



LOWER CAPE FEAR HISTORICAL SOCIETY, Inc. BULLETIN

Volume XX, No. 2

Wilmington, N.C. 28401

February 1977

A Yankee View of the Fall of Wilmington, 1865

by Diane Dolan*

Among family papers of the Poland family of Wakefield, Massachusetts, is an unpublished Civil War letter written in 1865. The author was Joseph Warren Poland, a former warrant officer, who served during the Civil War in the Union forces. At the time the letter was written, the author was among the forces attacking Wilmington, North Carolina. It is hoped that the publication of this letter will be of interest to scholars of the history of Wilmington and the Lower Cape Fear area.

J. Warren Poland was born February 22, 1845, the eldest son of Dr. Joseph Poland and Emily Coffin (Phelps) Poland of South Reading (now Wakefield). Dr. and Mrs. Poland were descendents of Hamilton and Gloucester families. Dr. Poland was a graduate of Dartmouth Medical School (1842) and was a physician in Hamilton and later in South Reading until his death in 1857.

The circumstances of J. Warren Poland's enlistment in the Union service are not known. However, in the *Genealogical History of the Town of Reading, Massachusetts . . . from 1639 to 1874* by Lilley Eaton,¹ he is listed as "seaman" and "hospital steward." According to an obituary notice printed in the *Wakefield Daily Item*, May 13, 1926, he was on board the *Nyack* on December 24, 1864, at the Battle of Fort Fisher:

"There his ship, being of light draft, took position close under the heavy guns of the fort, which were mounted at a considerable elevation, so that the artillery fire of the fort and of the fleet passed above her."

After the war, J. Warren Poland returned to Wakefield, where he was engaged in retail trade. He had a dry goods store on Main Street until 1914, after which time he sold real estate. He was active in civic affairs and was a member of the First Parish (Congregational) Church. He was a member of the H.M. Warren Post 12, G.A.R., from 1867 to 1926, the year of his death, and served as its commander for the last ten years of his life. In 1921 and 1922 he served two terms as commander of the Middlesex County G.A.R. Association. He spent much of his time after his retirement in attending to the relief of sick and disabled old soldiers and their widows, and was a burial agent for the town, representing the G.A.R. from 1918 until his death.

J. Warren Poland married Eliza Marcella Morrison of Wakefield in 1868, and they had one child, George Morrison Poland.

The following letter was written by J. Warren to his mother.²

Feb. 22, 1865. *Nyack*, Off Wilmington.³

Dear Mother,

On this, my 20th birthday, I cannot better employ my time than by writing to the dearest little Mother *I ever had*. We are having a day of Jubilee today. All the fleet are dressed in flags and at noon a salute of 35 guns⁴ was fired from each st[eame]r and as we have 20 of them, we made some noise.

With this you will r[c]eiv[e] a letter of the 20th giving an account of the Evacuation of Fort Anderson and today we have added another strong work to our list: Above Ft. Anderson, on the opposite side of the river, 10 miles from Anderson, we found Fort Mahon, a very strong battery, built on rising ground. Our Gunboats have been pounding at it since the capture of A[nderson], and this morning we were much surprised at seeing the glorious Stars and Stripes floating from it.

All the boats in the fleet were engaged in carrying troops across the river. They were a portion of Sherman's Army and had cut off all communication from W[ilmington] on the south and had been within 1½ miles of the city. Of course the rebs at Ft. Mahon could not hold their position and they *Evacuated, as usual*. The Rebels have been burning cotton,⁵ Rosin, etc., and for 2 days past a large volume of black [smoke] has risen from the doomed city.

Today we have moved up and now are within 5 miles of the city. The Rebs have sunk a Bloc. runner⁶ in the channel and we shall have to blow her up with some of the Reb. torpedoes.⁷ We have a torpedoe catcher in front of us to protect us. Last night and the night before last, they sent down quan[tities] of torpedoes floating with the tide. Two small boats that were doing picket duty was blown up and several men killed.⁸

(continued on page 3)

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BULLETIN

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MEETING

Date: Wednesday, February 16, 1977

Time: 8:00 p.m.

Place: Thalian Hall

Speaker: John Baxton Flowers, III

Subject: Stagville Center for Preservation Technology

The President's Message

The Society has been recognized for its past accomplishments and services to the community. During Culture Week, the Historic Preservation Society of North Carolina, Inc. awarded us the Ruth Coltrane Cannon Cup. Hargrove Bellamy, Mrs. Ida B. Kellam, and Henry J. MacMillan were the incorporators. It is a pleasure to thank them and the membership for recognizing the importance of historical research, publication, and preservation pertaining to the Lower Cape Fear area, the State of North Carolina, and the United States of America. The diligent endeavors of all members have made our organization the valuable asset it is today.

Old Wilmington by Candlelight was a wonderful success. One thousand ninety-six attended. The Wassail Bowl provided a delightful gala on the eve of the tour. Receipts from both events totaled \$7,340.00. We thank the members, homes, churches, and organizations for their participation.

The Servants' Quarters Preservation Project is proceeding with the excavation by Dr. Thomas Loftfield. When this is completed, restoration will begin.

Kind donations of \$1,125.00 have been received from Mrs. Marjorie B. Cason, Mrs. Patrick Welder, and Thomas H. Wright, Jr. A gift of bulbs and their planting was made by C. Heidi Trask. The Society wishes to acknowledge the gift of the Federal sofa formerly on loan from Mrs. David Murchison, Jr. John Kalmar has graciously loaned a Federal table and a pair of eighteenth century Chinese parrots. Donations and gifts of furnishings for the Latimer House and of records, letters, diaries, and documents to the archives library will greatly benefit the Society.

Since the opening of the Latimer House on September 1, 1976, an experience in historical interpretation has been provided for over fifteen hundred from throughout the country and from several foreign countries.

Membership has increased by one hundred eleven since May, 1976. Let us encourage others.

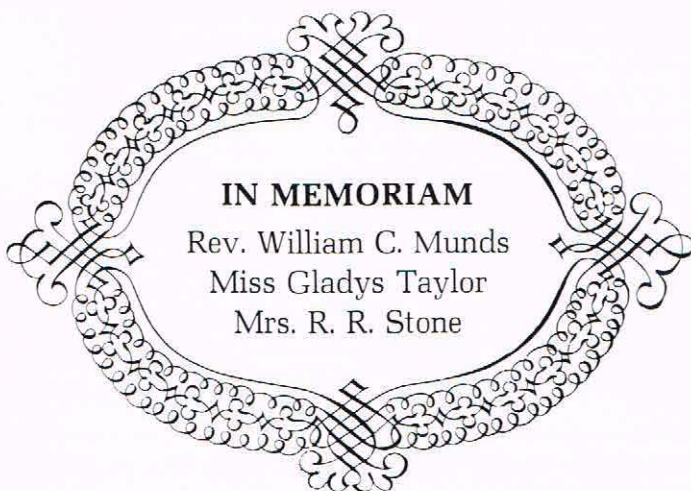
We have a delightful task before us—the dissemination and preservation of our history.

James Robert Warren
President

THE RUTH COLTRANE CANNON CUP

The Ruth Coltrane Cannon Cup, the state's most prestigious preservation award, is presented annually by the Historic Preservation Society of North Carolina to the individual, organization, or project who has made outstanding and significant achievements in the field of historic preservation, restoration, and/or research in the state of North Carolina. Originating in 1948, the award was named for Mrs. Ruth Coltrane Cannon, president 1945-1956, in honor and recognition of her outstanding contributions to preservation in North Carolina. The master cup, donated by Mrs. Cannon, is on permanent display in the Museum of History, Department of Cultural Resources, Raleigh, North Carolina. The award consists of an engraved silver cup and a written citation of the recipient's accomplishments.

The Ruth Coltrane Cannon Cup Citation
To The Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, Inc.



THE LOWER CAPE FEAR HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.

The Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, Inc., receives the Ruth Coltrane Cannon Award in recognition of its comprehensive historical program. Organized in 1956, the Society's goals, activities, and programs are a model well worth emulation throughout the state. As set forth in the incorporation papers, the Society was to "collect and preserve records and materials and disseminate knowledge and information pertaining to the history of the Lower Cape Fear Area." In the first year of existence, the Society began publishing the *Bulletin*, a journal containing scholarly articles on the history of the Lower Cape Fear area. The *Bulletin* has been published for nineteen years. In 1962 a revolving publication fund was established to honor the late Louis T. Moore. Money to aid in the publication of historical studies can be borrowed from the fund and repaid as the books are sold.

Since the early days of the Society, the archival collection has steadily grown. In 1967 the Ida B. Kellam Archives Library was officially established; to date, almost two thousand documents relating to the Lower Cape Fear area have been accessioned, catalogued, and filed in the archives library.

In December of 1963, the Society purchased the striking Italianate Revival style Zebulon Latimer House for their headquarters. It took the Society four years to raise the funds and accomplish the painstaking restoration and furnishing of the house, which is now open for public visitation.

Not a head-in-the-sand organization, the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society has been visibly involved in and supportive of civic projects which promise to preserve the historical character of the port city. Among the first was sponsorship of the Innis Park in front of Thalian Hall. The Society lobbied for and assisted in the creation of the Wilmington Historic District zoning ordinance in 1962. This was one of the first historic district ordinances in the state which attempted, through the board of architectural review, to preserve the character of the old residential section of downtown Wilmington. Three years later the society raised money to sponsor the preparation of a plan for the historic area of the city. In 1966, the Society contributed \$3,500 to the newly formed Historic Wilmington Foundation, Inc.—the first revolving fund for historic preservation in the state of North Carolina. The continued concern of the Society for historic preservation led to the formulation of plans for the restoration of the Latimer House Servants Quarters. As a fund raising project to accomplish the restoration, the annual Christmas tour, "Old Wilmington by Candlelight," was established two years ago and thus far has raised \$16,400. In recognition of the significance of the project, the Society was awarded a \$10,000 National Park Service grant.

For their significant, broadly-based and diligent efforts in the field of historical research, publication, and preservation for the past twenty years, the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society is awarded the Ruth Coltrane Cannon Cup.

A Yankee View continued

We can now shell the city of Wilmington if they still hold out. The best thing they can do is to Evacuate and run to Richmond. Yesterday Admiral Porter signalized that Charleston had been evacuated and had been occupied⁹ by our forces. We gave three hearty cheers and a tiger.¹⁰ In a few day[s] you will hear of the capture of W. and then you may look for peace Com.⁸ at Washington, ready and willing to accept Uncle Abe's propositions, an unconditional surrender. That's My style. We can see the church spires of the city and it is rumored that it has surrendered. Shall I bring you home a silk dress from W.? This is a splendid day, clear and as warm as June. We have good water in the river, and it is much better than our condensed and rusty stuff we call water, after we can see the oil on the top of it. We drink the river water now, but in the summer it is apt to bring on the Diarrhoea, [sic], etc.

I am very glad to be here at the surrender and it will repay me for all *privations* I have endured, for after we have wound up affairs here, we shall go north and repair.

Since writing the above, the Admiral's st[eame]r has gone up the river and is in the city. The St[eame]rs are moving up and we shall follow soon. I shall forget how to skate and I shall feel the cold next winter, for we have seen no snow or ice except that that was brought from N.Y. with fresh meat. Thare (sic) is three sutlers Sch[ooners?] here ready to open trade with Wilmington.

6 p.m. Here we are within 2 rods of the city of W. The Admiral went up the river and in an hour we followed and anchored off the city. Coming up the river we passed the Forts the Rebs blowed about so much. The forts were small earthworks mounting three or four guns each, from which a white flag was flying. Of torpedoes we found none. The great chain¹¹ said to be laid across the river was there, but (there was) an opening large enough for us to pass. We passed several boats sunk in the river, and one in particular, the Privateer *Chickamauga*. Her Wheel houses out of Water.¹² On our right hand is the ruins of the Govt. Store House that was filled with cotton, etc., but now all Burnt. On the other side was a large factory or Foundry, which the rebs burnt.

The city contains many brick and some handsome buildings. The Inhabitants are very shaby (sic) and no wonder, for they have been under the *Devil's rule*. The darkies are running around delighted at "Massa Lincoln's coming," and at the prospect of *being free*.¹³ I shall ever remember this day and I had rather work a year without pay, than *miss being* here. You will see more news by the N. York papers than I can write you, for *our news* comes from N.Y. When we was coming up, the white women on shore waved their handkerchief[s] and the darkies danced and jumped around "like mad."

I will write again tomorrow or next day, before that time I shall have a chance to go ashore, I hope. With much love, I remain yr. loving son, Warren.

(Marginal notes): Love to all, send me a paper containing the news. (On page 2): What a day of rejoicing, you will have. Wilmington and Charleston. How are you, So. Con^dl.? (Page 1): We never expected to get here so easy and are a little *disappointed* at not having a tougher time of it. Guess *Gold will fall* some. Love to Martin and family.

FOOTNOTES

1. Boston, 1874, p. 622. At this time Wakefield was called South Reading. Wakefield was incorporated as a town in 1868.
2. This letter is now in the possession of Mrs. Ella Dolan of Wakefield. Most spelling errors have been corrected, and the punctuation has been supplied. The letter is written in ink on four lined pages with marginal jottings.
3. The address Cape Fear River was scratched out and Nyack was substituted. The Nyack was a steamer of seven guns, 593 tons, built at the Brooklyn Navy Yard 1863-4 and launched October 6, 1863. cf. *Handbook of the United States Navy from April, 1861 to May, 1864*. Compiled by B. S. Osbon, New York, 1864. The Nyack is also mentioned in *The Naval History of the Civil War* by Admiral David D. Porter, U.S.N., New York, 1886, pp. 735-739, 743. The commander was Lieutenant Colonel L. H. Newman.
4. Admiral Porter (1813-1891) sent the following communique to Secretary Welles: "I have the honor to inform you that Wilmington has been evacuated and is in possession of our troops . . . I had the pleasure of placing the flag on Fort Strong, and at 12 o'clock noon today shall fire a salute of thirty-five guns, this being the anniversary of Washington's birthday." cf. *Report of the Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, December 1865*, Washington, 1865, p. 186. *Civil War Naval Chronology, 1861-1865*, Wash., D.C. (1966) part V, p. 47.
5. Cf. *History of North Carolina* by Samuel A'Court Ashe, Raleigh, 1925, II, p. 957.
6. Perhaps the privateer *Chickamauga*. See below.
7. Torpedoes were noticed floating in the river as late as March 4. See *Civil War Naval Chronology*, p. 56.
8. An officer wrote: "Last night after half a day's fighting, therebs sent down about 50 torpedoes; but although 'Old Bogey' took no notice of them, they kept the rest of us pretty lively as long as the ebb tide ran." *Ibid.*, 47. Old Bogey was a bogus monitor, made of a scow, some timber and canvas, and placed in the river February 16-17 so as to draw the fire of the Confederate forces. One torpedo hit a boat from the *Shawmut* on the night of February 20, and Porter said in a dispatch there were one killed, one drowned, two wounded. cf. *Report of the Secretary of the Navy* . . . p. 185.
9. Text reads unoccupied.
10. A salute?
11. The chain is mentioned in a dispatch of Lieutenant Colonel Young to Porter on March 10. "The people, white and black, whom I questioned, state that the *Chickamauga* is sunk across the stream at Indian Wells, with a chain just below. Her two guns are on a bluff on the western bank of the river." *Civil War Naval Chronology*, p. 59. *Report of the Secretary of the Navy*, p. 187.
12. According to the *Chronology*, the C.S.S. *Chickamauga* was sunk on February 25 by her own crew, just below Indian Wells. (p. 49). "The position selected by the Confederates was above Wilmington on the Northwest Fork of the river leading to Fayetteville. The scuttling was intended to obstruct the river and prevent the Union from establishing water communications between the troops occupying Wilmington and General Sherman's army operating in the interior of the state. The effort proved abortive as the current swept the hulk around parallel to the bank, and by 12 March the water link between Wilmington and Fayetteville had been opened." There is a painting of the privateer on page 52 of the *Chronology*.
13. It is interesting to note that the great-grandfather of J. Warren Poland, Col. Peter Coffin, Jr. a prosperous farmer in Gloucester (1750-1821; Harvard College 1769), was reputed to own slaves. However, we should also note that J. Warren was a fourth cousin twice removed of Levi Coffin (d. 1877), the celebrated abolitionist of New Garden, N.C. and Cincinnati, Ohio.

New Members

The Society would like to welcome the following new members:

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