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Cape Crusader
The River Keeper speaks

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JOHN HIRCHAK

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FLOWER POWER

The North Carolina Azalea Festival brings over 200,000 people to its street fair each April. For more info, visit ncazalea.com/festival.org



A GREAT PLACE TO LIVE

Local author GRETCHEN SAULE takes an informative walk around

DOWNTOWN WILMINGTON, and discovers why it is more lively than ever.

WILMINGTONIANS TAKE JUSTIFIABLE pride in their fun, inviting downtown and its astonishing revitalization. Like many downtowns throughout post-WWII America, Wilmington's central business district had fallen into disrepair and disrepute, a victim of 1970s suburbanization. A handful of civic-minded business owners steadfastly maintained their downtown locations, but most fled to strip malls, leaving behind vacant buildings interspersed with adult bookstores, seedy bars, and other unwelcome establishments.

In 1976, with plans for an indoor mall threatening to destroy what remained of downtown Wilmington's merchant community, Mayor Ben Halterman formed a task force charged with investigating the issues challenging the city's core. Out of this task force emerged DARE, Inc. (Downtown Area Revitalization Effort), an independent entity focused solely on downtown revitalization through the combined resources of the private and public sectors. After more than a quarter century, this successful private-public partnership continues

today as Wilmington Downtown, Inc.

DARE's initial task was to assist business and property owners in renovating and restoring their buildings. Unfortunately, during the mid-20th century many building owners had attempted to make the old look new again by jack-hammering away or covering up architectural details in favor of a smooth, modern façade. If Wilmington was going to take full advantage of one of its greatest assets—its wealth of historically significant and architecturally diverse structures (more than 200 downtown Wilmington blocks are currently on the National Register of Historic Places)—restoration efforts needed to be planned and funded. Visionary entrepreneurs like Thomas Wright, Jr., quietly bought up some of the more rundown buildings and lovingly restored them. Meanwhile, DARE members began the process of gathering funding for restoration projects and encouraging downtown business owners to recognize the value of their building's history.

One major funding victory

achieved by DARE in conjunction with the City of Wilmington was the acquisition of an Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG). Earmarked for financially struggling urban areas, this federal grant created a low-interest loan pool that would finance renovations and public improvements such as the addition of sidewalk trees and streetlamps. The development of Riverfront Park at the foot of Market Street was also included in this plan to return pedestrian traffic to the downtown area. The envisioned waterfront park and Riverwalk would connect the main anchors of Wilmington's recovering riverfront, the Cotton Exchange to the north and Chandler's Wharf to the south, increasing walkability along the waterfront and attracting tourists visiting the battleship on the other side of the Cape Fear River.

Rescued from demolition in 1972 by entrepreneurs Malcolm Murray and Joe Reaves, the Cotton Exchange is a themed shopping complex of eight buildings. These

historic buildings represent the commercial and industrial waterfront of early 20th-century Wilmington, and have become a great draw for visitors and local shoppers alike. At the south end of the Riverwalk, Chandler's Wharf is part of Thomas Wright, Jr.'s creative development project begun in the early 1970s. One of the more recent examples of smart business development is the Castle Branch relocation to the Cotton Exchange. When the company first arrived in Wilmington, Castle Branch brought 25 employees and utilized 5,000 square feet of office space. In the two and a half years since, they've increased their number of employees to 125 and doubled their office size. They've adapted their office in order to meet their high-tech needs, while still maintaining the character of the historic brick building location.

In present-day Wilmington, many of the downtown and riverfront buildings are mixed-use properties containing retail, office, and residential space. Wilmington's compact and walkable central business district contains approximately 3 million square feet

see page 112



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIN WHITTLE

FAIRLY FULL

CUCALORUS FILM FESTIVAL
March 30-April 3, 2005
www.cucalorus.org

POPLAR GROVE HERB AND GARDEN FAIR
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www.poplargrove.com

NORTH CAROLINA AZALEA FESTIVAL
April 6-10, 2005
www.ncazaleafestival.org

AIRLIE ARTS FESTIVAL
May 5-8, 2005
www.airliegarden.org

9TH ANNUAL PORT OF WILMINGTON MARITIME DAY FESTIVAL
May 22, 2005
www.ncports.com

BATTLESHIP NORTH CAROLINA MEMORIAL DAY OBSERVANCE
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www.battleshipnc.com

CAROLINA BEACH MUSIC FESTIVAL
June 3-5, 2005, Carolina Beach
www.carolinabeachgetaway.com

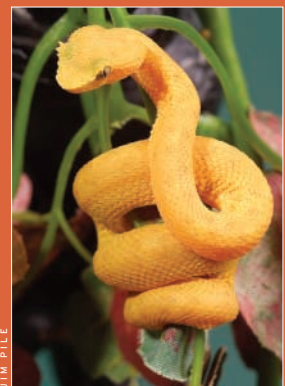
WILMINGTON NAUTICAL FESTIVAL
June 2005
www.nauticalfestival.com

NORTH CAROLINA FOURTH OF JULY FESTIVAL
July 4, 2005, Southport
www.nc4thofjuly.com

CAPE FEAR BLUES FESTIVAL
July 28-31, 2005
www.capefearblues.com/festival.html

RIVERFEST
September 30-October 2, 2005
www.wilmingtonriverfest.com

CAPE FEAR INDEPENDENT FILM FESTIVAL
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CAPE FEAR SERPENTARIUM

910/762-1669

Snakes. Lots of them. Under many of the live-animal exhibits there are thrilling accounts of how each animal was captured.

NEW HANOVER COUNTY ARBORETUM

910/452-6393

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RACINE CENTER FOR THE ARTS

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FIT FOR FUN CENTER

910/341-4630

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UNDERWATER WONDERS

Poet and author REBECCA PIERRE pays a visit to **THE NORTH CAROLINA AQUARIUM**, one of the best in the nation.

TO VISIT THE NORTH CAROLINA Aquarium at Fort Fisher is like taking a journey straight down the Cape Fear River—from swamps and freshwater streams to the coastline, then on to reefs and the open ocean. The adventure begins in the Cape Fear Conservatory. This soaring atrium, topped with pyramid-shaped glass domes, is filled with a half-acre of trees, vegetation, swamps, creeks, waterfalls, and deep pools. You will see Raven Rock, where water tumbles down a rock face into a deep pool. There you will find striped bass, yellow perch, carp, and sturgeon undulating under the water. The path meanders through habitats where you can see aquatic snakes, predatory fish like channel catfish, long-nose gar, and bowfin. In the Carolina Bay area you can look at such carnivorous plants as Venus flytrap (which mainly grows only within a 100-mile radius of Wilmington) and pitcher plant. A favorite exhibit is Town Creek, where three species of turtles and more than a dozen American alligators live.

From there, you can move into the Coastal Waters Gallery where the Coquina Outcrop Touch Pool is a

favorite place for kids. You can hold a live whelk or a hermit crab in your hand, or pet a starfish or horseshoe crab. Other exhibits in this area include the Masonboro Inlet Jetty with its fisherman specials: flounder, red drum, and bluefish; an indoor salt marsh and the Open Oceans Gallery, which includes faux reefs and a sunken vessel, where you can see Loggerhead sea turtles and sea horses. Don't miss Shadows in the Sand, a sandy-bottom habitat where skates and rays fly through the water.

Looking like a slice cut out of the rocky-ledge habitat of the ocean, the 24-foot deep, two-story high Cape Fear Shoals exhibit contains 235,000 gallons of salt water. Five windows allow different vantage points from which to view the more than 300 creatures of 50 species that inhabit the exhibit. One of these windows is a large concave window that allows you to lean inside for a close-up view. Sharks will swim right up to the glass for a close-up view of you! Stingrays, grouper, and reef fish are constantly on the move. Gape-mouthed green Moray eels, lurk in rocky lairs.

Treat yourself to the best place at the coast to learn about the coast—and to marvel at it. ★



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cameronartmuseum.com

**WRIGHTSVILLE BEACH
MUSEUM OF HISTORY**
303 West Salisbury Street
Wrightsville Beach
910/256-2569
wbmuseum.com

**WILMINGTON RAILROAD
MUSEUM**
501 Nutt Street
Wilmington
910/763-2634

**BURGIN-WRIGHT HOUSE
AND GARDEN**
224 Market Street
Wilmington
910/762-0570

CAPE FEAR MUSEUM
814 Market Street
Wilmington
910/341-4350
capefearmuseum.com

BELLAMY MANSION MUSEUM
503 Market Street
Wilmington
910/251-3700
bellamymansion.org

ZEBULON LATIMER HOUSE
126 South Third Street
Wilmington
910/762-0492



Yellow Dog, 2001, by Mark Hewitt is seen at the Louise Wells Cameron Art Museum



SUANN CLIZBE

AROUND THE DOCK

LAWRENCE BIVINS *learns about WILMINGTON'S PORT HISTORY, and its pivotal role in the area's growth.*

FREE TRADE AGREEMENTS MAY BE political fodder across much of the country, but in Wilmington, global economics are hardly fightin' words. That's because generations here have prospered in moving commodities and finished goods across the city's docks.

Trade has been central to Wilmington since its founding. By the 1820s, the city's economic importance soared as rice, peanuts, flax, and cotton were shipped through its port to buyers worldwide. By 1840, Wilmington was North Carolina's largest city, and its population continued to burgeon as exports of lumber, and turpentine sailed to foreign shipbuilders.

The Civil War only heightened Wilmington's commercial—and strategic—appeal. Natural and man-made defenses made the city a Confederate stronghold, and the Cape Fear coast hummed with blockade-running and assorted profiteering. Outbound vessels moved Southern cotton to Bermuda and the Bahamas, while arriving ships fed the Confederacy's war effort with arms and supplies.

Today, even as four towering container cranes punctuate Wilmington's skyline, the port is small compared to mammoth complexes in Norfolk and Charleston. Nor is it nearly as congested, port officials point out. Firms shipping through Wilmington can easily move product in and out of the terminal in the span of hours, not days.

Last year, over 2.3 million tons of cargo en-

tered or left the U.S. via Wilmington. Wood-pulp, food products, and general merchandise led exports, while chemicals, grains, and forest products accounted for what most vessels brought in. And the Port of Wilmington remains more than just a commercial asset. The U.S. military routinely transports personnel and equipment through the facility to global hotspots, most recently Iraq. "Wilmington has been designated by the U.S. government as one of 15 strategic ports," explains Tom Eagar, C.E.O. of the North Carolina Port Authority.

Earlier this year, engineers completed dredging of the Cape Fear River, making its channel deep enough to handle the heaviest container ships. Containerized traffic at the Port of Wilmington is surging by nearly 10 percent annually, Eagar says. He sees the port as a major economic engine for the entire region, spurring high-wage job growth at distribution and logistics firms.

Just as before, a combination of natural and man-made assets positions the port for renewed vitality. For starters, the region's convenient mid-Atlantic location puts thousands of retail establishments within convenient reach, and ample unused acreage around the port means the complex can double its traffic and then some, Eagar says.

"We're on the cusp of some really great things." ★

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[WORD OF MOUTH]

HOLLYWOOD EAST

DAN TYNAN goes behind the scenes of **WILMINGTON'S FILM INDUSTRY**, where everyone has a story to tell.

POP QUIZ: *WHAT DO ANTHONY Hopkins, John Travolta, and Miss Piggy have in common?* ANSWER: They've all made movies in Wilmington.

Since the early 1980s, Hollywood has shot more than 300 features, TV shows, and commercials in this city (including *The Road to Wellville*, *Domestic Disturbance*, and *Muppets From Space*). For six years Wilmington doubled as the mythical town of Capeside, Massachusetts, on "Dawson's Creek." These days it's the setting for the WB Network's "One Tree Hill," as well as an HBO movie starring the group OutKast.

The area's varied landscapes and range of architectural styles make it a natural for many kinds of productions, says Frank Capra Jr., son of the legendary Hollywood director and president of Wilmington's EUE/Screen Gems Studios. After Dino De Laurentiis built the original studio in 1984, filmmakers were able to do all of their sound-stage work here as well as shoot exteriors. As more productions called Wilmington home, a community of craftsmen, artisans, and actors settled in the area.

"Now that we've got a critical mass of the studio, crew members, actors, vendors, and locations, it's a very attractive place to make films," says Capra.

Lower production costs in Canada and Eastern Europe have hurt the area's once-booming film industry. At its height in the early '90s Wilmington took in more than \$200 million worth of film and TV work each year, says Johnny Griffin, director of the Wilmington Regional Film Commission. Last year the industry generated about \$35 million. That's why Capra and Griffin are lobbying state legislators for in-

centive programs to help producers recoup some costs and make shooting here more affordable.

Capra says film productions have benefited the area in other ways—bringing in new shops and restaurants, boosting tourism, and making Wilmington a more attractive place to live. It's also brought an odd kind of fame to some of the city's residents.

One or two days each month, Susan Carter lends her Wilmington home to the cast and crew of "One Tree Hill." The company shoots exteriors at her home, and then tapes interior scenes at the studio using duplicates of rooms in Carter's house. "They went to a lot of effort to reproduce the exact look of my rooms, even down to the appliances," she says. "Visiting the set is a very strange experience."

She says everyone at OTH has been easy to work with, and that her teenage daughter has become friends with some of the cast.

And having your house in a TV show does make for a heck of a story. In Wilmington, as in Hollywood, the story is everything—and this town's got plenty of stories left to tell. ★



LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION! Frank Capra Jr. relaxes on a film set in Wilmington.

Profile **Wilmington**
and the Lower Cape Fear Region

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CAFFÉ PHOENIX
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Wilmington
910/343-1395

CIRCA 1922
8 North Front Street
Wilmington
910/762-1922
circa1922.com



Deluxe Café

DELUXE CAFÉ
114 Market Street
Wilmington
910/251-0333
deluxenc.com

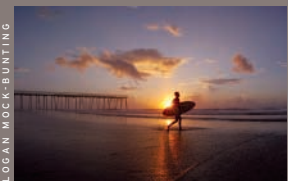
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Chandler's Wharf
Wilmington
910/343-0200
pilotouserestaurant.com

**WHERE'S
 THE BEACH**



THE ATLANTIC OCEAN is where it's at for many of the tourists who come to Wilmington and the Cape Fear Coast. Directly east of the city lies **Wrightsville Beach** with its marinas, fishing charters, cruise boats, surfing, new concrete fishing pier, luxurious accommodations, and, of course, the beach—miles and miles of it, backed by big, expensive houses and condos. Public beach accesses are plentiful, but parking is not, so in the summer come early with lots of quarters for the meters.

To the south, **Pleasure Island** and its two communities, **Carolina Beach** and **Kure Beach** have about seven miles of sand with lots of beach access and parking, plus a couple of fishing piers and many motels. The Carolina Beach boat basin is home to several large "head boats," popular for both cruises and fishing, and quite a few deep sea fishing charter boats are berthed here. Several major fishing tournaments are held in Carolina Beach.



A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

REBECCA PIERRE goes out on the water with Cape Fear's visionary **RIVERKEEPER**.

THE WORDS "CAPE FEAR" CAN instill a thrill of dread in the hearts of those who remember the movie. They inspired trepidation in the founders of Wilmington, and their followers who braved Frying Pan Shoals at the mouth of the treacherous river. But the Cape Fear River was the source for the establishment, preservation, and progress of this city 30 miles upstream from the ocean.

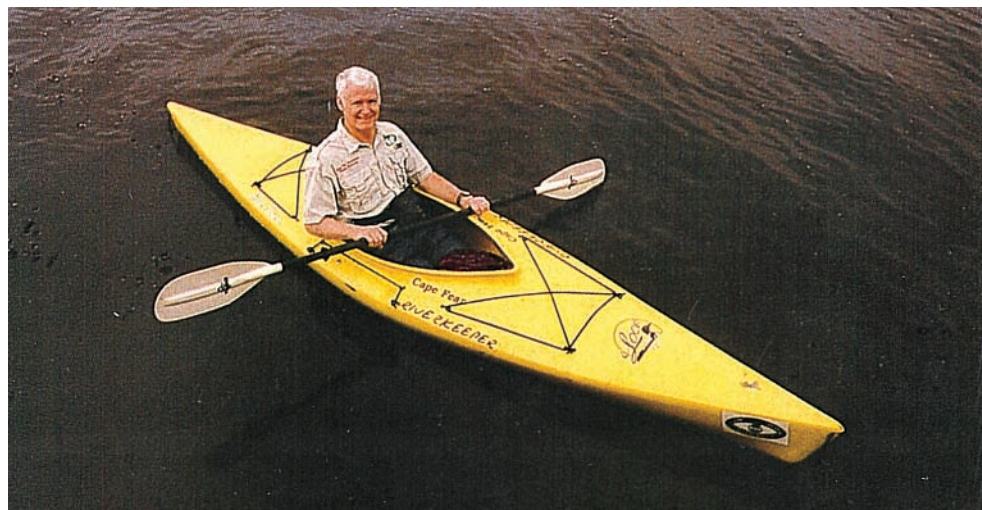
But more than this, the Cape Fear River is the source of 100 percent of Wilmington's water supply. This fact alone gives credence to the passion of Bouty Baldrige. When Baldrige met Rick Dove, keeper of the Neuse River, he knew that it was his destiny to become keeper of the Cape Fear. He began by helping to incorporate the Cape Fear River Watch. Under the auspices of the Water Keeper Alliance, which began in 1966 when fishermen banded together to reclaim the Hudson River in New York, there are now 123 keepers world wide. The mission statement of the CFRW reads: "To protect and improve water quality of the Lower Cape Fear River Basin through education, advocacy

and action."

Baldrige's background in environmental studies and his dedication to preserving the purity of the Cape Fear River make him an excellent spokesman for the CFRW. Because storm-water runoff is the number one source of surface-water pollution caused by sediment, automobile fluids, fertilizers, pesticides and pet waste, to name a few, the CFRW is working on a storm water program for the county which is linked to the city program. Baldrige works with the Coastal Federation and the Sierra Club and helps to get the community involved in clean-up days. His father helps by volunteering with the paddleboat and canoe rentals at Greenfield Lake, the proceeds of which go to CFRW.

Projects undertaken by the group include the installation of two wetland areas along Burnt Mill Creek and the stocking of grass-eating carp in Greenfield Lake. Earth Day Celebrations, environmental education classes, and speakers once a month are fun and educational venues.

Volunteer and internship opportunities are available as well. ★



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[WORD OF MOUTH]



FLOATING HISTORY

LAWRENCE BIVENS boards the **U.S.S. NORTH CAROLINA**, where visitors can marvel at a great gray lady of the sea.

SOME MIGHT GAZE UPON A 46,000-ton battleship and see a symbol of war. But those who operate the U.S.S. *North Carolina*, docked since 1961 on the banks of the Cape Fear River, see it as a reminder of freedom's price.

"One of the things we try to do here is get people to remember this era—one of the most significant in American history," says Capt. David Scheu, USN (Ret.), director of the U.S.S. *North Carolina* Battleship Commission. The vessel, which serves as the state's official World War II memorial, is a permanent tribute to the sailors and marines stationed aboard it during six years at sea. Though their ranks are thinning, veterans continue to reunite at the *North Carolina*, and various oral history projects have chronicled the ship's participation in all 12 Pacific campaigns during World War II. "These were guys right out of Brokaw's Greatest Generation," Scheu says.

At the time of its commissioning in 1941, the

U.S.S. *North Carolina* was the most technologically advanced weapon in the American arsenal. With its massive guns, the ship was formidable in protecting U.S. aircraft carriers from airborne assault. And it was nothing if not sturdy, even withstanding a direct torpedo hit at Guadalcanal. "She survived the best Japanese torpedo and lived to tell the tale," explains Scheu.

Visitors are free to roam the ship's nine decks, on which some 2,339 officers and crew lived, worked, and fought. "It was basically a small city at sea," Scheu says. In addition to sleeping quarters, hospital, and engine room, the ship had its own newspaper, movie theatre, chapel, and post office.

The U.S.S. *North Carolina* is open daily. The site is accessible by car, though a water taxi shuttles visitors across the river on summer days and on certain weekends during spring and fall. For more information, visit battleshipnc.com. ★

Profile
Wilmington
and the Lower Cape Fear Region

FORT FISHER HERMIT



A CAROLINA BEACH legend, the Fort Fisher Hermit lived for 16 years in an abandoned WWII army bunker out on the marsh. With nothing but the 9x15-foot concrete bunker for shelter and whatever seafood he could catch for dinner, 63-year old Robert Harrill preferred a simple life.

Despite this chosen isolation, Harrill wasn't alone for long. During the 1960s, word spread about a weather-worn old man's seaside lessons in life. Thousands of visitors from around the country signed the Fort Fisher hermit's guestbook, and were treated to his vivid storytelling and fervent love of the beach.

The Fort Fisher Hermit died more than 30 years ago, but the stories linger, especially in Carolina Beach, where locals recall lively encounters. Visitors can experience a taste of the hermit's peaceful co-existence with nature by hiking a trail that begins behind the Fort Fisher Recreation Center and runs through the marshlands where the hermit's bunker still stands. For more info, ftfishermilrec.com

— Gretchen Saule

FORT FISHER HERMIT PHOTOGRAPH (CA. 1972'S); ROBERT E. HARRILL PAPERS (1488; 28-PA20/15); SPECIAL COLLECTIONS DEPARTMENT, J.V. JOHNER LIBRARY, ECU