



The Bulletin

A PUBLICATION OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF THE LOWER CAPE FEAR

Volume LVII • No 1

Wilmington, North Carolina

January 2013

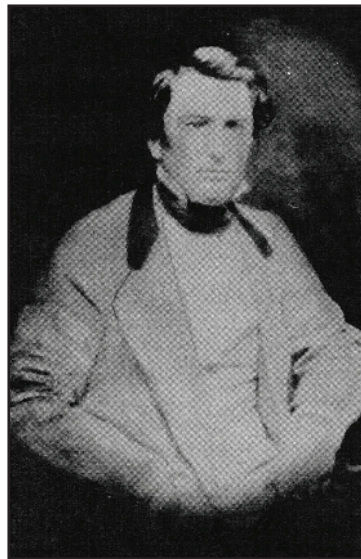
“Industries of a Feather” Part Two: Shipbuilding and Modern Industries of Eagles Island by Rob Minford

The following is the conclusion of “Part One: Industries of a Feather: Naval Stores, Cotton and Agriculture,” published in the November 2012 Bulletin.

Ship Construction

The greater Wilmington area contained vast amounts of local wood but the region never developed as a place for ship construction. Wilmington merchants generally relied on shipping companies based in northern cities because buying there was cheaper than constructing their own ships.¹ One of the first sailing ships of notable size that was built in Wilmington was the 316 ton oak-built *Eliza and Swann*, built in 1833 by John McIlhenny at his sawmill. McIlhenny's next and last involvement in ship construction was through a contract from the federal government simply to provide the timber for the USS *Pennsylvania*.²

The first successful shipwright business on Eagles Island was the Beery Shipyard (initially known as Commercial Mill and Shipyard), founded on June 20, 1848 by Samuel Beery. The shipyard was supported by a blacksmith shop, a rigging loft, a workshop, and an engine house, all owned by the Beery family.³ Two of the earliest ships produced at the yard were the 250-ton brig *John Dawson* in 1849 and the 100-ton schooner *Ella* the following year. At the outbreak of the Civil War, the shipyard was renamed The Confederate Naval Yard by the new owner, Captain Benjamin Beery, and promised to produce ships for the Confederate Navy. The first ship built during the war was the privateer *The Mariner* for Captain Beery's personal command. The ship was a converted steam tug, armed with one 24 lb. forward-mounted gun and two 9 lb. aft guns. The maiden voyage of *The Mariner* yielded one confirmed prize and a possible second. Captained by Joseph Price, the next assignment for *The Mariner* was to serve as a guard boat on the



Portrait of Captain Beery, late 19th Century.⁵

Cape Fear for the spring and summer of 1862. The end of *The Mariner*'s short career came when it was captured by blockading Union forces on the ship's second attempt at a run.⁴ The most famous ship produced at Beery Shipyard during the Civil War was the ironclad CSS *North Carolina*, albeit the ship's fame came from its spectacular failure. *North Carolina*, a Richmond-class vessel, was 150 feet long, had four guns, crewed by 150 sailors and 15 marines, and was built from heavy

pine, covered with “plate rolled railroad iron sent from Atlanta.”⁶ The ironclad was an intimidating sight but proved to be a paper tiger. The engines of *North Carolina* were defective, making the ship a glorified floating battery. *North Carolina* was deployed at Smithville to provide cover for inbound and outbound blockade runners. The ship spent insufficient time in freshwater to kill the Tereido worms, so by July 1864 *North Carolina* hovered only one foot above the river bottom and sank at its moorings on September 27 of that year.⁷

In addition to *The Mariner* and *North Carolina*, the Beery Shipyard produced the steamer *Yadkin*, numerous small vessels, and nearly completed the ironclad CSS *Wilmington* before the town's capture. Arguably the most intriguing endeavor at the Beery Shipyard was the mysterious submarine that was under construction in 1864. According to Rear-Admiral Lee of the Confederate Navy, a vessel built “to run under water; 150 feet long and cigar-shaped” was in

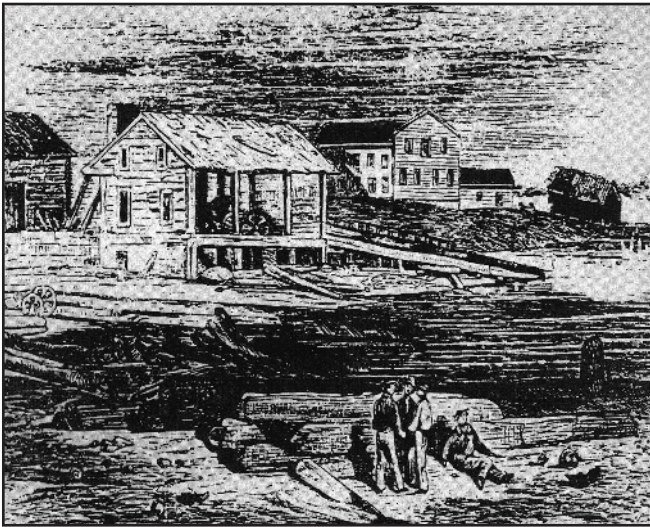


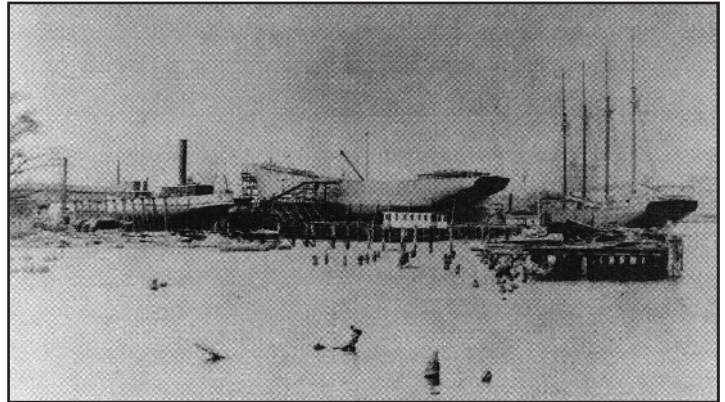
Illustration of the Beery Shipyard on Eagles Island.⁹

production at one of the two Wilmington shipyards.⁸ Several newspaper sources claim that the submarine was built on Eagles Island but very few records of its construction or service life exist. In late December of 1863, Robert Dunn, one of the engineers on the *Hunley*, was sent to Wilmington to provide his expertise on the construction of a "torpedo boat," a term used at the time interchangeably with submarine. Sources claim the submarine was launched the day prior to the Union's capture of Wilmington. Unfortunately for the vessel, it allegedly sank on its maiden voyage, possibly an intentional scuttling to prevent it from capture. The shipyard was razed by Benjamin Beery shortly after the submarine's launch to prevent its seizure by the Union army.¹⁰ The shipyard was rebuilt in 1872 and lasted until 1911, predominantly building small pilot boats and yachts, salvaging small watercraft, and removing submerged obstructions in the Cape Fear placed during the Civil War as part of Wilmington's defenses.¹¹

The Wilmington Marine Railway and Shipyard, owned by Wilmington Iron Works, purchased the Beery Shipyard in 1911 and established that site as their ship construction headquarters. Early operations at the shipyard were limited to repairing watercraft, but by 1915 the company had already produced a steamer and was in the process of constructing another steamer, *A.P. Hurt*. In 1916, the company received a contract to build two wooden four-masted schooners fitted with auxiliary engines. The schooners, *Hauptauge* and *Commack*, completed in October of 1917 and March 1918 respectively, were the last wooden schooners built in Wilmington. Wilmington Iron Works received government contracts to build or refit several dredges and barges until 1924 when the Stone Marine Railway purchased the company's yard on Eagles Island.

Stone quickly added a smaller railway to the site, to handle smaller vessels such as yachts. Despite the addition, by the 1940s the company seemed to focus on the towing portion of the business instead of

ship construction. The Stone Towing Records predominantly contain documents relating to towing rates with no mention of ship construction or repair. This was especially true after 1946 when a fire razed the shipyard, likely resulting in the cessation of all ship construction and repair activities.¹² Stone relied heavily on exclusivity contracts with companies. The towing rates were \$150 per vessel, plus \$50 for each additional tug, in modern prices these fees translate to \$1,820 and \$606 respectively.¹³ These contracts were essential for the prosperity of the company. In a letter from R.D. Stone to Esso Standard Oil, Stone recalls his grandfather saying, "If there had not been a Standard Oil Company,

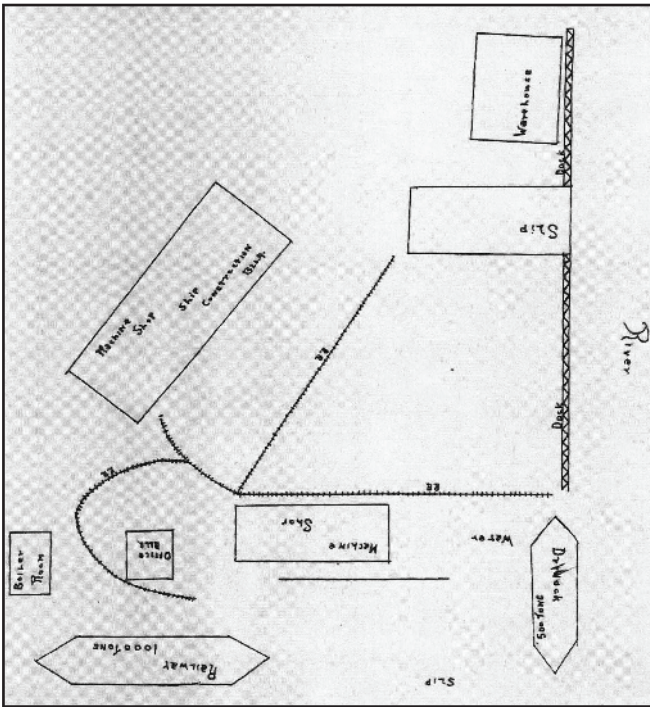


Hauptauge and *Commack* under construction.¹⁵

there would not have been a Stone Towing Line."¹⁴ The Stone Towing Company ceased operating in 1982; the business failed partly because it neglected to adapt to the changing times, leaving reminders of its once-thriving activity along the waterfront through its derelict fleet anchored along Eagles Island and Wilmington's piers.¹⁶

The coup-de-grace for the Stone Towing Company came when The Wilmington Towing Company, operated by Walker "Buddy" Rowe, hired all of the Stone crews, forcing it out of business. Rowe moved the Wilmington Towing Company to the former Stone shipyard on Eagles Island in 1984, but in 1986 sold the company to McAllister Brothers Inc., a New York based towing firm. The company, still in existence today, was eventually renamed McAllister Towing of Wilmington, Inc. and currently employs a fleet of two tugs.¹⁷

Eagles Island has been home to several other ship-related businesses, but additional historical documents and archaeological evidence are scarce. The Diamond Steamboat & Wrecking Company functioned on Eagles Island as early as 1902 to at least 1931 and was located north of the Beery Shipyard/Wilmington Ironworks site.¹⁸ The Cape Fear Towing Company, another tugboat provider, was a contemporary of the Wilmington and Stone Towing Companies. Moran, an east coast towing company based in New Canaan, Connecticut, purchased the Cape Fear Towing Company after 1999, and the company presently operates under the name Moran of Wilmington.¹⁹



Layout of the Stone Shipyard on Eagles Island.²⁰

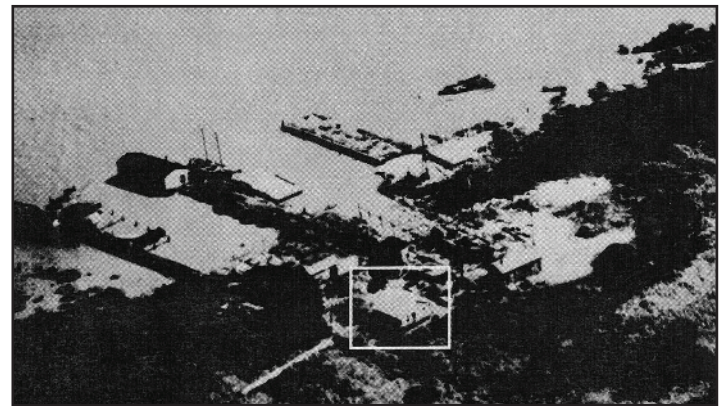
South of the Stone Towing Company, across from Ann and Nun Streets, was the Hamme Marine Railway. Initially known as “Hamme the Hatter” for his high-fashion clothing business, R.F. Hamme retired from haberdashery and purchased land south of Wilmington Iron Works from the Suburban Land and Development Company to build a small marine railway with his son, R.F. Hamme Jr. in 1915.²¹ The shipyard expanded in 1919 when R.F. Hamme’s brother, Fred Hamme, joined the business and constructed an electric-powered winch to service vessels up to 800 tons and 150 feet long.²²



Hamme the Hatter, prior to opening his marine railway. Early 20th century.²³

In the early 1920s, the Hamme family purchased an additional acre of land adjacent to the railway to build the first modern home on Eagles Island, called

“Edgewater,” (not to be confused with the Edgewater estate in nearby Wrightsville).²⁴ The railway was sold to J.P. Pretlow in June 1946, who operated the business under the Hamme name, but eight days later, a fire consumed parts of both Pretlow and Stone properties.



The Hamme Marine Railway in 1924, looking Southeast, with Edgewater highlighted in the center-bottom. ²⁵

Fires were a common occurrence on the northeast corner of Eagles Island because of the highly flammable nature of naval stores. The Hamme Railway was operating again by December 1946. Pretlow eventually sold the railway to Buddy Lynch, who closed the business sometime after 1964. At some point prior to the closure of the railway, the company diversified their operations to include miscellaneous waterfront improvement operations, such as bulldozing, digging and constructing piers and landings for private homes.²⁶



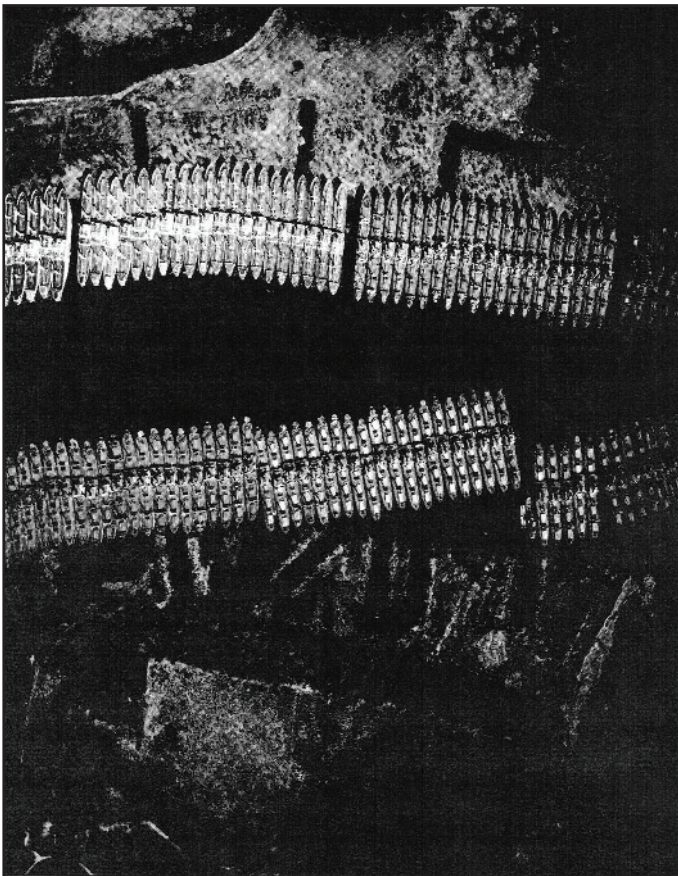
Fire razed the vacant Hamme site on 02/17/1992.²⁷

The most impressive feat of large-scale ship construction in the history of Wilmington was that of the North Carolina Shipbuilding Company (NCSC) during World War II. In 1940, the United States government established the US Maritime Commission, which chose Wilmington as the site of a large federally funded ship construction effort. Located three miles south of

4 – Bulletin

Wilmington on the east side of the Cape Fear, assembly of the NCSC shipyard began in February 1941 and ship construction began three months later. From 1941 until its deactivation in 1946, the shipyard produced 243 vessels for the war effort.²⁸

After the war, the decommissioning of the massive fleet was dealt with in several ways. Ships were either sold to private purchasers (until January 1951), absorbed into the Navy, scrapped, or stored (commonly referred to as “mothballed”) in the Brunswick River.²⁹ Plans for the mothball fleet, officially dubbed the U.S. Maritime Commission’s Wilmington Reserve Fleet, began in November 1945. The anchorage stretched from southwestern tip of Eagles Island north to the U.S. Highway 17 Bridge. Dredging the Brunswick River promptly began in December of 1945, but storage would not commence until 1956 when the Maritime Commission received the funds to purchase 323 acres of waterfront property along both sides of the river. The entire fleet was sold or scrapped by the 1970s, marking an end to the impressive efforts of the NCSC that began thirty years earlier.³⁰



View of Mothball Fleet, looking East.³¹

Modern Industries

More recent land use of Eagles Island is characterized by a departure from 18th and 19th century industries like naval stores and rice plantations, to modern industries,

such as telecommunications towers, energy substations, and tourism. Land conservation has been discussed as a practical use for the island when an editorial in the *Raleigh News & Observer* proffered that the land should be used as a bird and fish sanctuary, which never materialized.³² Recent land preservation efforts were suggested by the Ecosystems Land Mitigation Bank Corporation (ECOBank), an environmental consulting business. ECOBank purchased 130 acres on Eagles Island on August 31, 1999 from Kyle B. McIntyre for restoring the wetlands to their natural state prior to the North Carolina Department of Transportation’s (NC DoT) construction of the Wilmington Bypass. During the restoration process, ECOBank re-contoured the spoiled lands, destroying remnants of the old Wilmington & Manchester Railroad track and the causeway that once crossed the island. At the project’s completion, ECOBank sold the land on December 22, 2000 to the North Carolina Department of Transportation. Current land preservation efforts are spearheaded by the Eagles Island Coalition with partnerships from the following organizations:

- New Hanover Soil and Water Conservation District
- Cape Fear Resource Conservation and Development Council
- The Town of Leland
- Cape Fear River Watch
- Lower Cape Fear River Program
- National Audubon Society, NC Chapter
- NC Wildlife Resources Commission
- NC Clean Water Management
- NC Coastal Land Trust
- The Nature Conservancy

The future of Eagles Island is bound to the efforts of the preservation groups hoping to sustain the island’s beauty for ecotourism and other environmentally friendly activities.³³

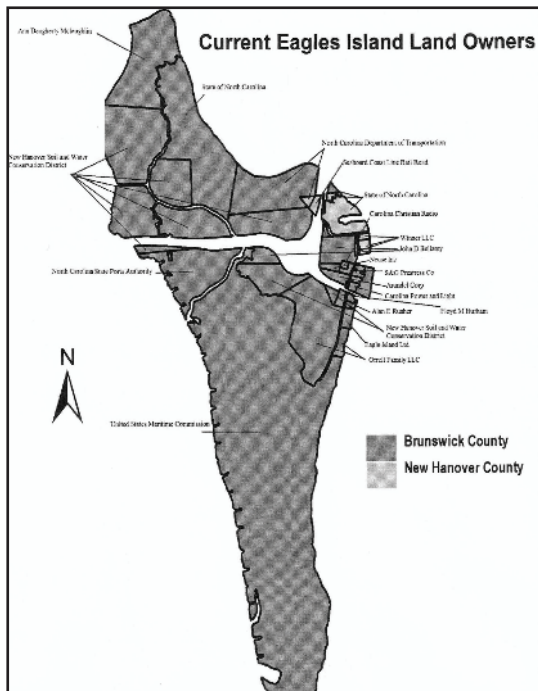
In 1959, Bill Jefferay of the Jefferay Broadcasting Corporation purchased nearly 6 acres from the Hamme family and Glenn Tucker to build a radio tower on Eagles Island. Based in New Bern, Jefferay established the first all-rock radio station in North Carolina.³⁴ In 1963, Progressive Broadcasting Corp. purchased the land from Jefferay and owned the property for 14 years. Over the next decade, the land was owned by several individuals for brief amounts of time, until it was purchased by Carolina Christian Radio (formerly Family Radio Network Inc) from Word of Faith Jacksonville, Inc.³⁵ Carolina Christian Radio remains the landowner of parcel 03900010, formerly owned by the Hamme Marine Railway, and continues broadcasting Christian messages to Wilmington and its surrounding area.

In April 1902, a merger between three companies, the Wilmington & Sea Coast Railroad Company, the Wilmington Gas Light Company, and the Wilmington Street Railway Company created the region’s

largest utility business, Wilmington's Consolidated Railways, Light, and Power Company. In 1907, the company reorganized into the Tidewater Power Company, and by 1925 brought electricity to all of southeastern

Fear.⁴⁰ In 1988, construction of a motel, several restaurants, and a shopping center on the Northeast corner of Eagles Island was proposed by developer Bill Eller and was approved by the Wilmington Planning Commission.

The plan was ultimately rejected by the New Hanover County Planning Board for four reasons: the land is within the limits of the 100 year flood plain, zoning restrictions only allow 2.5 units per acre of land, insufficient water and sewage lines exist in the proposed area, and only 7 of the available 16 acres are suitable for development.⁴¹ In 2000, Eagles Island was nominated in a newspaper editorial as a rival site for the vacant lot north of the downtown Hilton for the city's new convention center. The article's author argued that the island would be an ideal site because it would expound the Cape Fear River as the focus of Wilmington, but acknowledged that difficulties would arise from insufficient sewer and electrical lines on the island.⁴² Currently, the groups forming the Eagles Island Coalition plan to develop the island into an area for eco-tourism. This includes amenities such as walkways, river access, outdoor theaters, education about the area and possibly food and art venues.⁴³ While these plans have yet to exceed the planning phase, these ideas demonstrate the desire to incorporate Eagles Island into the everyday lives of both the residents and visitors of Wilmington.



Map of current Eagles Island land owners.³⁶

North Carolina. In 1934, the Grainger family sold three acres of land on Eagles Island (a fraction of what they owned) to the Tidewater Power Company to build a power substation. In 1952, Carolina Power and Light (now Progress Energy) bought Tidewater and to this day owns the Eagles Island substation.³⁷

Despite the decades of naval stores, rice plantations, and maritime trade history on Eagles Island, the Battleship *North Carolina* is a famous attraction in of itself that draws tourists to the island from across the county. Beginning in 1961, the state of North Carolina purchased land opposite Wilmington, north of the old ferry depot, and dredged out a permanent cove for the World War II battleship USS *North Carolina*. The purpose of the *North Carolina* is to serve as a naval war memorial for the State's World War II veterans, to educate visitors through a series of special programs.³⁹

There have been numerous efforts by local politicians and developers to utilize Eagles Island for other purposes throughout the latter half of 20th century. The location is ideal for development because of the proximity to Wilmington and the scenic beauty provided by the Cape Fear and Brunswick Rivers, but the marshy environment has long stymied such efforts.

In 1968, then county commissioner Mike Vaughan proposed running a cable car from downtown Wilmington to the Battleship *North Carolina* museum. He postulated that a cable car system would provide tourists with easier access to the battleship and allow passengers to observe boats navigating the Cape

Conclusion

The Civil War saw Wilmington and Eagles Island transition from primarily a naval stores hub "to a fortified entrépot for goods of all descriptions entering the Confederacy," meaning that by 1860, the city became an established free trade zone serving as a transshipment point for a diverse assortment of commodities. This trend continued after the war, as evidenced by the increased importance of cotton, fertilizers, and petroleum in Wilmington's maritime trade. Wholesale merchant warehouses cluttered the land directly across from Wilmington but slowly faded after 1915. The land beyond the west bank of the Cape Fear was used principally for cultivating rice, but this ended shortly after 1900 due to various labor, environmental, and market problems. The land south of the naval stores and merchant warehouses was used primarily for ship construction, repair, and towing. This stretch of land has been directly tied to maritime activities since Benjamin Beery initially built his shipyard in 1848 to the present, where tugging and towing operations still have a home on the island. The proximity to Wilmington will always make this land tempting to entrepreneurs and developers, demonstrated by the arrival of several industries incongruent with the historical pattern, such as the radio broadcast tower, the energy substation, and the battleship USS *North Carolina*.

Sources

1. Watson, Alan D., *Wilmington: Part of North Carolina*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1992, 69.
2. Sprunt, James. *Tales and Traditions of the Lower Cape Fear 1661-1896*. Wilmington, NC: LeGwin Brothers, 1896, 33.
3. Jackson III, Claude V. *The Cape Fear-Northeast Cape Fear Rivers Comprehensive Study: A Maritime History and Survey of the Cape Fear and Northeast Cape Fear Rivers, Wilmington Harbor, North Carolina, Volume 1*. Kure Beach: North Carolina Underwater Archaeology Unit, 1996, 217-222.
4. Sprunt, *Tales and Traditions*, 159-160.
5. Portrait of Captain Benjamin Beery, Late 19th century. Black and white photographic print. Historical Society of the Lower Cape Fear, Wilmington. 69.266.1.
6. Wood, Richard Everett. "Port Town at War: Wilmington North Carolina 1860-1865." PhD diss., Florida State University, 1976, 102.
7. Sprunt, *Tales and Traditions*, 160; United States Naval War Records Office (USNWRO), *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion: Civil War Naval Chronology, 1861-1865* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1971), VI-277; Watson, *Wilmington: Part of North Carolina*, 76.
8. USNWRO, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion: Series Volume 9. Operations: North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, May 5, 1863- May 5, 1864* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1899), 561.
9. Illustration of Beery Shipyard (Jackson, *The Cape Fear*, 218).
10. "Another Wilmington First," *The Wilmington Morning Star*, November 7, 1937, pg 4; "That First Submarine," *The Wilmington Morning Star*, November 11, 1937, pg 4; William Yopp, "The Surrender of Wilmington to the Yankees, February 1865," *The Sunday Star-News*, September 20, 1986, pg 4; Mark K. Ragan, *Submarine Warfare in the Civil War* (Cambridge: De Capo Press, 2002), 168-170.
11. Jackson, *The Cape Fear*, 234-236.
12. *Ibid.*, 250.
13. Measuring Worth, 2011, www.measuringworth.com (accessed August 24, 2012).
14. R.D. Stone to Esso Standard Oil, 28 July 1952, in *Stone Towing Records 1952* (Greenville: East Carolina University), 679:5.
15. *Hauppague and Commack* under construction on Eagles Island. Circa 1917. Photographic print. North Carolina Underwater Archaeology Branch, Kure Beach, NC.
16. Judith Tillman, "Last of the 'steam' tugs doomed," *Wilmington Morning Star*, November 15, 1982, pgs 1A, 5A.; Jackson, *Cape Fear River*, 250.
17. Debbie Norton, "Tugboat firm buys Wilmington Towing," *Wilmington Morning Star*, August 27, 1987, pg 7B; Hunter Kome, "Their days on the water are over, but ships can be useful when sunk," *Wilmington Morning Star*, November 5, 1988, pg 1C; Fleet Location Report, McAllister Towing, last accessed August 17, 2012, <http://www.mcallistertowing.com/FleetLocation.aspx>.
18. Jackson, *The Cape Fear*, 234; "February 20, 1902," *Wilmington Morning Star*, February 20, 2002, pg 5; New Hanover County Register of Deeds (NHRD), *Register of Deeds* (Wilmington, NC: 2011), 218.282.
19. Moran, *Wilmington, North Carolina*, New Canaan, CT: 2011 (last accessed August 26, 2011) http://www.morantug.com/port_wilmington.asp.
20. Layout of the Stone shipyard on Eagles Island (Stone Towing Line Records. 1934. Manuscript Collection #679, Greenville, NC: East Carolina University.
21. Sprunt, *Tales and Traditions*, LVII; Jackson, *The Cape Fear*, 237.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Hamme the Hatter, prior to opening his marine railway. Early 20th century. Black and white photographic print. *Wilmington Morning Star*, "'Hamme the Hatter' dressed the city's men," 1984: 1D].
24. Lewis Philip Hall, *Land of the Golden River: Historical Events and Stories of Southeastern North Carolina and the Lower Cape Fear. Volume One: Old Times on the Seacoast- 1526 to 1970* (Wilmington: Wilmington Printing Company, 1975), 33; Jackson, *The Cape Fear*, 238.
25. The Hamme Marine Railway in 1924, looking Southeast, with Edgewater highlighted in the center-bottom. 1924. Black and white photographic print. "Cape Fear's Forgotten Fleet: The Eagles Island Ships Graveyard," East Carolina University, Greenville. Sami Seeb, 2007, 107.
26. "Hamme Marine Railway, Inc: Advertisement," *The Sunday Star*, February 9, 1964., 13B; Jackson, *The Cape Fear*, 238.
27. Fire razed the vacant Hamme site on 02/17/1992, Star News Archives, Wilmington, NC. <http://www.starnewsarchive.com/section/archive> (accessed August 24, 2012).
28. Ralph Scott, *The Wilmington Shipyard: Welding a Fleet for Victory in World War II* (Charleston: The History Press, 2007), 17-67.
29. "Put Away the Cloak and Dagger, Boys," *Wilmington Morning Star*, February 27, 1952, pgs 1, 5.
30. "Ship Lay-Up Basin Work Starts Soon," *Wilmington Morning Star*, December 11, 1945.
31. View of Mothball Fleet, looking East, e-mail interview with Kristina Fischer, January 18, 2010.
32. Lindsey Russell, "Obscure Eagles Island, Now Almost Forgotten, was North Carolina's Rice Bowl in Old Days," *Raleigh News & Observer*, September 19, 1937, Section M, 1-2.
33. BRD, *Register of Deeds*, 1428.1259; Land Management Group, *A Chronological Inventory*, 54-59; Manta, "Ecosystems Land Mitigation Bank Corporation.", <http://www.manta.com/c/mm0p7mz/ecosystems-land-mitigation-bank-corporation> (accessed September 4, 2011).
34. BRD, *Register of Deeds*, 147.400; Skip Crayton, *Remember When: A Collection of Articles from One of New Bern's Most Popular Columnists* (New Bern: McBryde Publishing, 2004), 38-39.
35. BRD, *Register of Deeds*, 906.546.
36. Robert Minford, "For the Love of Profit: Examining Traditional Capitalism on Eagles Island, North Carolina," Greenville, NC: East Carolina University, 2012.
37. BRD, *Register of Deeds*, 59.85, 812.816-829; Hall, *Land of the Golden River*, 83-86.
38. NHRD, *Register of Deeds*, 710.639, 723.12, 681.244, 690.4; Welcome to the Battleship North Carolina, Battleship North Carolina, . www.Battleshipnc.com (accessed September 5, 2011).
39. "Over the river," *Wilmington Morning Star*, March 28, 1985, A8.
40. Tricia Robertson, "Board rejects Eagles Island housing plan," *Wilmington Morning Star*, March 8, 1988, 2C.
41. "An intriguing idea for a convention center," *Wilmington Morning Star*, March 18, 2000, A5.
42. Jason Gonzales, "Development of Eagles Island still very much up in the air," *Wilmington Morning Star*, February 9, 2011, 1B.
43. Wood, *Port Town at War*, 137.

Current Resident Or:

126 South Third Street
Wilmington, NC 28401

HISTORICAL
LOWER
CAPE FEAR
SOCIETY

