers and a rare snail (*Planorbella magnifica*). The Natural Heritage Program rates this site as having national significance. *Restricted access.*

Boiling Spring Lakes Wetland Complex

The largest group of pocosins, Carolina bays and savannas in private ownership. Several rare plants have been found here, including the rough-leaf loosestrife. National significance. *Restricted access.*

Military Ocean Terminal Sunny Point

The 12,000-acre military base contains a large number of limesink ponds, longleaf pine forests and pocosins which provide habitats for many rare and endangered plant and animal species. National significance. *Restricted access.*

Waccamaw River Aquatic Habitat

The habitats associated with the Waccamaw River contain rare plants, including the disjunct Plymouth gentian, and several rare fish and shellfish. National significance.

Bald Head Island

Diversity of high-quality maritime communities, including the largest remaining maritime forest in the county. The island also hosts the state's only locations of cabbage palm (*Sabal palmetto*). Large numbers of loggerhead sea turtles nest on the island's beaches. National significance.

Green Swamp Preserve

Owned by The Nature Conservancy, the 15,700-acre Green Swamp Preserve consists of an extensive pocosin wetland system associated with probably the best remaining longleaf pine savannas in the state. Provides unique habitats for 14 insectivorous plants and a variety of wildlife, including the black bear, American alligator and red-cockaded woodpecker. National significance. Call The Nature Conservancy for information about field trips. (919)967-7007.

Battery Island

The maritime forests on this natural island in the lower Cape Fear River host the state's largest breeding colony of herons, egrets and ibises. More than 5,500 nests have been counted. National significance. *Restricted access.*

Brunswick/Cape Fear River Marshes

The extensive freshwater tidal marshes in this area support one of the largest populations of alligators of any North Carolina river or estuary. Statewide significance.

Sunset Beach Wood Stork Ponds

In late summer, these ponds are visited by post-breeding wood storks from Florida and Georgia. The ponds are the northernmost localities on the Atlantic coast used by wood storks. Statewide significance. *Restricted access.*

Bryant Mill (Greenbank) Bluff

Located along the southern shore of the Cape Fear River, this bluff contains a variety of wet and dry habitats sheltering several unusual plant species, including large-leaved grass-of-Parnassus. National significance. *Restricted access.*

Zeke's Island Estuarine Sanctuary

Complex of islands, marshes, tidal flats and shallow estuarine water on the northern end of Bald Head Island. An important nesting site for loggerhead sea turtles and colonial nesting waterbirds. Statewide significance. *Restricted access.*

Source: National Heritage Program

Note: Most sites are either privately owned or have extremely limited access.

48-percent growth it experienced from 1970 to 1980.) Like other coastal counties, Brunswick has enjoyed a high seasonal population, as vacationers sought the sun for a week at a time in rented beach cottages, but more and more people are opting to put down roots. The county's permanent population has more than doubled from 1970 to 1990, from 24,223 to 50,985, and in the next 20 years it is expected to double again. Many of these migrants are retirees, and the county expects the population to become progres-

sively older in the coming years.

More important, however, is where these extra bodies are going. Not surprisingly, the attractive beach communities—Sunset Beach, Ocean Isle Beach, Holden Beach, Long Beach, Yaupon Beach, Caswell Beach and Bald Head Island—are among the fastest-growing areas of the state. A brochure promoting "The Brunswick Islands" summarizes their allure: "47 miles of clean beaches, history at every turn of the road, scenic beauty in abundance, water

and land sports, and a slowed Down-East pace that soothes the spirit and body." Yet the county is growing even faster in inland areas just across the Intracoastal Waterway where the tidal creeks rapidly are being embellished with subdivisions and golf courses. As a result, during the 1980s the townships of Lockwood Folly and Shallotte grew the fastest of any area of the county.

"Growth is happening throughout the county, both east and west, north and south," says Haskell Rhett,

(See STEW, Page 44)



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