

RETAINING WILMINGTON: THE ROLE OF CLASS, HERITAGE AND MEMORY
IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION, 1882-1963

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ABSTRACT

History is made by those who write it, and preservationists write history through the medium of historic buildings. The historic, built environment is irreplaceable, and the work of historic preservation is indispensable in maintaining our sense of identity and place. Historic preservation is a field that aims to maintain the character of a place by renovating and retaining historic structures, and with them the memory of the people who built and used them. Historic preservation was begun and is traditionally led by the upper classes in American society. Early preservation in Wilmington, from the last decades of the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, illustrates the fact that the powerful create and preserve their own history, and that the upper classes are motivated to memorialize their own heritage through the built environment. This work argues that the success of early preservation in Wilmington was directly proportional to the degree of investment by the upper classes in a specific property. Early successes and failures of preservation as exemplified through the case studies of the Burgwin-Wright House, City Hall-Thalian Hall, the main branch of the United States Post Office, and others support this argument. These examples, as well as the historiography and evolution of historic preservation over time, highlight upper class motivations for preservation such as memorializing, retaining their sense of place and solidifying their position as leaders of society. An examination of early efforts at preservation within the state of North Carolina and across the United States indicates that events in Wilmington reflected larger trends.

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DEDICATION

To Mum and Dad
With Love

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The past simply is wholly unknowable; it is the past as residually preserved in the present that is alone knowable.

R.G. Collingwood

During 2003 and 2004, the city of Wilmington, North Carolina faced two critical tests of its commitment to historic preservation. The tests shed light on why the community needs to preserve historic buildings if it is to maintain a tangible memory of its history. A pioneering hospital for the treatment of infants, converted into offices in the 1980s, and a pre-Civil War Ice House, possibly the oldest in the Southeast, were each threatened by development pressure. At stake were prime locations in the heart of Wilmington's riverfront and at the entrance to Wrightsville Beach. Led by Wilmington's Historic Preservation Commission and the Wilmington City Council, local preservationists, historians, and educators all voiced their concerns in a prolonged fight for preservation. Despite a massive groundswell of support from an increasingly indignant public, both buildings were eventually razed. Neither site has been redeveloped, and no plans are on the horizon. In each instance, the property owners proceeded with demolition despite the almost certain knowledge that their plans for new development would be denied due to current zoning laws. The loss of local character, identity and history was clear, and yet hardly unsurprising, as such struggles have been the basis of preservation in Wilmington since the nineteenth century.

In battles such as these, the frequent victory of 'money now' over broader, more intangible benefits points to the intrinsic problem of preservation in the United States. As preservationist James Marston Fitch notes, the country "tends to regard the past, as

represented by existing urban fabric, as merely an obstacle to future growth.”¹ New development is habitually perceived as forward-reaching, dynamic and therefore American in nature. By comparison, preservation seems conservative and static. Historic buildings are often a given in the landscape, neither celebrated nor appreciated, and it is of critical importance that the preservation effort does not view the simple fact of their remaining presence as the completion of its public mission. Success in preservation is often low-profile, particularly when compared to the spectacular and obvious failure of a historic site under demolition. In Wilmington, numerous preservation successes, such as the 2004 relocation and renovation of the Cronly-Vezina House on Summer Rest Road, pass virtually unnoticed. Failures such as Babies Hospital and the Ice House are much more widely recognized, a fact which can be dangerous to the continuation of historic preservation. It takes visionaries to breathe new life into an old building, to marry the two threads of continuance and growth in a manner which results in the maintenance of a sense of place in America.

This paper will argue that the success of early preservation in Wilmington was directly proportional to the degree of investment by the upper classes in a specific property. The elite were motivated to invest emotionally in preservation by their sense of place, their attachment to their own heritage, and their obligation to serve as leaders in society (termed here as ‘noblesse oblige’). Wilmington has been said to contain the richest collection of nineteenth urban architecture in North Carolina.² It was the sense of identity felt by the upper class for Wilmington that moved them to successfully preserve

¹ James Marston Fitch, *Historic Preservation: Curatorial Management of the Built World* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1990), x.

² Catherine W. Bishir, *North Carolina Architecture* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, for Preservation North Carolina, Inc., 1990), xi.

that architectural heritage. In defending this argument it will be necessary to recognize that the powerful create and preserve their own view of history first and foremost. This thesis will examine how historic preservation has evolved as a private and institutionalized field at the federal, state and local levels. The text will also discuss how an entrepreneurial business class joined old Southern elites as the leaders of society as the region developed economically. The period under discussion encompasses Reconstruction after the Civil War and leads into the early 1960s and as that decade began there was an intense period of rampant urban renewal and widespread demolition. Therefore, the 1960s serves as a natural bookend for the evolution of the field as presented in these pages.

The historic built environment is literally irreplaceable, but clearly not every element can be retained. The following is intended to be a discussion of why we preserve, who does the preservation and what they choose to keep. The manner in which a society preserves, primarily through buildings and memorials, reflects the varying perceptions of history within that society. By using local studies and reflecting on how upper classes dictate the success of preservation, this study will endeavor to discover how our community can lose both an Ice House and a Babies Hospital in the post-industrial age and still be wrestling with issues first raised during Reconstruction.

Defining Historic Preservation

What constitutes historic preservation is not easily or plainly defined. Preservation is a process practiced by Foundations, Commissions, and City Councils, as well as by individuals and private, public and non-profit groups. All essentially deal with saving recorded history in the form of historic buildings. As each structure carries a rich

history of architects, builders, owners and tenants, preservation also becomes concerned with preserving written, oral, and photographic history. Because the urban landscape itself is a product of its occupants, all that surrounds historic structures becomes a matter for preservation.

Four mission statements of preservation groups present succinct definitions. Founded in 1949, the National Trust for Historic Preservation provides “leadership, education, advocacy and resources to save America’s historic places and revitalize our communities.”³ Preservation North Carolina, founded in 1939, is determined to “protect and promote buildings, sites and landscapes important to the diverse heritage of North Carolina.”⁴ The Lower Cape Fear Historical Society began in 1956, originally dedicating itself to the preservation and study of history in the lower Cape Fear region in a literary and educational capacity; since the 1970s the Society concentrates on preserving records and disseminating knowledge of local history.⁵ And the Historic Wilmington Foundation, originally a part of the Historical Society until its inception in 1966, exists “to protect and preserve the irreplaceable historic resources of Wilmington and the lower Cape Fear region.”⁶ All are clearly mandated to save not only historic buildings, but also their respective contextual history.

Preservation methods have evolved over the years. Legislation has led to the designation of landmarks and the establishment of oversight bodies such as historic preservation commissions. Preservation groups teach educational outreach courses,

³ National Trust for Historic Preservation. “History is in Our Hands.” 2006. <http://www.nationaltrust.org>.

⁴ Preservation North Carolina. *Homepage*. 2006. <http://www.presnc.org>.

⁵ Lower Cape Fear Historical Society. “About the Society.” 2006. <http://www.latimerhouse.org/society.shtml>.

⁶ Historic Wilmington Foundation. “Historic Wilmington Foundation.” 2006. <http://www.historicwilmington.org>.

manage historic plaque and marker programs, and utilize revolving funds to buy, secure and sell endangered properties.⁷ Federal tax credits encouraging restoration support not only the piecing together of a building that has seen better days, but also the documentary work of writing a history: researching deeds, city directories and tax records in order to establish the historic value of place.

Preservation at the Federal level is by definition bureaucratic. Even after the emergence of a professional apparatus in the 1930s and 1940s, the burden of preservation was still primarily assumed by interested locals. The National Park Service defines the cultural landscape quite narrowly; in keeping with the nature of bureaucracy, the wider sweep of history and preservation demands applicable definitions. Their definitions include the moniker of 'Historic Site,' which either names a place significant for its connection to an historic event or person or designates a specifically deliberate landscape, such as a formal garden. The broader term 'Historic Vernacular Landscape' refers to a location in which a use evolves within the landscape, such as with tobacco fields and barns. Finally, an 'Ethnographic Landscape' connotes "an area of cultural resources definable as heritage resources."⁸ In the late twentieth century, the Secretary of the Interior defined preservation as "the act or process of applying measures to sustain the existing form, integrity, and material of a building or structure."⁹ This definition, while

⁷ For a general overview of the evolution of historic preservation as a field, consult Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., *Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926-1949*, 2 vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia for The Preservation Press, National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States, 1981).

⁸ Charles Birnbaum, *Preservation Brief 36. Protecting Cultural Landscapes: Planning, Treatment and Management of Historic Landscapes*. (Washington D.C., National Park Service, Preservation Assistance Division, 1994), 1-2; quoted in Robert Z. Melnick and Arnold R. Alanen, eds., *Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America*. Center Books on Contemporary Landscape Design, ed. Frederick R. Steiner and George F. Thompson. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 8.

⁹ William J. Murtagh, *Keeping Time: The History and Theory of Preservation in America*, (Pittstown, N.J.: The Main Street Press; Scarborough, Ontario: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1988), 19.

instructive, is a relatively recent development. Historians must be cautious in applying modern definitions to the formative years of the preservation movement, as no such definitions existed at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Historic preservation is the retention of the historic built environment, and this retention serves as a catalyst for further historical education. The journal *Preservation News* describes the field as possessing three goals: education, recreation and inspiration.¹⁰ Although archives certainly give insight to the past, education is more likely to be effective when the physical presence of the built environment supplements the written word. Actually standing in Mount Vernon or Monticello, or indeed in the Bellamy Mansion, grants an immediacy to history that is impossible to reproduce in documents or memoirs. The sensory experience of landscape is vital to the imagination, as the popularity of heritage tourism attests.

This leads to the second goal of the preservationist movement: recreation, or the leisurely enjoyment of place. In Wilmington, visitors to the Bellamy Mansion are exposed to a faithful interpretation of upper class daily life in the Old South. Historic sites in the latter half of the twentieth century strive to provide a first person, relatively objective, perspective that monolithic stereotypes cannot capture. For many visitors, the sheer enjoyment of temporarily inhabiting another era cannot be underestimated. Aside from the instructive nature of historic sites, the historic experience often holds entertainment value, a fact which the tourism and recreation industries certainly realize.

The third goal of the preservation movement concerns the various inspirational uses of preserving a building or monument. Many countries habitually use architecture to

¹⁰ David Poinsett, in *Readings in Historic Preservation: Why? What? How?*, ed. Norman Williams, Jr., Edmund H. Kellogg, and Frank B. Gilbert, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Center for Urban Policy Research, for the Environmental Law Center of Vermont Law School, 1983), 61-62.

inspire nationalism. In the United States, public architecture such as the Lincoln Memorial can be representative of the fight for freedom and democracy. Public architecture is also utilized to celebrate patriotism, such as with the World War II memorial in Washington, D.C. Architecture can illustrate the costs of war, as seen in the meeting of sculpture and intent in the Korea and Vietnam War memorials in Washington.¹¹ Architecture can also grant a city an instantly recognizable aesthetic footprint, such as the St. Louis Arch or the Golden Gate Bridge. Architecture is an art form which both informs the viewer and provokes an emotional reaction. As with any highly visible art, architecture often sparks considerable controversy, as we shall see in the various struggles to preserve buildings in Wilmington.

Historically, the role of preservation has been to maintain and to study historic buildings. As preservation has long been an occupation of the elite, preservation primarily frames the past through the lens of those with the money or power to make preservation happen, creating in turn a new – and imbalanced – history. Education, recreation and inspiration provide a good starting point in the attempt to define historic preservation. With the addition of economics and politics, along with the concepts of heritage and identity as derived from and reflected in the built environment, the definition becomes more robust. All of these issues are contextualized both by the era in question as well as by current historians' retrospective opinions. The present view of a past reality is what makes preservation valuable. Preservation gives us the power to see and touch the past at the same moment that we understand what the past has meant. However, that understanding is presented to us by those people who chose what to preserve and is the

¹¹ For an informative discussion on the nature of monuments, see the entire text of James W. Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York: The New Press, 1999).

version of the irreplaceable link to the past that early, upper class, preservationists sought to maintain.

Historian Randall Mason argues that early preservationists enacted the notion of “spatializing memory – preserving and expressing historical memory in material form.”¹² According to Mason this was an extension of eighteenth and nineteenth century Enlightenment theories, which focused on environmental determinism. This meant the deliberate use of the urban fabric to present a particular view of history because of the attachment of the upper class to their sense of place, which in turn led to successful preservation. In the context of Wilmington’s case studies buildings become texts for creating a history, rather than conserving a history. The “power” of historic memory was “an inherent quality of old buildings and historical places”, including memorials, and, “Preservation activated this power.”¹³ Wilmington’s elites as early preservationists, therefore, were casting historic memory, often literally, in stone.

Preservation has evolved around and beyond the material act of restoring a structure. Early preservationists were most successful because they pushed the definition of preservation beyond those initial boundaries of the built environment. In the late twentieth century, saving a historic building has become a process that includes restoration tax credits, low interest loans, preservation contractors, supervised districts and much more institutional help. Preservation is not merely concerned with the built environment, but with recording the history of the people who inhabited that landscape,

¹² Randall Mason, “Historic Preservation, Public Memory, and the Making of Modern New York City” in *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States*, ed. Max Page and Randall Mason, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 140.

¹³ Ibid.

both past and present. Successful preservation keeps the link between people and buildings alive.

Mike Wallace presents the idea that “the historic preservation movement was born, over a century ago, in opposition to a free-wheeling, free market era, when profit-seeking Americans ... routinely demolished what prior generations had constructed.”¹⁴ The term he coins for this is ‘historicide,’ an impulse he believes is embedded in the culture. It has taken the birth and development of the preservation movement, created and managed by the upper class to memorialize themselves and the glories of the country, to check progress when it has threatened to overwhelm the historic built environment.

Although preservation is of immense value to society, American culture still does not tend to recognize the gifts it provides. In James Marston Fitch’s view, preservation has hence become a series “frantic efforts of archaeologists, anthropologists, and art historians to keep ahead of the technological manipulation of the landscape.”¹⁵ The reasons we preserve today are not far removed in rationale from the early attempts to retain historic structures. They include not only a conservative urge to offset ‘progress’ with the realization that our history defines us, but also a progressive realization that history and progress should intermingle to create a dynamic urban fabric.

¹⁴ Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 9.

¹⁵ Fitch, *Historic Preservation*, 23.

CHAPTER TWO: THE GOLDEN RULE

The aphorism of the Golden Rule is thus: he who has the gold makes the rule. Historic preservation has long been an upper class interest. The preservationist historian James Fitch terms this interest an “inherent bias,” a claim he supports by noting that “most of the artifacts studied and conserved have been monumental – palaces, cathedrals, and parliaments: the seats of the powerful and the famous.”¹⁶ The values of the ruling classes have been preserved through literature, buildings, and politics, and their dominance has left vernacular architecture behind and relegated the working class experience to the cultural periphery. According to Fitch, the focus on the experience of landlords, literati and the like has meant a “narrow and compartmentalized attitude toward the artistic and historic heritage [which] has had a stultifying effect”¹⁷ in terms of marginalizing the masses. Preservation was insidiously myopic before the social revolution of the 1960s, when American culture began to place more value on its own diversity.

All archetypes of early preservation necessarily feature iconoclasts like the women who saved Washington’s home at Mount Vernon. Leaders in preservation have also been multimillionaire industrialists and philanthropists with largesse like Carnegie, Rockefeller and Ford. From a preservation standpoint, Rockefeller is most remembered as the man who funded the Colonial Williamsburg project. While some grand visionaries surely sought to memorialize themselves as benevolent leaders of the age, their level of genuine interest and altruism should not be discounted. What unites this type of person is their investment in history and historic properties. In Wilmington there are many

¹⁶ Fitch, *Historic Preservation*, 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

examples of this archetype, even though they may not be as rich as Rockefeller. James Sprunt, Thomas Wright Jr., the Murchison and Boney families are just a few examples of impassioned leaders from the upper classes who invest in historic preservation and do all that they can to assure its success. These elites had and still have money and social power, and they are willing to use both for preservation purposes. While preservation is not always successful, the chances of saving a building increase proportionally with the level of interest invested by committed, rich, powerful people.

James Loewen contends that in both historic preservation and memorial building, the upper class always wins. Susan Schrieber of the National Trust for Historic Preservation is cited as saying that all nineteen sites the trust owned in 1999 were first ‘owned by the elite,’ with the exception of one Frank Lloyd Wright House, and even that home was situated on the grounds of a plantation mansion.¹⁸ Loewen’s thesis, proved again and again in his 500 page text *Lies Across America*, is that local biases create local history. These biases may be narrow, parochial, altruistic, racist, personal, elitist, nostalgic or political – in short, they run the entire gamut. Preservation, whether of a building or the interpretation of an event, is certainly subject to those biases. When one considers the fact that preservation is usually driven by the money required to complete the renovation of a property or the construction of a monument, the significance of biases in creating history becomes evident.

In Wilmington, Confederate monuments like those in Oakdale Cemetery and at the intersection of Third and Dock streets are illustrative of these biases. Such monuments are prominently placed and locally sanctioned, yet they provide only a

¹⁸ Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 14.

snapshot from the memory of one specific group among the population. Historic preservation is a major tool by which those in the position to define history create and preserve their own legacy. As far as monuments and memorials are concerned, there is certainly evidence in the literature to support the argument that preservation serves the rich and powerful sections of society and supplies the rest of society with that subjective vision.

While a slanted view of history was often preserved by those who wished to memorialize their own social group, it is important to note that this is a natural consequence of bias. Historic perspective shapes how we preserve. Objectivity in history is virtually impossible, as biases are natural for authors and readers alike. The same relative viewpoints that shape our interpretations of history also dictate what buildings are saved, what monuments are built, whose history is recorded and what is lost.

For example, the Civil War and subsequent Reconstruction period coincided with a boom period in monument building and a low point in race relations in the South. The political weakness of white Republicans and the subsequent rise of white supremacists to positions of power, coupled with the disenfranchisement of blacks and a simultaneous upturn in memorializing, all resulted in a neo-Confederacy after 1865. James Loewen believes the times allowed groups like the Daughters of the Confederacy and Sons of Confederate Veterans to distort why the South seceded, simultaneously memorializing and glorifying the Southern cause through their idealization of history. In fact, Loewen

argues that “erecting these monuments was a way to continue the Civil War by other means.”¹⁹

An event’s remembered history is shaped by those who preserve its particulars, and the built environment is customarily maintained by those who wish to keep their own history alive. Though this is not the only motivation for preservation, the Wilmington case studies analyzed here indicate the persistence of this motivation. Each of Wilmington’s most prominent monuments demonstrates the manner in which a subjective use of history serves the needs of the upper class. Memorializing after an event takes different forms, each of which shapes history in turn; these memorials themselves then become the lens through which future generations understand the past. Historians are therefore faced with the critical task of extrapolating the actual truth from written records, newspapers, and personal narratives, rather than simply from the more concrete archives of buildings, memorials and historic markers.

An interesting corollary of the golden rule involves the manner in which the behavior of the accumulated masses mimics the behavior of the elite individual. The golden rule is so ingrained in American society that the influence of a group is rarely extended to those outside of the group, as power itself has come to signify – and legitimize – self-interest. In this society, the fact that the elite choose most frequently to preserve their own heritage first is almost considered so self-evident as to be beyond reproach; the self-interest of the rich is emulated by the poor and disenfranchised who do come to power. This institutionalized mentality works at odds with the diverse aims of modern historic preservation. When social or political groups gain the money, the

¹⁹ Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 38-40.

position and the inclination to memorialize, they will customarily begin – and often end – with memorials to themselves, their peers and their own heritage.

However, these groups are still responsible for the majority of America's memorials to the working class and minorities, if not precisely to the poor. For example, Loewen notes that “Labor unions have precisely the three factors needed to influence state marker offices: political influence, some historical expertise, and money for the marker.”²⁰ Without their influence, labor union history might not be preserved at all. So a leading question about preservation for historians becomes who is preserving and documenting specific events in history?

In its selective memorialization, Wilmington is a microcosm of a trend prevalent during the first half of the twentieth century. The United States is most consistent in the preservation of grand places, mansions such as Biltmore in Asheville, NC, or Hearst's San Simeon in California. In Wilmington, the most celebrated historic places are also those left by the rich, the powerful, and the white. Orton Plantation, Bellamy Mansion, Governor Dudley Mansion, Burgwin-Wright House, Latimer houses, City Hall-Thalian Hall and most downtown churches are the former domains of the white elite. Wherever one looks is the reality of the time: those with money built and designed the places that posterity will preserve. The poor, the lower class and non-whites are far less well represented in Wilmington. Many people may be moved by the high quality of architecture and construction of many structures in Wilmington. But, despite the fine artistry of architects such as James F. Post or Henry Bonitz's designs, Wilmington's historic structures are still landmarks of the white elite and their symbolism cannot be

²⁰ Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 33.

reduced by an appreciation of their beauty. When viewed through the medium of historic buildings, history here is selective.

While the country does possess a sense of the modest history of worthy, lower-class Americans, preservation of such history is not built into everyday society. When the United States does retain its ‘smaller’ history, the sites are generally thematically presented, such as the colonial village of Williamsburg, Virginia. One of the more notable examples of this style of thematic preservation – as referred to in the title *Mickey Mouse History* – is Henry Ford’s collection of birthplaces. Ford traveled the country in search of the birthplaces of inventors such as Harvey Firestone and the Wright brothers, finding each house only to promptly uproot the structure from its original location. He shipped them all to one property in Dearborn, Michigan. No longer history in situ, these sites were now pronounced historic – an instant tourist success – by virtue of their new positions vis-à-vis their neighbors. Ford bargained on the evidently true idea that for Americans, neither the place nor the year of birth was necessarily intrinsic to the concept of ‘birthplace.’ Suddenly, Edison became Firestone’s neighbor, sharing a mutual Midwestern childhood.²¹ For Americans, it seems even the nation’s modest history must be aggrandized in order to attract public attention.

If successes in early preservation are proportional to the level of investment by the upper classes, then that thesis is certainly mirrored by the failures that occur when ‘forgotten’ histories and sites are eventually found and examined. When fewer people, particularly those from the wealthy upper class, are invested in specific properties or even in whole communities, both can easily be lost. Historians who define themselves as ‘cultural landscape preservationists’ are bent on seeking out the forgotten vernacular

²¹ Murtaugh, *Keeping Time*, 36-37.

architecture of small, rural historic scenes, the landscape itself as a historical setting.²²

They also believe that the preservation of buildings and architecture requires the context surrounding the structures to be explained, and they utilize this approach to address the gaps in historiography.

In Wilmington, some elements of a ‘smaller’ history, a more common and less ostentatious history of the lower classes, did manage to survive, though their retention was more accidental than a matter of preservation. Carolina Place, Carolina Heights and Winoca Terrace are examples of commuter suburbs on trolley lines which have found new life in the modern era. While some of the houses found in these suburbs are large homes once owned by business managers and leaders, many are small cottages from the 1920s. Perry, Pender, Wolcott and Creecy streets in Carolina Place are perfect examples of this architectural demographic. Another historic district, Sunset Park, is comprised of homes belonging largely to dock workers from the first decades of the twentieth century. Today these neighborhoods are revitalizing, historic plaques are appearing and house prices rising commensurately.

Aside from these subdivisions, the downtown historic district also spans a great deal of functional residential architecture. While these spots are generally less celebrated than their grander cousins and usually far more threatened by development, it would be a mistake to overlook their presence as part of the town’s urban fabric. Providing examples of a hidden architecture that is often bypassed is valuable because it helps to remove the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality that can often be attached to preservation efforts by emphasizing what is regularly excluded.

²² Robert Z. Melnick and Arnold R. Alanen, eds., *Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America*. Center Books on Contemporary Landscape Design, ed. Frederick R. Steiner and George F. Thompson. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 9.

CHAPTER THREE: THE EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN PRESERVATION

We are not building this country of ours for a day; it has to last through the ages.

Theodore Roosevelt

Preservation law can be traced back to April 20th 1832, when President Andrew Jackson restricted development in Hot Springs, Arkansas, and declared the town reserved for the use of the people of the United States. Unfortunately, Jackson's proclamation was not enforced. While Hot Springs National Park predates the more famous Yellowstone by forty years, the town was preserved in name only.

Whereas Fitch believes "It is safe to assume that any independent nation in the world today is committed, at least in principle, to the theory that the protection of the national artistic and historic heritage is a responsibility of the state,"²³ it is also true that the State did not start the preservation movement. In the United States, preservationists relied very little on government at either a state or federal level until the New Deal, even though Federal legislation created the National Park Service and its kin prior to the 1930s.

James Fitch explores the misconception of preservation as recent concern, noting that "Americans are inclined to think of the historic preservation movement as being a phenomenon of the past fifty years or so. Actually ... conscious intervention in the defense of the national and artistic heritage began at least as long ago as the foundation of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association in 1859."²⁴ The story of George Washington's home is instructive because it reflects a style of preservation that was often repeated between 1900 and 1950 in Wilmington and elsewhere. At Mount Vernon the impetus was local, the mode genteel, and the motivations altruistic and highly patriotic. These are

²³ Fitch, *Historic Preservation*, 399.

²⁴ Fitch, *Historic Preservation*, 13.

currents in preservation that recur throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Earlier attempts at preservation across the State were almost always led by private individuals or small interest groups from the upper classes, along the lines of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association (MVLA) in Virginia.

At the start of the twentieth century, preservation “reflected a growing tendency for Americans to find their history in their architecture and not just in written documents.”²⁵ The people who followed the MVLA model in later years can be divided into specialized groups. By the time of Reconstruction, many merchants in antebellum New England considered themselves to be representative of old money. As they struggled to keep their place at the vanguard of American aristocratic society, such merchants used preservation as a means to slow modernity.²⁶ Preservation enabled them to maintain the character of their surroundings while still retaining, and thereby emphasizing, their place in society.

Alongside this group were enlightened anthropologists who headed west after the Civil War and found indigenous history under threat. For example, Harvard’s Peabody Museum purchased the Great Serpent Mound and deeded it to the State of Ohio.²⁷ The urgent need to preserve Native American history before it was obliterated by the progress of advancing white civilization led directly to the 1906 Antiquities Act. This act, which was “honorific and applied only to properties of national significance”,²⁸ covered only

²⁵ David Louis Sterrett Brook, *A Lasting Gift of Heritage: A History of the North Carolina Society for the Preservation of Antiquities, 1939-1974*. (Raleigh, N.C.: Preservation North Carolina and Division of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1997), xi.

²⁶ Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, 181.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Brook, *Lasting Gift*, 16.

federal property and was subsequently limited. However, it was the first successful step in the direction of nationalized preservation.

Section 1 of the Antiquities Act defines the penalties for anyone who destroys an historic monument, ruin, or antiquity on government lands. Upon conviction, the perpetrator would be imprisoned for up to 90 days or fined no more than \$500.²⁹

Whether such a law was actually enforced or even enforceable in the heady days of westward expansion, railroad building, massive immigration and rampant urbanization is highly debatable. Section 2 of the Act authorizes the U.S. President to proclaim “historic landmarks...to be national monuments”³⁰ whenever they are found on federal land. Although in reality Section 2 covered only isolated buildings and a few archaeological sites, its existence set a precedent which lent more authority to the National Park Service and sites such as Mount Vernon.

In 1916, the management of federal government-owned properties designated historic by the Antiquities Act came into the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, a branch of the Department of the Interior, where they remain today.³¹ The National Park Service Act itself, made law in 1916, preserved landscapes and landmarks for the nation and finally institutionalized preservation at a federal level. This federal legislation imposed some clarity on a field that had historically been unregulated and largely ignored by the government.³² The Antiquities Act may have been weak, but it did mark in a change in the culture towards preservation rather than unfettered growth.

²⁹ *Antiquities Act of 1906, U.S. Code*, 34 Stat. 225, secs. 431-433 (1906).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, 180-183.

³² *National Park Service Organic Act, U.S. Code*, 39 Stat. 535, sec. 1 (1916).

Charles Hosmer's two-volume *Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926-1949* is a comprehensive history of the preservation movement in the period. Beginning in the 1920s with William Goodwin's vision of saving an entire historic community at Williamsburg, Hosmer describes a myriad of preservation efforts by local, state and federal groups, concluding with the National Trust's formation in 1949. Hosmer is exhaustive in his biography of the preservationists' impulse and his work is a history of visionaries. He highlights members of community preservation groups that organized before World War One and who quickly realized what the country's rapid industrialization could mean to the American built environment. The rise of automobiles and the mobility they provided helped launch many house museums, as tourism based on traveling to a location and seeing the heritage *in situ* was born. Hosmer points out that the National Parks recorded only a quarter of a million visitors in 1914, but two and a quarter million by 1926.³³ Personal transportation was the key, and preservation boomed as new forms of entertainment were sought out by the increasingly mobile population. Williamsburg, along with Henry Ford's Greenfield Village, were examples of preservation destinations built on this premise.

On top of such philanthropic projects, the federal government's role expanded greatly in the period Hosmer discusses. Despite the short chronology of his topic, there is a dramatic evolutionary change within the cadre of preservationists who appeared between 1926 and 1949. The vision of retaining the urban landscape expanded and the models, like house museums or archaeological sites, became more widespread. Such models now required the imagination not only of small groups, but also of business and

³³ Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 1.

the government in order to make them widely appealing to the public. As society changed, preservationists formed institutions to answer the challenge. Industrialization, urbanization, immigration and new forms of income, education and transportation all aided the shift. Along with the advent of the automobile, the socialist impulse of the New Deal, with its public works and large-scale Federal involvement, also helped to transform an atomized and localized society into a mobile but communal one. In *Giving Preservation a History* the authors urge preservationists to recognize their movement as one of social reform and that development can be positively allied with preservation to that end.³⁴ In reacting to the Wall Street crash of 1929 and ensuing Great Depression an example of preservation as social reform, which includes Federal government input, can be seen in Wilmington when the downtown Post Office was demolished to create work and positively influence the stricken working class.

National identity changed in this period, and with the new developments the need to retain the past increased. Hosmer points out how preservation grew more mature as the country dealt with its economic crisis and many radical social changes. This evolution culminated in what Hosmer sees as the zenith of the early preservation movement, and the beginning of a new chapter after World War Two, the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

One of the early social groups who learned from Mount Vernon how to utilize preservation were the faltering planter elite, who lost their position and wealth between the late 1800s and the 1930s but who still wished to retain the genteel sense of order of the Old South. This group based its primacy on the Bourbon, white society that had led

³⁴ Max Page and Randall Mason, *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 14-16.

since Colonial times and organized to preserve in its own image through social stratification – as embodied by the Colonial Dames and others. This upper class clung to an Old South order even as the industrial middle class and the rapid urbanization of America changed society. Charleston in the 1920s became a case in point for this retention of an Old Southern sense of place. The Society for the Preservation of Old Dwelling Houses in the city fought against Standard Oil gas stations and the encroachment of a more modern, and far less genteel, world.³⁵ This well-heeled society group spurred the 1931 local preservation ordinance, America’s first. The ordinance gave birth to the Old and Historic Charleston District, the first of all zoned historic districts in the country.³⁶ Not only did this type of zoning preserve buildings by age rather than by utility or some other criteria, but it also granted stability to a neighborhood by restricting undesirable development. As neighborhoods were populated, property values rose accordingly.

On top of this financial incentive for preservation came the retention of an elite identity. Planners of the new zoning in Charleston defined that only colonial, Federal and antebellum structures were of historic interest in the town, with the implication that all else was disposable. The framers of the legislation also believed preservation planning could, in the words of Robert Wyeneth, “maintain and direct patterns of residential segregation” by setting up delineations between black and white sections of town.³⁷ So the new formulation of historic districts enabled the preservation of class and racial

³⁵ Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, 182.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Robert R. Wyeneth, “Ancestral Architecture: The Early Preservation Movement in Charleston” in *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States*, ed. Max Page and Randall Mason, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 270.

divisions from the outset. Upper class investiture in their buildings led not only to success in securing preserved properties but the evolution of preservation into legislation.

Charleston's action in staving off the encroachment of Standard Oil gas stations was a reaction to modernization and secured upper class, white, family linkages to the historic architecture that was at the core of these neighborhoods. The "preservation of local heritage was frequently inseparable from preservation of family history" and, "The collective memory of civic conservators inspired their efforts just as it informed their ideas of what constitutes meaningful history."³⁸ Wilmington, through Orton Plantation, the Bellamy Mansion and the Burgwin-Wright House would have precisely the same struggle as it placed upper class family values on what it deemed important to preserve. Class, and by extension race, and the reaction to modernization were factors in the urge to preserve and the upper classes led the fight to maintain control of that collective memory through architecture in Charleston and Wilmington, using preservation to do so.

Historic districts have shaped urban historic cores across the United States. The Vieux Carré district in New Orleans' French Quarter followed Charleston's lead in 1936, creating a Vieux Carré Commission that restricts property holders' rights to demolish historic properties in a manner similar to Wilmington today. A Supreme Court decision in 1926 helped ease the path for this increasingly widespread use of zoning as a preservation tool. *Euclid versus Ambler* placed before the Court an ordinance that used zoning laws to restrict Cleveland's urban sprawl into the adjoining town of Euclid.³⁹ Ambler Realty objected, claiming that restrictions on building by the criteria of height and mass adversely affected its property values in the area, as well as the potential for

³⁸ Wyeneth, "Ancestral Architecture," 275.

³⁹ *The Village of Euclid, Ohio, v. Ambler Realty Co.*, 272 U.S. 365 (1926).

further development. The Court rejected the developer's argument and posited that zoning had a rational basis and was not adversely restrictive.⁴⁰ This action legitimized the use of zoning on grounds of local character and set a standard for residents to decide how their town should develop, should governments be disposed to enact such laws.

However, it was the Historic Sites Act of 1935 that actually described the impetus for preservation that had driven private citizens for so long: "It is hereby declared that it is a national policy to preserve for public use historic sites, buildings, and objects of national significance for the inspiration and benefit of the people of the United States."⁴¹ This was a clear and concise definition for federal preservation. Through enforcement and management of the Act, the government created numerous positions and projects during the Depression; much of this work was interrupted by the advent of World War Two. While preservation institutionalized at a federal level did lag behind the popular realm, the government eventually reflected the preservation concerns of its citizens and put in place another level of definition as to what was historically important for the ruling classes (those who ran local and federal governments, for example) to legislate on.

Preservation came of age along with the country as a whole, while helping to maintain a distinctively American history by opening museums, saving properties, and institutionalizing at all levels of government. Part of this evolution was the movement of the growing, upwardly mobile, entrepreneurial class into the social elite. Organizations like the MVLA were upper class pioneers, and the Colonial Dames and others followed their model. The evolution of preservation as the twentieth century progressed saw businessmen join the old aristocratic elite as leaders in the field. In fact, the bureaucratic,

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ *Historic Sites Act of 1935, U.S. Code*, 49 Stat. 666, secs. 461-467 (1935).

newly enriched, middle class of a rising, industrialized nation rose to prominence and, as the case studies after World War Two show, came to lead the movement and organize themselves into groups like the National Trust or, locally, the Historic Wilmington Foundation. These individuals wanted to check unfettered growth by a more circumspect and reactionary mode of preservation. With the establishment of the Antiquities Act, an adherence to zoning ordinances, and careful restoration of public history, this class sought to stabilize society primarily through legislation.

When older preservation groups, grown from the MVLA model and other private efforts, joined forces with the urban middle class and the newly wealthy, preservation evolved once more. Wallace states, “Southern gentility worked with businessmen to forge preservation law.”⁴² New professionals, engineers, doctors, lawyers and architects sought to curb the dangerous pace and unregulated excess of American commerce through education and government control. As they did so the middle classes became increasingly important to historic preservation, often through their use of government legislation, alongside the wealthy, aristocratic elite. Occasionally, as in the case of the Wilmington Post Office and Thalian Hall, modernizing elements of this burgeoning class clashed with the more conservative upper class. On the whole, however, they co-existed and after World War Two both groups were so interwoven that they became the driving force behind all historic preservation. The shared goal of these classes was to preserve a view of history that correlated with their attachment to a building, and their tactics ranging from private preservation to government ordinances.

⁴² Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, 184.

CHAPTER FOUR: A SENSE OF PLACE

Every community has a spirit of place that identifies it as special and unique. It may be a building or a monument or a street, a public square or a stretch of lakeshore or a view of distant mountains. It sets the community apart from every other. It attracts tourists, contributes to the area's stability and livability, and gives residents a sense of connection with their shared heritage.

Sadly, despite its importance in the social, cultural and economic life of the community, the spirit of place is easily destroyed. Older neighborhoods, rich in texture and character, start to decline. Familiar landmarks are allowed to deteriorate or are replaced by new buildings that fail to respect their historic setting. Scenic vistas are spoiled by insensitive development, and precious open space is devoured by sprawl. Uniqueness fades into anonymity. Every place starts looking like Anyplace, and eventually they all look like Noplace.

National Trust for Historic Preservation President Richard Moe⁴³

Preservation physically links us to our past, as the buildings we preserve are direct links to our heritage. A town or city is defined by its buildings, and the inhabitants derive a sense of identity from those surroundings. Preservation is necessary because we have a need to retain familiar places. Nostalgia and patriotism guide us to preserve buildings that remind us of past figures and events. People can appreciate where they came from through the context of old buildings.⁴⁴ This became a primary motivation for the upper class to preserve their surrounding in Wilmington – its unique link to their shared heritage.

Our own identification with our surroundings is the essential definition of a sense of place. The quality of life in any city is dependent upon the community's sense of identity, a psychological need for the comfort zone of a mutual, communal definition.⁴⁵

⁴³ Richard Moe, Proclamation at National Historic Preservation Week 2003, Washington, D.C., File "Preservation Month," Historic Wilmington Foundation, Wilmington, North Carolina.

⁴⁴ Robert Stipe, "Why Preserve Historic Resources?" in *Readings in Historic Preservation: Why? What? How?*, ed. Norman Williams, Jr., Edmund H. Kellogg, and Frank B. Gilbert, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Center for Urban Policy Research, for the Environmental Law Center of Vermont Law School, 1983), 59.

⁴⁵ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and Massachusetts Department of Community Affairs, "A Future from the Past," ed. Gene Bunnell, in *Why? What? How?*, 62.

On a trip to Oakland, California, in 1934, Gertrude Stein took one look at the bland homogeneity around her and summarized what befalls a city missing its character: “there is no there, there.” Without the successes of historic preservation, Wilmington could easily have faced the same fate. The loss of a defining sense of place, and the resulting lack of self-identity for both the town and its inhabitants, is what preservationists struggle to overcome.

Preservation in Wilmington has usually been a local impulse, but it is not simply stated. There is often a blending of actors and impulses to any given preservation project and simply, “By suggesting that wealthy individuals or the national government have driven the evolution of the preservation field...traditional history misleads us and fails to inspire.”⁴⁶ Generalizations do not fully address how specific people reacted to specific projects and how they acted on their “concerns about the quality of their local environments - their senses of place.”⁴⁷ The contention is that local practice in Wilmington was driven by the elite’s need to define themselves by preserving *and shaping* the environment for the whole community.

In answer to the question of why we preserve, James Fitch offers the idea that “the historically evolved urban fabric offers a critically important life-support system to everyone who is sheltered there.” He sees the need for a familiar urban landscape as physiological, and he believes that the presence of historic buildings in any city defines its inhabitants’ sense of self. He argues that places like Disney World, or even thematically organized historical sites such as Colonial Williamsburg, cannot replicate

⁴⁶ Page and Mason, *Giving Preservation a History*, 8.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 8.

such a feeling, as they remove the complexities and time span of an actual, dynamic historic area.⁴⁸

In his book *Keeping Time: The History and Theory of Preservation in America*, William Murtaugh argues that preservation is driven by people's attempts to preserve their emotional connection to their surroundings at all costs, rather than by a more calculated, scientific approach to the feasibility of restoration. Murtaugh's argument draws upon incidents where passion rather than rationalism initiated the preservation process. A synagogue in Rhode Island, Christ Church in Philadelphia and a New York state purchase of the Hasbrouck House in 1850 are all examples of successful early preservation.⁴⁹ Each site is evidence of the individuals or congregations who chose to preserve because of their nostalgia; a passion for place overrode the more practical, modernizing approach of new construction.

Critical changes in society during the first half of the twentieth century impacted historic preservation by highlighting the need for a sense of place. The evolution of America into an industrial and cultural superpower, as well as the Great Depression's effect in drawing the country together, created the sense of a shared past. No longer was the country too young for nostalgia. The retention of that collective past became increasingly important as the country hurtled through astonishing changes. The first half of the century transformed America from a rural to an urban nation, from an agricultural land to an industrial one. Massive immigration gave rise to a vibrant, ever-shifting culture. During a time of so much upheaval and rapid progress, Americans became increasingly invested in the link between self-identity and a sense of place, and the

⁴⁸ Fitch, *Historic Preservation*, xi-xii.

⁴⁹ Murtaugh, *Keeping Time*, 205.

physical embodiment of home became more an imperative that residents would fight to protect.

Wilmington's Sense of Place

A young London merchant who visited Wilmington just after the American Revolution described it as “the most disagreeable sandy barren town,” containing only “a few scattered wood and brick houses without any kind of order or regularity.”⁵⁰ While the town was apparently hardly dazzling, today there are few means by which to measure the merchant’s opinion. Except for a fortunate few, the original structures of the town did not last. Fire and hurricanes, as well as changes in taste and various attempts to modernize, all robbed today’s citizens of the opportunity to judge the early character of Wilmington for themselves. Regardless, Wilmington has gained its character from the many generations who have shaped it across many years. Being a major port city has meant the introduction of new ideas, new industry, new wealth and a particular sense of place. Today the sense of community and place in Wilmington is defined by familiar landmarks, the downtown historic district, suburbs such as Carolina Heights, Forest Hills, and Sunset Park, and the character of the nearby creek and beach areas.

One of the earliest natural landmarks that once defined Wilmington’s sense of place might well have been glimpsed by the London merchant himself. The Dram Tree [Figure 9] was a legendary Cape Fear landmark.⁵¹ Located in the marshy river’s edge south of the current Sunset Park development, this old cypress tree, dripping with Spanish moss, became a touchstone for superstitious seamen. The tree was situated well

⁵⁰ Mills Lane, *Architecture of the Old South: North Carolina*, (Savannah, Ga.: The Beehive Press, 1985), 165.

⁵¹ Ann Hewlett Hutteman, *Wilmington, North Carolina, Postcard History Series* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, Tempus Publishing, 2000), 15.

out into the river as it curves out of sight of the town, toward the sea. For more than three centuries, the tree was regarded by natives and visitors alike as “an inanimate yet very vivid and appealing sentinel” guarding the shipbuilding yards and port.⁵² As ships left port from the Colonial era to the 1940s, many paused by the tree, offering prayers for a safe voyage. Upon safe return the sight of the tree would reputedly mean a celebratory dram of whiskey, rum or grog for all on board.⁵³ The name remained with the landmark across the centuries, and the Dram Tree is featured in several local tales.

Louis Moore recalls one story which describes the adventures of the famous pirate Steed Bonnet, who in 1718 sailed up the Cape Fear with the intention of stealing provisions. He stopped at the plantation of an old comrade and was hospitably welcomed. However, the pirate crew got drunk and kidnapped the planter’s wife. As they sailed back down the river, pursued by the husband, she slipped overboard and swam to the refuge of the Dram Tree, sheltering there overnight until rescued.⁵⁴ Another story places a British officer aboard a warship patrolling the Cape Fear in 1775. The officer’s brother is a Colonist in the area, and there is much sympathy between the brothers for the Revolutionary cause. The British seaman deserts overboard, hiding again in the root system of the Dram Tree. He evades patrols through the refuge the Dram Tree provides and heads into town to volunteer with the Colonial side, fighting with his brother and residing in Wilmington after the war.⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Louis T. Moore, *Stories Old and New of the Cape Fear Region*, (Wilmington, N.C.: Friends of Louis T. Moore through the Louis T. Moore Memorial Fund, Wilmington Printing Company, 1956. Reprint, Wilmington, N.C.: Friends of Louis T. Moore, 1968), 47-54.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

While these stories cannot be documented, they give the landmark an importance in local history that bears remembering. The loss of the Dram Tree in the 1940s due to dredging for shipyard expansion diminished Wilmington's sense of place. In the end it was destroyed by workmen ignorant of its significance.⁵⁶ The Dram Tree is an excellent example of how landmarks define a community's sense of identity by providing a continuity of place across the generations. Seventeen years after its destruction, The Lower Cape Fear Historical Society's first bulletin in October 1957 presented the Dram Tree as a suggested society emblem, as its memory was so tied to Wilmington's image.⁵⁷ The tree was in the consciousness of mariners in this port city for many years, and its destruction distressed local residents who realized that their region had lost historical character along with the tree; its absence as a landmark detracted from the identity of the city. Old Wilmingtonians still remember the Dram Tree fondly as representing the history of the town.⁵⁸

A decade after the loss of the Dram Tree Wilmington's sense of identity was challenged on a larger scale by changing patterns of infrastructure. Most sources agree that Wilmington steadily declined as a major city due chiefly to two factors: competition from other ports along the Eastern coastline, and as a result of the 1954 decision to move the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad headquarters to Florida. Along with the port, the railroad had been a major employer since the mid-1800s, and when it relocated Wilmington's infrastructure and influence also left the area. The headquarters, depot,

⁵⁶ Hutteman, *Wilmington*, 15.

⁵⁷ Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, *Inaugural Bulletin* (Wilmington, N.C.: privately printed, 1957), File "Lower Cape Fear Historical Society," Louis T. Moore Collection, North Carolina Room, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

⁵⁸ Unpublished notes, File "Historical and Scientific Society," Local History Collection, North Carolina Room, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

roundhouse, and ship-to-rail warehouses that crowded the area on the north end of downtown gradually disappeared.⁵⁹ Many fine buildings fell into disrepair until the properties were either replaced by the Cape Fear Community College or the lots were left empty. Remnants from that era include two former railroad warehouses and an office building on Nutt Street, which is currently the site of the Wilmington Railroad Museum. These structures received protective preservation easements in the 1980s. The former Atlantic Coast Line Railroad office building on Red Cross Street between Second and Third is the fourth and final architectural link to this railroad history.⁶⁰

The terms ‘neighborhood’ and ‘district’ immediately connote a sense of both place and community. Wilmington’s Carolina Place, Carolina Heights and Winoca Terrace are suburbs created in 1906, 1908 and 1911 respectively. Each was designed to provide affordable housing for the rising working class and a burgeoning middle class. Streetcars served the communities, and the nearby sections of Market, Seventeenth and Princess Streets grew in prominence because of the neighborhoods’ expansion.⁶¹ The three areas neatly illustrate the concept of sense of place by their possession of several definable characteristics, including architectural styles and standards, house size and affordability, and their residents’ similar class status.

Carolina Place features relatively modest houses with small yards on narrow, tree-lined streets. This suburb has a much higher density of housing than the other neighborhoods, as it filled a need for affordable housing for workers and renters.⁶²

⁵⁹ See Emma Woodward MacMillan, *Wilmington’s Vanished Homes and Buildings* (Raleigh, N.C.: Edwards and Broughton Company, 1966).

⁶⁰ Until 2006, the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad building served as the site of the Wilmington Police Department.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶² Beverly Tetterton, interview with the author, 14 December 2005.

Carolina Heights, which lies across Market Street from Carolina Place and centers on Princess Street, was more upscale, meant for middle-class managers and businessmen. This neighborhood was finer in architectural style, with grand houses set back from the street and spaced far apart. Winoca Terrace is centered around Fifteenth Street, north of Market, and its character was defined by its developer, Thomas H. Wright. This neighborhood reflects an upscale and less grandiose style than Carolina Heights, as its large homes are situated closer to the street, giving a more communal feel.⁶³ What is illuminating is the fact that each contiguous neighborhood retains its own style and sense of place, despite all that the neighborhoods share – including a common infrastructure of streets, stores and a park. This type of character is difficult to pin down or define, but its retention is a primary reason behind preservation. Without such neighborhoods, Wilmington’s historic areas would be as monotonous as any strip mall. It is that sense of place that preservationists try to retain and is the obvious connection between Wilmington’s elites and the character of the town their families have shaped across the centuries.

⁶³ Gunter, *Carolina Heights*, i-3.

CHAPTER FIVE: PRESERVATION THROUGH MEMORIALIZING

The impulse for preservation required a root before it could evolve, and that root was commonly found in a wealthy social elite with a memorializing agenda. Murtaugh defines the motivations of all preservationists in the second half of the nineteenth century as “secular pietism,” as in the case of the 1856 preservation of Andrew Jackson’s Hermitage home, when it was considered “good policy in a republican government to inculcate sentiments of veneration for those departed heroes who have rendered services to their country in times of danger.”⁶⁴ This sentiment places the preservation of buildings squarely in the mode of memorializing the powerful and famous, as it was with the Mount Vernon effort in the 1850s. The efforts of Ann Cunningham, Mary Hamilton, Letitia Morehead, Anna Ritchie and others provided the impetus, energy and money to get American preservation started.

The Model of Mount Vernon

Preservation at Mount Vernon was a very direct case of memorializing. Class, money and the history of famous white men were all recurring motivations for preservation in its early days, and each was a leading factor in this case. The romantic story of the foundation of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association (MVLA) begins when Louisa Bird Cunningham, described by historian Patricia West as “a distinguished Southern matron,”⁶⁵ was awakened on a river boat cruise. As her ship passed the dilapidated Mount Vernon property, the captain rang a bell as a sign of respect. Dismayed by the property’s state of disrepair, Mrs. Cunningham inspired her daughter,

⁶⁴ Murtaugh, *Keeping Time*, 11.

⁶⁵ Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America’s House Museums* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), 5.

Ann, to organize a ladies' movement and, serendipitously, to revolutionize American historic preservation.

The history of active preservation in the United States begins most visibly at Mount Vernon. When historic structures are left in place simply through circumstance, and not protected by design or oversight by any interested parties the result is preservation almost by default. The purchase and restoration of the Mount Vernon was not passive, however, and was the first example of a concerted urge to preserve. Like many that followed, the project began as a privately-funded effort driven by committed individuals. The trailblazing project was unique at the time because it was conceived of by a female social group that used preservation of a historic property to build a mythology around a figure; the result of their efforts became the first house museum in the country. Not only did Mount Vernon institutionalize Washington with an actual physical monument, but it also institutionalized historic preservation at the same time.

The seeds were sown for the various Acts and district establishments to follow by the protracted and politicized purchase of Mount Vernon in February of 1860. In the years immediately preceding the war, Ann Cunningham and the MVLA raised funds to buy the property by any means possible: they cajoled and agitated, planning elaborate strategies using heritage as a topical touchstone.⁶⁶ In addition to the desire to honor heroes from their own social class, race and position, a notion of Southern identity was also used to sell the idea of preserving Mount Vernon to others. In a series of shrewd political moves to galvanize her Southern audience, Ann Pamela Cunningham used inflammatory rhetoric in her speeches. Patricia West believes Cunningham's increasingly passionate language was because she perceived, "The creeping tide of

⁶⁶ West, *Domesticating History*, 38.

Northern culture threatening the South in general and Mt. Vernon in particular could not . . . be averted by a direct appeal to the federal government . . . increasingly under the sway of the same Northern money-grabbers.”⁶⁷ Her desire to enshrine Mount Vernon as a touchstone of Southern heritage in particular proved to be an inspired tactical and political move. Cunningham was an excellent politician and for Murtaugh, she is “a woman whose tactics and vision were to color American preservation for generations.”⁶⁸

Cunningham occupied a moral high ground with her appeals to patriotism, creating what has been called an aura of “transcendent femininity” for the organization. This aloof mystique allowed the MVLA to rise above sectionalism, which often threatened to derail the process.⁶⁹ Cunningham possessed a strong anti-Northern sentiment which persisted even after she enlisted the help of several Northern women in the cause. Some Virginians did not appreciate Cunningham’s goal of gathering nationwide support for the project, as it added Northern tarnish to the Southern gold of Mount Vernon. To offset such division within the ranks, Cunningham used the idea of a national legislative charter to solidify the MVLA.⁷⁰ Leading women in the MVLA lobbied male legislators, including the Virginia Governor, at a party given by Anna Mowatt Ritchie in 1856. They succeeded and with the passing of the 1856 charter, the MVLA became the first officially sanctioned preservation organization in the country, and the result was the procurement of the house in 1860.⁷¹

Mount Vernon exemplifies the manner in which disparate popular themes combined to underwrite early preservation models. In this case, Southern identity and

⁶⁷ West, *Domesticating History*, 8.

⁶⁸ Murtaugh, *Keeping Time*, 28.

⁶⁹ West, *Domesticating History*, 11.

⁷⁰ West, *Domesticating History*, 37.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

national patriotism were utilized alongside the mythology of the ideal home and the notion of memorializing the dead. The Mount Vernon Ladies Association used their dedication, passion, class, money, revolutionary gender politics and remarkable organizational skills as tools to create a preservation success. As Murtaugh notes, “the seminal quality of this organizational arrangement cannot be overemphasized...it documents the leadership quality of women in preservation...and [serves as a] blueprint for other potential preservationists to emulate.”⁷² The MVLA preserved the history of their own class by creating a national icon blazed a new trail in the process.

Murtaugh concludes that the MVLA model for organized preservation meant that “through participation in Ladies Memorial Associations, many genteel southern women first stepped into public roles as guardians of regional memory and history.”⁷³ Activist organizations such as the Colonial Dames moved women’s traditional role of home and family into a political arena by empowering their female members to lead causes. This single-minded purpose was mirrored in Wilmington when the Colonial Dames pursued purchase of the Burgwin-Wright House to memorialize white society. Early preservation was the preserve of the elite, and it was led almost exclusively by women. Both the notion of preservation and the role of women in it were revolutionary in the 1850s.

The early house museums were icons to the ‘cult of domesticity’ which made the home a central theme of mid-nineteenth century America.⁷⁴ The home was the heart of American life, and its universality for Americans gave it primacy both in society and in politics. Since the beginning of the nineteenth-century, politicians have regularly built

⁷² Murtaugh, *Keeping Time*, 29.

⁷³ Catherine W. Bishir, “Landmarks of Power: Building a Southern Past, 1885-1915.” *Southern Cultures* Inaugural Issue (1993): 9.

⁷⁴ West, *Domesticating History*, 8.

their campaigns around the mythology of being born poor, or raised in a log cabin, or educated in the one-room schoolhouses iconic in American culture. Along with small town ideals and values, such images of home, school and church were prevalent before the Civil War; the stability of the home, and therefore of society, centered around a woman's place within that home as its lynchpin and foundation.⁷⁵ This preeminence of the American homeplace made the preservation of house museums of critical importance to preservation, as the cases of the Bur gwin-Wright, Bellamy and Latimer houses in Wilmington will attest. At Mount Vernon, the position of the home in society lent credence to the efforts of the MLVA and gave women – albeit white, elite women – the opportunity to break out of domesticity in the championship of a cause.

Southern Regional Identity

In Tony Horwitz's travelogue *Confederates in the Attic*, he quotes a 1995 letter to the editor of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* containing the line, "The South is a place. East, west, and north are nothing but directions."⁷⁶ Southern identity consists of much more than simply the distinctive speech pattern, the reputation for friendliness, the distinct class system, racial distance, and comfort cuisine, but these are all characteristics of vital importance to the region. Since the eighteenth century regions of the United States have possessed their own sense of identity independent of the wider country, and nowhere is this more evident than in the South. Although the obvious cause for Southern sectionalism is the Civil War, when Robert Penn Warren wrote that "the imaginative appeal of the Civil War may be, in fact, the very ritual of being American," he was

⁷⁵ Ibid., 1-10.

⁷⁶ Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 18.

talking about the unifying result of the war, not the divisions that it highlighted.⁷⁷

Sectionalism in the United States is strongly tied to a national identity.

Retaining identity, whether it be a regional, ethnic, racial or cultural identity, is as important to preservation as maintaining the historic built environment. In modern times, the desire to preserve a regional heritage is often incorrectly viewed as oppositional to the desire to preserve a broader, national heritage. Although historic buildings reflect their local surroundings more frequently than they reflect a homogenous national style, the retention of a specific region's architecture is not driven by an impulse towards isolation. Local preservation is driven just as strongly by a need to preserve the region's distinctive character within the urban fabric of the nation as a whole; each region seeks to preserve its chapter within the larger story of the country. Historic preservation conserves both national and regional buildings and reminds Americans to remember their past, like the Civil War, through cultural landscapes. Preservation can retain styles of public architecture that at once remind us of sectionalism, nationalism and unity.

In the South, it often seems that the point of preserving and remembering the past is to push the culture determinedly forward. Southern preservationists strive to maintain a Southern identity without forgetting about a united America. This idea was first expounded in the last speech of Jefferson Davis, the first and only President of the Confederate States of America. Davis proclaimed that while he had "no regret that I stand before you a man without a country, for my ambition lies within the grave of the Confederacy," he still realized that "the past is dead: let it bury its dead, its hopes and

⁷⁷ Horwitz, *Confederates*, 389.

aspirations. Before you lies the future . . . a future of expanding national glory...lay aside all rancor, all bitter sectional feeling, instead reunite the country.”⁷⁸

Preservation through memorializing, the process of how memory lives on in society, is a difficult web to untangle. An example is how the Anglo-Saxon, upper class history of Wilmington has been memorialized, or how the Civil War in the South preserves a certain view of history through the memorializing of a Confederate identity. Horwitz’s book *Confederates in the Attic* examines the manner in which some Southerners track their heritage, and therefore their sense of identity as Southerners in the modern era, by means of the Civil War. The book is structured as a travelogue across the South in search of the reasons behind the regional preoccupation with the Civil War, or as it is commonly referred to in the South, the War Between the States or the War of Northern Aggression. What Horwitz finds is a region of friendly people still in thrall of the war, and along the way he uncovers an odd juxtaposition of informal segregation and civil rights memorializing. He attends a Lee-Jackson birthday party held by the Daughters of the Confederacy in Salisbury, N.C.,⁷⁹ and meets men pledging allegiance to the Stars and Stripes and the Stars and Bars, as well as those introducing themselves as members of the Army of Northern Virginia. Certainly the war is a symbol of Southern identity like no other, and Horwitz succinctly summarizes why: “For any Southerners I’d met, remembrance of the War had become a talisman against modernity, an emotional love for their reactionary politics.”⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative*, Vol. 3, *Red River to Appomattox* (New York: Random House, 1974), 1058.

⁷⁹ Horwitz, *Confederates*, 22-23.

⁸⁰ Horwitz, *Confederates*, 386.

The social hierarchy of the Confederacy had certainly not deteriorated entirely after 1865. Plantations, slavery, and white aristocracy prevailed, albeit with an emphasis on the need for a more broad-based economy. In the Reconstruction era after the Civil War, not much had changed in terms of Southern mentality. Memorials glorifying valiant defeats cast the Confederacy in a victimized role. Legislation turned slavery to sharecropping, and Lincoln's brand of Republican abolitionism was replaced by Jim Crow and Black Codes. In order to move forward and join the rest of the country in modernization, the South needed a means of remembering the past that would simultaneously push the culture toward a new identity.

Against this backdrop the 1907 Jamestown Tercentennial Exposition was planned, in recognition of the date in 1607 on which the first Anglo-Saxons settled in Virginia. This event was proposed by North Carolina's Democratic political leaders and organized by women.⁸¹ Mary Hilliard Hinton, editor of the *North Carolina Booklet* for the Daughters of the American Revolution, led the effort. The Exposition was primarily an opportunity to tout the New South, as well as the state's economic and social potential; Bishir terms it "The Epitome of the New Southern Order."⁸² In keeping with models of preservation, the Exposition lauded the participants' view of their own history.

Hinton summarized the sentiment behind the Exposition as progressive, but progressive in a conservative manner: "The keynote of American life is progress – an excellent and most powerful characteristic; yet harm and ultimate ruin will surely follow in its trail unless safeguarded by conservatism. No study so engenders and promotes the cultivation of this check to vandalism as does history. At last the dominant trait of the

⁸¹ Bishir "Landmarks of Power," 35.

⁸² Ibid.

Anglo-Saxon race is asserting itself and we are becoming more like our relatives overseas, who guard sacredly whatever bears on their glorious past.”⁸³ In stating the sentiment of the time, Hinton neatly characterized why historic preservation was considered a useful tool for the social elite to define their own history on their own terms. According to Bishir, during the Jamestown celebration of early European settlement in America the “Democratic elite ... reaffirmed the social order of their antebellum heyday, while embracing a program of modern economic progress.”⁸⁴

It is worthwhile to describe the Pageant in Wilmington alongside the Jamestown Exposition because they both say much about the attempts made to redefine the South as modern while focusing on a glorious past. The sense of identity they celebrated was rooted in the Old South of white aristocracy. A vital facet of historic preservation is its educational practices, and the predominant education practiced at the time was heritage tourism. In 1907 this forerunner to heritage tourism both attracted investment and spurred economic growth, the redefinition of the South as modern and economically viable was accomplished largely through the retention of an Old South sense of past.⁸⁵ These threads were often woven together in city pageants. Pre-World War Two pageants in many cities developed a sense of place, as they both promoted historic education and celebrated the history of the city.⁸⁶

The Pageant of the Lower Cape Fear in Wilmington was a major event in the life of the town and particularly in solidifying its stature across the state as the largest and most vibrant urban center. Plans were made in 1921 for the pageant, which was in fact a

⁸³ Mary Hilliard Hinton; quoted in Bishir, “Landmarks of Power,” 37.

⁸⁴ Bishir, “Landmarks of Power,” 35-37.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸⁶ Beverly Tetterton, interview with the author, 14 December 2005.

festival based around the performance of a historically-based play.⁸⁷ The play was written by members of the local Sorosis Club under the supervision of Dr. Frederick Koch, Professor of Dramatic Literature at the University of North Carolina, and was based on many early histories of the region, especially those of James Sprunt in *Chronicles of the Cape Fear*.⁸⁸ Featuring hundreds of performers and requiring six weeks of rehearsals, the play was “a great spectacle...for not only perpetuating history, but for making history.”⁸⁹ It was essentially a fantasy with historic elements. While James Sprunt’s foreword ascribes to the work the honorific “the biography of Wilmington,”⁹⁰ the opening scenes feature not only white settlers mingling and conversing with noble Indians, but also Blackbeard singing ‘Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum!’ while moored off Wrightsville Beach.

The Pageant showcased the growth of a sense of place and the regional pride in history. In the vignettes of the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, the writers take considerable artistic license with characters from Wilmington’s history.⁹¹ However, these characters are brought to life and memorialized for a generation who may otherwise have forgotten the rich history of the area. This is a classic example of the beginnings of heritage tourism.

Education is preservation in this case, and in 1921, the idea that “communal expression in drama will most completely approximate a representation of the life of the

⁸⁷ File “Pageant of the Lower Cape Fear,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ “Pageant Plans Being Studied This Afternoon” and “Noted Authority on Pageant Arrives Shortly,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Dispatch*, 13 January 1921, File “Pageant of the Lower Cape Fear,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

⁹⁰ Frederick Henry Koch and Citizens of Wilmington in North Carolina, *Pageant of the Lower Cape Fear* (Wilmington, N.C.: Wilmington Printing Company, 1921), 17.

⁹¹ File “Pageant of the Lower Cape Fear,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

community”⁹² was new. The spectacle was performed on James Sprunt’s property at the foot of Nun Street, and the Pageant drew a crowd of thousands. The impact of this new development is difficult understate. As the Pageant featured books on historical subjects, prominent naval displays and a cast of five hundred all wearing homemade costumes, most of the town was involved in some manner.⁹³ The newspapers of the time could not have been more effusive concerning the glories of the event and the local pride it evoked.⁹⁴ The Pageant served as Wilmington’s first major historical education program, and possibly its most successful to date in terms of arousing popular interest in local history.

Creating a Heritage Through Memorials

Unlike the more subtle influence of events in memorializing a sense of place, historic monuments are an overt, physical presentation of a community’s memories of the past that help to create an urban sense of place. Monuments tend to glorify, while historic markers generally contain more researched information. Both, however, are selective in their topics, by design and necessity. Monuments convey the importance of their subject by position, size and the materials used. As a monument requires both an architect and a sponsor, not to mention the trouble and expense of the process from idea to execution, the matic elements tend to be bold. Monuments mythologize the subject by placing the subject literally on a pedestal. Their physical embodiment up high is one factor of why Bishir believes memorials as “architecture commemorated and asserted the

⁹² Koch, *Pageant of the Lower Cape Fear*, 8.

⁹³ File “Pageant of the Lower Cape Fear,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

renewed continuity of the values and way of life those heroes represented.”⁹⁵ As Loewen continually reminds, memorials also send the message that the subject is representative of a cause worth emulating, as “they embody a moral imperative; go thou and do likewise.”⁹⁶ Like the Wilmington monuments discussed momentarily, all memorials are historic preservation through memory – another mode for defining and retaining a shared past.

The questions that naturally arise when history is cast in stone is who is creating the monument and what snapshot of history are they preserving? As the history preserved in a public monument is also shared among a whole community, if the monument in question is intended to embody a moral imperative that should be emulated, then it becomes critical to assess the motivations of the people who designed and placed the monument. Several monuments in Wilmington are snapshots of a past that glorifies the deeds of the white elite of the Old South, rather than the eclectic and diverse society that views those monuments today.

If inspiration, alongside education and recreation, is one of the three central tenets of historic preservation, it is also surely the most controversial.⁹⁷ As noted in Chapter 2, inspiration is a subjective premise; what possesses the capacity to inspire will also possess an equal capacity to spark controversy. A national example of this truth is the recent World War II memorial on the Washington Mall, which was considered inspirational by many, grand and noble in design. However, the memorial agitated many veterans because of its somewhat monolithic, Teutonic grandeur and its placement partially below ground level.

⁹⁵ Bishir, “Landmarks of Power,” 6.

⁹⁶ Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 43-45.

⁹⁷ David Poinsett, “What is Historic Preservation?” in *Why? What? How?*, 61-62.

When the inspiration provided by a sense of place is threatened by an encroachment into the built environment, preservation arguments concerning character are critical; the issue is that inspiration is as difficult to define as a sense of place. What is important to remember is that neither a sense of place nor controversy concerning the questionably inspirational elements of a place are fixed variables; what is agreed to be inspirational in one era often becomes controversial in another, and vice versa.

Take as an example Ulysses S. Grant's tomb in the Upper West Side district of Manhattan, which languished into neglect throughout the 1980s.⁹⁸ History has not been kind to Grant; he is broadly considered to be an ineffectual President with a drinking problem. However, a 1990s' resurgence in the reputation of his administration, due in part to its early race relations work, instigated a renovation and rediscovery of the monument in 1997.⁹⁹ The ever-subjective critical lens of historic perspective is at work once again. Not only must architecture and monuments reflect the people who inhabit the time, but they must also appeal to the imagination of all those who follow. In this regard, historic preservation is forever changing to suit current tastes, both aesthetic and otherwise.

After the Civil War, monuments to both the war and the Colonial past became popular across the South. The monuments blended sculpture and architecture, and their presence reflected, as Bishir notes, a cultural emphasis on "revering antebellum buildings as survivors from a glorious past."¹⁰⁰ This revisionism extended through buildings and monuments into the psyche of the South as a region, building beliefs such as "the renewed place of the vindicated South in the American mainstream, the rightness and

⁹⁸ Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 38.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁰⁰ Bishir, "Landmarks of Power," 5.

patriotism of the Confederate cause, and the association of classical architecture with idealized southern virtues.”¹⁰¹ Motivations for Southern preservation in its early years centered on reinvention, and memorializing often accomplished the goal of relating an idealized past to the present and future. For the Southern elite to reclaim and maintain power, they needed to erect reminders of their past glory. Before the urban and industrial growth of the 1920s, the seemingly progressive action of saving historic buildings for posterity was actually born of a conservative root, the verification of social class and identity.

Recording an unrealistic, idealized past through buildings or monuments is a matter of historic perspective. In *Lies Across America*, James Loewen crosses the country, examining the history that is presented to the public and inquiring as to its origins: who wrote it, when was it created, and for what purposes? He finds one instructive example in Bentonville, North Carolina, where General Joseph Johnston’s 30,000 Confederates fought a delaying but ultimately unsuccessful battle against 60,000 Union soldiers under General William Sherman in March 1865.¹⁰² Memorials dedicated to the battle later occupied their own historical battleground and illustrate the manner in which memorializing is highly subjective. In the Bentonville case monuments were mostly built in the early part of the twentieth century. However, it is arresting that the struggle to define the history of the site continued to become a 1995 controversy.¹⁰³

In 1893, Confederate veterans installed a memorial to their dead at the Bentonville site in remembrance of the largest Civil War battle fought in the state. Three

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 288.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

more memorials to Confederates followed, the last in 1992.¹⁰⁴ For the sake of balance, a Living History Society formed locally around this time for the purposes of erecting a Union monument.¹⁰⁵ Subsequently, a letter appeared in the Raleigh *News and Observer* implying that the monument would feature General Sherman himself, the scourge of the Confederacy.¹⁰⁶ The United Daughters of the Confederacy and Sons of Confederate Veterans were particularly incensed at that idea. As at many other Southern Civil War sites, the Union side was not memorialized but omitted altogether, allowing the Confederate side to remain in the role of heroic victim to the murderous Sherman and the invading army.

In the art of memorializing, several perspectives are at stake and often at war: the perspective held during the time of an event or a person, the perspective held during the period in which that person or event was memorialized, and the perspective of the present, when we apply our own lens to the subject. This section will explore the monuments that shaped Wilmington's memory throughout the years.

The grandest monument in Oakdale Cemetery is a pedestal bearing a bronze Confederate soldier. Separated by an iron fence from the rest of the cemetery, the soldier sits atop a rise high enough to give the impression of primacy over the rest of the graves, statuary and markers. Originally this marker faced the cemetery entrance and was therefore the most immediate and recognizable landmark.¹⁰⁷ Erected by a Ladies Memorial Association and unveiled on May 10, 1872, the Confederate Monument is another example of how the white upper class, invested deeply in Confederate heritage,

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 289.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ File "Oakdale Cemetery," Archive "Plaques," Historic Wilmington Foundation, Wilmington, North Carolina.

shaped Southern memory.¹⁰⁸ Under the headline “A Monument to Our Dead” on May 14, 1868, a Wilmington newspaper eulogized, “never will their names be forgotten, until the Southern heart has ceased to thrill at the recollection of our glorious past.”¹⁰⁹ The defeat was fresh and still rankled the author, and the resulting bias towards idealization was extreme. The writer insisted that the monument “be of North Carolina granite. Let not those sacred graves be consecrated by the erection over them of marble from the Northern land – better, far better and far more appropriate would it be to place there the roughest hewn post of North Carolina wood than marble stone which ever came from a Northern quarry, or was chiseled by the hands of a Northern sculptor. We deem it little short of desecration to do it.”¹¹⁰

In 1868 the war wound was still raw, and the motives for this memorial were personal to the community, an obvious conclusion given the Union’s occupation of Wilmington and the fact that no Southern family was unaffected by the war. What the memorial demonstrates is that the South immediately began to mythologize its past. The Ladies Memorial Association later merged with the United Daughters of the Confederacy and continued their idealistic commemoration.¹¹¹ What is perhaps most illuminating here is the speed with which the South moves from a devastated and defeated army to the iconization of heroic martyrs. Three years after Appomattox, the rancor towards the North is still firmly in place and set in stone within the memorials. As Bishir notes, “By erecting public landmarks celebrating that history and proclaiming a legitimizing

¹⁰⁸ Bishir, “Landmarks of Power,” 21.

¹⁰⁹ Wrenn, *Architectural and Historical Portrait*, 295-296.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 295.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 297.

continuum from the Old South to the New South, they [the elite] shaped both public memory and public life.”¹¹²

The United Daughters of the Confederacy was another private group which preserved with a certain heritage in mind. Erected by the Cape Fear Chapter #3 of the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1911, the George Davis statue near Market and Third streets commemorates the lawyer, local resident, and Senator and Attorney-General of the Confederate States of America.¹¹³ Davis was imprisoned after the war and later pardoned by President Andrew Johnson, whereupon he returned to Wilmington to practice law.¹¹⁴ The obvious point to note is the prominent positioning of this monument to rich, white Confederate history.

The memorial to the soldiers of the Confederacy [**Figure 10**] on South Third Street, erected in 1924, features two bronze figures by sculptor F. W. Packer of New York, one representing love and the other self-sacrifice. The memorial bears the inscription, “Confederates blend your recollection/ Let memory weave its bright reflection”.¹¹⁵ Both the figures and the inscription expressly invite the viewer to reimagine an idealized past. Henry Bacon, a Wilmington architect who designed many notable local buildings as well as the Lincoln Memorial in the nation’s capital, designed this monument through a bequest from Gabriel James Boney.¹¹⁶ The monument’s theme and inscription are underlined by the motto “Pro Aris Et Focis” (*For your altars and your fires* - Cicero) written on the pedestal and the linking of the memory of the Confederacy

¹¹² Bishir, “Landmarks of Power,” 6.

¹¹³ Hutteman, *Wilmington*, 47.

¹¹⁴ Wrenn, *Architectural and Historical Portrait*, 204.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

and the classical glories of Rome are unmistakable.¹¹⁷ Their investment here led to the successful completion of a monument that makes the Confederate cause symbolic of Rome – with all the implications of white, patrician nobility, classic learning, longevity, democracy and leadership and civilizing qualities that are implied by such association. The prominent positioning of such a monument is attributable to the funding provided by an old Wilmington family, as well as to the renown of the designers and the grand sentiments displayed. All factors are certainly understandable, as the monument serves a nostalgic purpose for the town’s familial sacrifices in a bitter, internecine war. What the memorial also achieves is the unabashed creation of a myth. There is glory and honor present aplenty, but there is no doubt expressed, no motives explained. Memorials generally glorify in a subjective fashion rather than educate, and this one is true to form. The statue idealizes and idolizes the spirit of the Confederacy, and by implication the just cause for which it fought. This was the iconography desired by the ruling class at the time.

One other prominent Wilmington memorial is found at the corner of Market and Front streets. The Cornelius Harnett obelisk, inscribed to the “statesman and patriot,” remembers the life of a North Carolinian Revolutionary hero.¹¹⁸ The memorial was placed in 1906 by the North Carolina Society of the Colonial Dames of America and mentions all those who fought against British oppression. As with the Burgwin-Wright House the Dames invested in memorializing their ancestors. Designed and built by M.G. Delahunty of Philadelphia, this marker fulfills the Colonial Dames’ mission of education

¹¹⁷ Bishir, “Landmarks of Power,” 23-24.

¹¹⁸ File “Cornelius Harnett,” Louis T. Moore Collection, North Carolina Room, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

and preservation of colonial era history.¹¹⁹ It is impossible to argue Harnett's importance to local colonial history, but the memorial does illustrate once again that history is made by those who preserve it.

It disparages none of the four memorials mentioned here to point out that they were all commissioned by white people of money, nor the fact that they subjectively glorify white Southern heritage. The monuments are understandable – relatives died on the Confederate side and memorials to the dead are a human impulse. Reverence rather than contrition, celebration with nary a word of defeat, are the themes at work. However, Wilmington's memorials to the Civil War, as well as to Harnett, are very clearly products of their time and their authors' biases. These monuments are the work of the aristocratic, white Southern society presenting itself in an unapologetic light, and they serve a reactionary self-image. The Civil War was about slavery, a state's right to hold slaves, and an economic battle which centered on the fruits of slave labor. There is no acknowledgment or explanation of this subjugation in these monuments, and certainly no apology is expressed. They laud romantic figures, which is typical of the presentation of that war in the first half of the twentieth century.

¹¹⁹ Mrs. William O.S. Sutherland, "Minutes of the National Society Colonial Dames of America in the State of North Carolina" including *A History of the North Carolina Society of the Colonial Dames of America, 1935-1961*. 1964, iv.

CHAPTER SIX: NORTH CAROLINA INSTITUTIONALIZES ‘NOBLESSE OBLIGE’

Since America’s first preservation efforts, the upper class leaders of society have sought to preserve not only to retain a sense of place and to memorialize their status in society, but also out of a sense of obligation to their communities. Many motives for preservation seem genuinely altruistic and reflect a trend from Victorian society; namely, that the leaders of society feel themselves responsible for the education of all society. In Wilmington, this ideal of ‘noblesse oblige’ is reiterated in the Colonial Dames’ attempts to save the Burgwin-Wright House, as well as in the efforts to save the unprofitable Thalian Hall and the family heritages at Orton and in the Bellamy Mansion. Once again, the group which coordinates the effort makes history through a certain lens based upon their own recollection of a shared heritage. Within this model of preservation, where the upper class leads, the development of the North Carolina Historical Commission in 1903 stands as the first effort to institutionalize the state’s history.¹²⁰ The difference in this case is that the founders of the Commission, along with their successors, widened the mandate of ‘noblesse oblige’ to cover more diverse sections of society; in doing so, they successfully changed the model of private preservation by interest groups.

Early preservation efforts in North Carolina were sporadic at best. Whereas in Virginia preservation organized early, it was not until 1896 that a private nonprofit, the Roanoke Colony Memorial Association, bought Fort Raleigh, the first English settlement in the country. The North Carolina Historical Commission was founded nine years later with the mandate for “preservation of battlefields, homes, and other places celebrated in the history of the state.”¹²¹ In 1907, the state appropriated funds to preserve both

¹²⁰ Brook, *Lasting Gift*, 4.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

Guilford and Moore's Creek battlefields; Alamance battlefield followed in 1909, at a cost of \$103,000 for the three sites.¹²² In 1907, North Carolina decided to legislate in favor of preservation. Following the lead of Virginia, which established its own Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities in 1889 as a result of preservation interest roused by Mount Vernon, the North Carolina Historical Commission began to supply funding for battlefields and buildings.¹²³ Legislation was a slow road, however. North Carolina's first local preservation ordinance, in Winston-Salem's historic Old Salem area, only appeared in 1948.¹²⁴ In the meantime, preservation depended upon the civic-minded individuals – often women's groups, usually upper class, and mostly volunteers – who led the way.

North Carolina Historical Commission

On March 7, 1978, the Office of Archives and History in Raleigh marked the 75th Anniversary of the North Carolina Historical Commission.¹²⁵ On that date in 1903 began the state's first professional effort at public history. The resulting office now focuses on archiving and preserving historic sites for the betterment and education of the state. Any history of early historic preservation in North Carolina must include mention of these early leaders and their groundbreaking ideas. Elsewhere this thesis has discussed how historic monuments preserve through historic perspective and memory, and how that process can distort a wide sweep of history when narrowly executed; at times,

¹²² Michael Hill, Director, and David Brook, Research Specialist, North Carolina Department of Archives and History Research Branch, interview by author, 21 January 2006, North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, N.C.

¹²³ Ansley Herring Wegner, *History for All the People: 100 Years of Public History in North Carolina* (Raleigh, N.C.: Edwards Brothers Incorporated for the Office of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2003), 6.

¹²⁴ Brook, *Lasting Gift*, 17.

¹²⁵ File "Historic Marker Commission," Research Branch, Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

monuments become more about mythology than factual documentation. With the creation of the North Carolina Historical Commission, small preservation groups in danger of dissembling about the past gained a valuable checkpoint. The Historical Commission paved the way for professional, researched history in the state of North Carolina by placing the emphasis squarely on documented historical fact rather than on mythology.

Formed in part from interested participants in the North Carolina Literary and Historical Society, which approximated a Victorian gentleman's club, the Historical Commission centralized the management of state history with a preservation mandate. The first Secretary of the Commission was R.D.W. Connor who, along with a five-man Board, kept a primarily advisory role for the early years of the organization. Although the Commission did buy several busts to fill niches in the Capitol rotunda in 1910, the real efficacy of the organization began in 1917.¹²⁶ In that year the General Assembly passed "An Act whereby the Historical Places of North Carolina May Be Commemorated by Appropriate Markers."¹²⁷ Despite the fact that funds were limited to \$2500 each year and the program required locals to raise matching funds for each marker, this was a formal program designed to enhance North Carolina preservation. The plan was published in "A Plan for Marking Historic Places in North Carolina," which demands that local sites possess a broader significance beyond their respective regions and states that all markers should first be cleared by the Historical Commission.¹²⁸ The plan for markers

¹²⁶ File "Historic Marker Commission," Research Branch, Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

¹²⁷ Public Laws of 1917, c. 277, ss.1-2; quoted in 'From Memorials to Markers: The Role of the North Carolina Historical Commission 1903-1935,' photocopy, File "Historic Marker Commission," Research Branch, Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

¹²⁸ "A Plan for Marking Historic Places in North Carolina" (Raleigh, N.C.: Edwards and Broughton Printing Co., 1917), in File "Director Correspondence," Box 30, Research Branch, North Carolina

is an example of the impulse to preserve and the early methods of ensuring appropriate historic commemoration.

J. Bryan Grimes, President of the Historical Commission in 1917, originally lobbied for the creation of the marker program in 1909.¹²⁹ Under the theme of preservation and education, Grimes addressed the Literary and Historical Society on issues ranging from a Hall of History state museum in Raleigh to the virtues of a North Carolina Day to promote history in public schools. He also advocated for 2,400 libraries to be built in North Carolina's rural schools.¹³⁰ Grimes, Connor and others believed that the state had barely begun to document or preserve its history, and that in regard to preservation goals North Carolina had long been neglectful of its duties. Their rallying cry was, "What avails a great deed after the crisis that called it forth has passed, if is not recorded? ... We must know how we became what we are in order to become better than we are."¹³¹ The determination to educate the citizens of the state stems from the upper class attitude of 'noblesse oblige' and from the background of the leaders. The end result was that the upper classes became invested in documenting the history of the state; one outlet for which was the preservation of the built environment.

The North Carolina Society for the Preservation of Antiquities

An archetypal model of preservation and a groundbreaking part of North Carolina's preservation firmament first appeared on the scene in 1939. The North

Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina. The marker program is today managed by the North Carolina Department of Transportation.

¹²⁹ J. Bryan Grimes, "Why North Carolina Should Erect and Preserve Memorials and Mark Historic Places," (address before the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association, Raleigh, North Carolina, 4 November 1909), (*Raleigh, N.C.) News and Observer*, sec. North Carolina Review, Literary and Historical, File "Historic Marker Commission," Research Branch, North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

Carolina Society for the Preservation of Antiquities (NCSPA) was a private organization, and during the Depression it enjoyed far greater financial support than the state-run Historical Commission.¹³² Christopher Crittenden was instrumental in the creation of the Society and sat on its first Board, noting at the time of its inception that “the Society...should be headed by a man, but most of the actual work should be done by a woman, who would be called executive Vice-President”.¹³³ Blatant chauvinism aside, Crittenden drew his model from women’s renown in organized preservation, a role first established at Mount Vernon.

Far too often, women’s effectiveness as preservation advocates was dismissed by the term “women’s organizations”. The NCSPA did suffer from the societal gender bias of the age, but as women advocated successfully to the state legislature, they gained more and more credibility in the field. In fact, views of preservation as a gender-specific movement, an upper class preoccupation, or as the purview of older and more conservative citizens all dissipated over time because of societal attitudes changing during the 1960s. By the 1970s, as historian David Brook has noted, “the appeal of historic preservation stretched across class, age and gender lines,” reaffirming the roots of the movement from the 1850s as documenters of American history and expanding them beyond elites.¹³⁴

The NCSPA worked from offices adjoining those of the Historical Commission, and they migrated through a number of names before becoming the Preservation North Carolina of today. The NCSPA established a revolving fund in the 1948 through which

¹³² Wegner, *All the People*, 25.

¹³³ Wegner, *All the People*, 25.

¹³⁴ Brook, *Lasting Gift*, 143.

historic structures could pass into preservation-friendly hands.¹³⁵ Preservation North Carolina now owns many preserved properties across the state, and both owns and operates the Bellamy Mansion Museum in Wilmington, Briggs Hardware Building in Raleigh and Edenton Mill Village as site museums.¹³⁶

North Carolina's preservation history saw the evolution of the Society into Preservation North Carolina and the transformation of the Historical Commission into the Department of Archives and History. Such an expansion of missions and the symbiotic work of public and private organizations is inspiring. When Ruth Coltrane Cannon became NCSPEA President in 1944, she was charged with revitalizing an already ailing group. By the time her tenure ended in 1956, the private organization had assisted the public one in saving many properties.¹³⁷ As a result of this work, the North Carolina General Assembly turned over Tryon Palace, the Zebulon Vance birthplace, Town Creek Indian Mound, Alamance battleground and Brunswick Town to the care of the new Department of Archives and History in 1955, underlining that agency's increasing importance.¹³⁸

Leaders: Connor and Crittenden

Examples of the trend to use a governmental umbrella to promote the concerns of history and preservation can be seen through two men who led the movement. These two men were educators and archivists and both felt obligated to lead by example. R.D.W. Connor was born in Wilson, NC in 1878.¹³⁹ He graduated from the University of North Carolina after editing all three university publications in 1899, his final year of college.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 58.

¹³⁶ Wegner, *All the People*, 25.

¹³⁷ Brook, *Lasting Gift*, 54-58.

¹³⁸ Wegner, *All the People*, 34.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 3.

Connor's career gives insight into the class and education impetus that moved early preservationists. He was a public school teacher in Wilmington before he became an administrator, the principal of Wilmington High School.¹⁴⁰ Connor was a founding member of the North Carolina Historical Commission who promoted education through his work, his speeches and his additional appointment at the Department of Public Instruction.¹⁴¹ Connor's zeal for the dissemination of state history is clear from his correspondence on matters ranging from an early marker program to the Hall of History and the acquisition of books detailing local history in school libraries. Connor became the first archivist of the United States in 1934, returning from Washington to teach at Chapel Hill in 1941.¹⁴² He was a continuous force on the Board of the Historical Commission as Chairman until his death in 1950.¹⁴³ Connor's example was leadership from the upper class for the state with the education and organizational skills that came from his profession.

A similar dedication to the field was shared by Christopher Crittenden, Director of State Archives and History from 1935 to 1968 and the man responsible for moving the organization out of its Historical Commission beginnings. During the course of his tenure, he took the state office from eight to thirty-five employees, expanding not only its programs and its scope but also the prominence of North Carolina as a state that grasped and recorded its own history in preservation for the future.¹⁴⁴ Today he is regarded by

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Michael Hill, Director, and David Brook, Research Specialist, North Carolina Department of Archives and History Research Branch, interview by author, 21 January 2006.

¹⁴⁴ Wegner, *All the People*, 23.

staff as the father of the agency and a standard for his successors.¹⁴⁵ Crittenden's tangible achievements in the field include the advancement of a highway marker program, the consistency of modern record-keeping standards, the existence of several preservation programs, the recording of public property and an extended network of state-owned historic sites.¹⁴⁶ It is more difficult to place Crittenden in terms of 'noblesse oblige,' but he still exemplified the leadership qualities of the educated class. Crittenden's biggest contribution to statewide historic preservation may even have been his attempt to remove class barriers and broaden the spectrum of documenting history to all parts of society.

The legacy of Connor, Crittenden and their contemporaries is professionalism, organization and a passion for state history at a government level. They preserved not only buildings and records, but also the state's memory. Connor was the Victorian intellectual, moved to educate through broad public schooling; he applied the patrician attitude of the upper class for the betterment of society. Crittenden's motto, used to promote the historic marker program in the 1930s, was "history for all the people."¹⁴⁷ The 1930s was the most socialist period in U.S. government history, and Crittenden's agency was a product both of that movement and of his predecessor's desire to educate. North Carolina Archives and History was designed to preserve the entire state's history and to disseminate such history to all who were interested. In terms of preservation, education is often the best tool in retaining a sense of identity.

¹⁴⁵ Michael Hill, Director, and David Brook, Research Specialist, North Carolina Department of Archives and History Research Branch, interview by author, 21 January 2006.

¹⁴⁶ Wegner, *All the People*, 23.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

The achievement of early preservationists in North Carolina is primarily due to their immense ability to organize the diverse masses into cohesive wholes. The task of forming institutions that worked together at a state level from disparate groups of dedicated amateurs represents a considerable evolution across the first half of the twentieth century. The fact that private and governmental bodies could also raise funds, save buildings, and document and archive – all while lobbying for legislation and spreading historic education across the state – is a testament to the vision and passion of those involved.

North Carolina today has several restoration specialists and the City of Wilmington employs a Historic Preservation Planner, both thanks to the work of people like Connor and Crittenden. The advent of preservation professionals did not remove the need for concerned citizens to be involved in preservation. Historic preservation still needs owners who will fix houses and volunteers with an interest in local history to be active at a community level, along with nonprofit groups with endowments such as the Historic Wilmington Foundation, the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, and the Bellamy Mansion Museum, which is a branch office of Preservation North Carolina. The concept of ‘noblesse oblige’ means that the upper classes lead the rest of society and spread the benefits of their experience and education. While that concept is paternalistic, the society of early preservation pioneers was stratified by class. Thanks to the early pioneers who made the public aware that retaining their surroundings was wise for their own well-being, such local efforts now have state government support and oversight. Leadership was required to make that happen and the upper class provided the educators and activists to organize North Carolina’s preservation and archival infrastructure.

CHAPTER SEVEN: PRESERVATION IN WILMINGTON

This chapter uses case studies in Wilmington to determine how the level of investment of the upper class in properties leads to success (and failure) in preservation. The sense of identity that the upper classes felt for Wilmington led directly to their success in shaping its preservation. The case studies serve to illustrate how the leadership of the upper classes moved the evolution of preservation in the city. In certain cases, the chief motivation of the social elite is clearly the memorializing of their own heritage, but often the attachment to a sense of place and their appointed role as leaders and educators of society (‘noblesse oblige’) are also significant factors. Particularly when discussing individuals and their attachment to a building altruism should not be discounted. Wilmington grew increasingly aware of its architectural heritage as the century progressed, and the upper classes led the way. This class simultaneously evolved into an urban, industrial entrepreneurial group but retained its elite, Southern heritage.

Wilmington’s early preservation history contains a number of instructive stories and themes, such as memorializing and the discord between progressive and conservative forces recur in the case studies cited. These case studies provide examples of small interest groups driving preservation forward. Meanwhile, the government’s attempts at assistance often flounder and fail due to a predominant focus on modernization. The fact of success or failure being contingent on the social elite’s interest in the buildings is specifically documented in the cases of City Hall-Thalian Hall at 102 North Third Street, the Burgwin-Wright House at 224 Market Street, the main office of the United States Post Office at Second and Chestnut streets, the Cornelius Harnett property near Castle Hayne, the William Hooper property near North Second and Market streets, the Mitchell-

Anderson House at 102 Orange Street, the U.S. Custom House at Market and Water streets, and Orton Plantation.

The period that stretches from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century was one of monumental change, encompassing a total transformation in American fortunes. Reconstruction ended and two World Wars were fought and transformed into a Cold War. The federal government evolved from minimalist to socialist, surviving a crippling depression and moving onto a war footing by the early 1940s. America industrialized and became the world's great power, discovering cars, suburbs, and atomic power along the way. During these years the South changed less than the North, as fewer immigrants meant the region retained much of its agrarian economy as well as its racial segregation.¹⁴⁸

In the midst of all this change, Wilmington also grew and developed exponentially. Between the Civil War and World War Two, the city's population tripled. The Wilmington to Weldon railroad, later the Atlantic Coast Line railroad, was the longest in the world for a brief time in the 1840s.¹⁴⁹ Wilmington was the last major port to fall in the Civil War, and during Reconstruction the city was a critical transportation and industrial hub. From the 1880s to around 1910, Wilmington was North Carolina's largest city.¹⁵⁰ The cotton trading company of Alexander Sprunt and Sons was the largest in the United States in the 1880s, and its business helped to make Wilmington one of the chief ports on the eastern seaboard. At the turn of the twentieth century, the evolution of

¹⁴⁸ For an excellent primer on American history, see Hugh Brogan, *The Penguin History of the United States of America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985) and Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1994).

¹⁴⁹ Anne Russell, *Wilmington: A Pictorial History* (Virginia Beach: Donning Publishing Company, 1981), 31.

¹⁵⁰ Hutteman, *Wilmington*, 7.

an American elite and its incorporated business class precipitated a revival of monuments to the American values of industry and enterprise. Classical architectural themes were revived, celebrating the success of national reunification, industrial modernization, nationalism, Southern heritage and imperialism.¹⁵¹ The Old South elite, battered by the Civil War, reasserted itself through a reactionary reinvention of history. Simultaneously, the new captains of industry developed a commercial infrastructure in towns such as Wilmington, favoring an expressive, grandiose architectural style that flaunted their newly acquired wealth.¹⁵²

The City of Wilmington's population was 10,000 in 1860, and up to 30,000 by the late 1930s.¹⁵³ When one considers the whole of New Hanover County, as well as rural areas surrounding the city, those numbers are appreciably larger. In the 1920 Census, Wilmington supported a workforce of 15,311, defined as the number of "persons ten years of age and over gainfully employed."¹⁵⁴ An economic survey of the city from 1927 states that cotton exports, the distribution of petroleum products, and fertilizer production – by far the largest industry – drove the local economy. As a direct result of both the railroad's presence and the agricultural economy of surrounding areas, Wilmington's principal industry was the receiving and shipping of goods through the port.¹⁵⁵ The fishing, lumber, oil, fertilizer, shipbuilding and manufactured textiles industries, as well as the export of cotton, iron, cement and molasses, were all central to the life of the town

¹⁵¹ Bishir, "Landmarks of Power," 6.

¹⁵² Ibid., 7.

¹⁵³ Walter H. Conser Jr., *Sacred Spaces: Architecture and Religion in Historic Wilmington* (Wilmington, N.C.: Bellamy Mansion Museum, Preservation North Carolina, 1999), 7.

¹⁵⁴ Members of the School of Commerce and the Bureau of Municipal Research, *University of North Carolina Extension Bulletin: Economic Survey of Wilmington, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1927), 24. United States Census figures.

¹⁵⁵ Members of the School of Commerce and the Bureau of Municipal Research, *University of North Carolina Extension Bulletin: Economic Survey of Wilmington, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1927), 23-24.

in the 1920s. Our ensuing discussion of historic preservation should be viewed against Wilmington's industrial background, which was representative of America as a whole from 1900 to World War II.

Histories of historic preservation have often centered on the role of the Federal government but while that is a necessary area to remember the field has been a largely local political movement.¹⁵⁶ That is why regional heritage is so strongly linked to preservation in Wilmington. Regional identity is as strong as personal attachment in Wilmington, and never more so than during a discussion of elite efforts to secure a city that reflects their own image.

Published in 1966, the same year as the Historic Wilmington Foundation was founded, Emma Woodward MacMillan's book *Wilmington's Vanished Homes and Buildings* identifies 54 structures that were memorable to the author from her years as a resident between 1900 and 1950. This whimsical account has importance as a first-hand recollection of place, notable for its tone of gentle indignation: "Often I have been asked by new residents of our city why all the stately old homes on North Front, Second and Third streets were pulled down. Why indeed? All in the name of progress! And just as many more are going to give place to parking lots and insignificant office buildings."¹⁵⁷ MacMillan's book is representative of the flavor of local sentiment for those with the means and inclination to consider preservation a topic of merit during the period. The upper class realized they had the societal obligation to save buildings if any were to be saved at all. Wilmington's first Post Office, situated on the site of the current Post Office

¹⁵⁶ Page and Mason, *Giving Preservation a History*, 12.

¹⁵⁷ Emma Woodward MacMillan, *Wilmington's Vanished Homes and Buildings* (Raleigh, N.C.: Edwards and Broughton Company, 1966), vii.

at the corner of Front and Chestnut streets, elicited much of the same genteel disquiet when it was demolished in 1936. Although the project created jobs for skilled and unskilled laborers during the Depression, the removal of the grand Victorian Post Office and adjoining park raised residents' awareness of what it meant to lose an intrinsic element of their familiar urban landscape even though they were not sentimentally attached enough to the building to save it.

The trend toward a greater recognition of sense of place reappears in the public sphere. Wilmington City Council minutes for October 10, 1917, state that "A communication from the Committee appointed by the Mayor to locate points of historical interest asking for an appropriation of \$250,000 to carry out the purpose of the Committee was read and referred to the Finance Committee."¹⁵⁸ The inclination to preserve is clear, and the committee did in fact meet to advance the idea. In this particular instance, the resolve failed a week later when "the Historical Committee...was advised that the Finance Committee...was not now prepared to recommend an appropriation in view of the demands of employes [sic] for increased wages to meet the high cost of living."¹⁵⁹ The necessity of utilizing funds to fulfill more pressing concerns is often the greatest restriction on governmental preservation. The City Council's motions illustrate the desire to retain a sense of the past and the value placed on such activity, despite the lack of resources. The Historical Committee mentioned in the minutes originated from motivations to preserve Wilmington's heritage by government leaders. In the organization of a short-lived marker program that distributed granite markers around downtown (and at Cornelius Harnett's 'Maynard' site), the City did

¹⁵⁸ Wilmington City Council Minutes, 10 October 1917.

¹⁵⁹ Wilmington City Council Minutes, 17 October, 1917.

attempt a modicum of early preservation education, but they almost required wider support and privately funded leadership from Wilmington's upper class to succeed.¹⁶⁰

Architectural Styles In Wilmington

Any discussion of Wilmington's preservation efforts should detail the architectural styles preserved. Wilmington's architectural vernacular begins with the 1738 Georgian-style Mitchell-Anderson House and encompasses many succeeding trends. Italianate is probably the style most prevalent in the city, but Queen Anne, Federal and Greek Revival all make numerous appearances. A great variety of styles have enjoyed prominence over the years, due in part to waves of immigration and the fluctuation of capital, as well as to natural changes in taste over the last 267 years. Additionally, the Victorian period was marked by the customarily gaudy expansion of houses; the meshing of popular styles was fashionable in the day. In short, Wilmington's architectural heritage reflects both its populace and its position as a port city - cosmopolitan.

The most common style of architecture is not actually a style at all. The term 'vernacular architecture' refers to a type of local architecture that fits no particular model but may include elements of definable styles. Along with many of Wilmington's small cottages, the majority of the city's functional structures, including bridges, airport facilities and commercial warehouses, often fit this vernacular categorization.

Italianate architecture was most popular in the second half of the nineteenth century. This style usually conforms to the pattern of a square house with long porches,

¹⁶⁰ File "Historical Markers." Louis T. Moore Collection, North Carolina Room. New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

ornate molding, tall and narrow sash windows, and detailing such as cornices.¹⁶¹

Italianate is the predominant style of Wilmington's surviving public and private buildings. Its popularity was linked to the Romantic Movement and the writings of Andrew Jackson Downing, and its zenith in Wilmington was the 1852 construction of the Zebulon Latimer House at 126 South Third Street, currently home of the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society.¹⁶²

Also popular in the mid-to-late nineteenth century was the Gothic Revival style, notable for its steeply pitched roofs, pointed arches above doors and windows, battlements, towers, and elaborate exterior decorations. Gothic Revival followed a European trend and was often featured in churches. The Cronly-Vezina House, formerly of 403 Summer Rest Road, is an exemplar of this style, boasting a high-pointed design and second level balustrade.¹⁶³

Greek Revival is a style closely associated with the Old South and embodied by imposing columns and porticos reminiscent of classical Greek temples. The deRosset House at the corner of Second and Dock Streets features a Doric portico in this style. From 1820 to 1860, Greek Revival replaced the earlier Federal style and enjoyed a period of immense popularity among Wilmington's landowners. After a series of devastating fires in Wilmington robbed the city of much of its early architecture, only the 1819

¹⁶¹ New Hanover County Planning Department, *Historic Architecture of New Hanover County, North Carolina* (Wilmington, N.C.: New Hanover County Planning Department, 1986), 13.

¹⁶² Edward F. Turberg, "Overview of Wilmington Architecture." In *Time, Talent, Tradition: Five Essays on The Cultural History of the Lower Cape Fear Region, North Carolina* (Wilmington, NC: Cape Fear Museum, 1995), 17-31.

¹⁶³ New Hanover County Planning Department, *Historic Architecture*, 93. In January 2004, the Historic Wilmington Foundation assisted in moving this house to preserve it.

Lazarus House on Grace Street and the 1828 Cassidey-Harper House at the foot of Church Street remain as examples of the Federal style.¹⁶⁴

After Italianate, Queen Anne style buildings are the most notable architectural style in Wilmington. Queen Anne is a prototypically Victorian style, full of ruffles and embellishments, assorted bright colors, and verandas and towers on a rambling scale. One grand example of this style is the 1892 New Hanover County Courthouse at Third and Princess Streets. One subset of the Queen Anne style was the shingle style house, for which a sense of horizontal continuity was important; in Wilmington, the Donald MacRae house at 23 South Third Street is an example of this style.

Neoclassical-Revival followed Queen Anne into the 1950s, bringing Greek and Roman simplicity back into fashion. As the grander designs fell away and the suburbs blossomed, a more utilitarian style quickly developed. The new homes built as the city spread out from downtown were a blend of ranch houses, cottages, and structures borrowing heavily from Georgian, Federal or neoclassical styles but not establishing their own style due to the transient nature of mobile, suburban life.¹⁶⁵ Although stylistic elements certainly remained, as the twentieth century progressed the factors of speed, cost, utility and convenience replaced high style as the driving force behind new construction. As architectural historian Edward Turberg notes, between 1908 and 1940 the Aladdin Company and Sears-Roebuck used boxcars to ship 'kit' houses to the new suburbs, where they were assembled in mere days.¹⁶⁶ Styles such as Craftsman bungalows, Colonial, Tudor, Art Moderne, and Mediterranean intermingled with the previous styles into a new vernacular.

¹⁶⁴ Turberg, "Wilmington Architecture," 4.

¹⁶⁵ Edward Turberg, personal correspondence, 13 February 2006.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

Architectural styles have changed over time. From a preservation standpoint, this often means that a subsequent style supersedes an earlier fashion, leading directly to the destruction or radical alteration of earlier houses. Wilmington has been fortunate to keep many examples of the evolving tastes of its residents. In fact, as historian Catherine Bishir notes in *North Carolina Architecture*, Wilmington “contains the state’s richest collection of 19thc. urban architecture.”¹⁶⁷ This achievement is in itself an immense preservation success.

The following case studies are intended to tell the stories of particular successes and failures in Wilmington’s preservation history. These examples help to clarify the motivations of the individuals, elites, interest groups, and governmental agencies committed to preservation. In these studies the recurrent theme of clashing conservative and progressive forces and the reasons why society did and did not preserve are practically illustrated. Each example also demonstrates how class drives preservation. Successful preservation comes from the idea of ‘noblesse oblige’, altruism, memorializing of the upper class and their heritage, and the feeling for sense of place by the preserver. The thread that unites these themes is that success is directly proportional to the degree of emotional investment by the upper classes in a specific property.

Burgwin-Wright House [Figures 1a & 1b]

The Burgwin-Wright House, on the southwest corner of Third and Market streets, was built in 1770-71 by lawyer, merchant and landowner John Burgwin (1731-1803). The house is also named for Judge Joshua Grainger Wright, who purchased it in 1799.¹⁶⁸ The house has a central role in the history of Wilmington from the American Revolution

¹⁶⁷ Catherine W. Bishir, *North Carolina Architecture* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, for Preservation North Carolina, Inc., 1990), xi.

¹⁶⁸ Hutteman, *Wilmington*, 45.

onwards, and it was known as the Cornwallis House into the twentieth century due to the building's Revolutionary connection. The house was built from the walls of a jail built around 1744 and the stone foundations were used as a prison and dungeon during the Revolutionary conflict. Patriot hero Cornelius Harnett is thought to have died in that dungeon in 1781.¹⁶⁹ British General Lord Cornwallis used the house as a headquarters for 18 days in April of 1781 and, allegedly, British musket marks are still visible in the original floorboards.¹⁷⁰ Leaving a bloody Guilford courthouse after a Pyrrhic victory, Cornwallis marched to Wilmington where he commandeered the house, regrouped, and then proceeded on his way to defeat and surrender at Yorktown.¹⁷¹

The National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in North Carolina first became engaged by this property in the 1930s. In that decade Wilmington was “still a small town and a special place,”¹⁷² says Lillian Boney, an active preservationist for over fifty years. There was little of the eighteenth century left and the Dames' focus was to preserve Colonial history. With the Boatwright House situated directly behind and St. James Church across Third Street, the Burgwin-Wright was positioned in an excellent historic setting. Despite the throes of the Depression, it seemed clear to the organization that their role was to save the building despite its advanced state of dilapidation. Interior photographs show that the house was in desperate straits by the early 1930s, with missing

¹⁶⁹ File “Cornelius Harnett,” Louis T. Moore Collection, North Carolina Room, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

¹⁷⁰ Anonymous, Curator and Restorationist of Colonial Dames Archive, private interview by author.

¹⁷¹ William S. Powell, ed., *The Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 3 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 36.

¹⁷² Lillian Boney, interview with the author, 22 February 2006. Mrs. Boney's mother was a Colonial Dame at the time of the purchase of the Burgwin-Wright House and sponsored her daughter's membership in the early 1940s. Mrs. Boney is relating her mother's recounting of the story. Mrs. Boney also discussed recollections with Mrs. Kauno Lehto, a Colonial Dame in the 1930s, and subsequently President of the local chapter, who declined to be interviewed here.

floors and rotting walls.¹⁷³ Mrs. Boney, a Colonial Dame since the 1940s, recalls how members at the time related the story. The women who comprised the membership were “keenly aware of the historical significance” due to Revolutionary history and the prominence of the Wright and Burgwin families.¹⁷⁴ A sense of civic duty and historical sentiment seems to have led to this preservation success.

The Colonial Dames were often preservation minded. Mrs. Alfred Moore Waddell, wife of the former Congressman and Mayor, joined the Colonial Dames in 1896 and was President from 1916 to 1935. In her first Annual Report in 1916, she noted that Mrs. James (Luola) Sprunt was currently involved in the maintenance and restoration of her Orton home and that projects for monuments and preservation were underway elsewhere in town. These included a \$500 gift presented to the George Washington Memorial Building and a further \$500 for a portrait of George Washington to present to England, commemorating one hundred years of peace.¹⁷⁵ In her final Annual Report in 1935, Mrs. Waddell reported the organization’s participation in markers for pioneers in western North Carolina, a marker at Steele Creek Presbyterian Church, and donations to a museum fund at Stratford.¹⁷⁶ What is most instructive is the model the Dames followed; they were a private, preservation-minded women’s group which was well funded and upper class – and they memorialized George Washington. Ann Cunningham would be proud.

¹⁷³ File “Colonial Dames,” New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

¹⁷⁴ Lillian Boney, interview with the author, 22 February 2006.

¹⁷⁵ Jean Dalziel Wood, *A History of the North Carolina Society of Colonial Dames of America from March 1894 to March 1935* (privately printed, 1935), Local History Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina, 8.

¹⁷⁶ *The 41st Annual Report of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of North Carolina* (privately printed, 1935), 38-40, File “Colonial Dames,” New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

The rehabilitation of the grand, Georgian-style Burgwin-Wright House began in 1938 after the 1937 purchase by the Colonial Dames for their North Carolina headquarters.¹⁷⁷ The Wright family had held the property until after the Civil War, and in March 1869 it was conveyed to William McCrary. Subsequently Mr. McCrary's widow owned the house, and finally it was passed to her sister, Miss Rowe Wiggins.¹⁷⁸ Miss Wiggins died in 1930 and her estate was held by the Wilmington Savings and Trust Company.¹⁷⁹ Amazingly, at this time it was proposed that the building be removed for the construction of a gas station at the corner of Third and Market streets. Early in the decade this proposal caused dismay amongst the Dames. "When the possibility was presented to us of the demolishing of a beautiful and historic house, to be replaced by a gas station, we wondered if it were not time for the North Carolina Society to...acquire our new home"¹⁸⁰ reported Mrs. Waddell. Citing the architectural beauty and historic importance of the house, she stressed how much of an opportunity its preservation of the house afforded for a headquarters and a museum to Colonial history. Eventually, after much lobbying to avert demolition, the property was sold to the Dames for \$21,000.¹⁸¹ The Dames publicly released a statement celebrating the acquisition, which allowed them to "preserve[e] for future generations a perfect picture of the life of a gentleman of the eighteenth century."¹⁸²

¹⁷⁷ John Bivins, "Preliminary Investigation: North Steps and Porches of Burgwin-Wright House, Wilmington, NC," 1991, private archive, Burgwin-Wright House Museum, Wilmington, North Carolina.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ *The 37th Annual Report of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of North Carolina* (privately printed, 1931), 22-24, File "Colonial Dames," New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² "NC Dames Will Restore Historic House," *Wilmington (N.C.) News*, 8 March 1938.

Aside from the plan to replace the house with a gas station, there were also rumors that a family with local connections planned to ship the house in pieces to Connecticut in order to preserve it.¹⁸³ Such affronts to a Southern landmark seem to have spurred on the Dames' efforts. In her report for 1931 Mrs. Waddell began the process of preservation, quoting Woodrow Wilson's phrase, "a nation that forgets what it was yesterday does not know what it is today" and exhorting fellow Dames to organize and gather funds for the rescue of the house.¹⁸⁴ Interestingly, she discusses 'noblesse oblige' as a reason that the Dames must be the driving force in saving this house.¹⁸⁵ Waddell repeats the phrase in her 1932 report, re-emphasizing the patrician (or matrician in this case) view that upper classes will always need to lead historical and preservation movements in society.¹⁸⁶

Like many other such groups, the Colonial Dames seemed to believe that it was the elite's responsibility to preserve local heritage, and specifically that connected with great men, great wars and great deeds. In fact, Article II of the bylaws that founded the Colonial Dames states that the objects of the society include, "to preserve and restore buildings connected with the early history of our country; to diffuse healthful and intelligent information concerning the past; to create a popular interest in our colonial history; to stimulate a spirit of true patriotism and...the sacred obligation of honoring the memory of those heroic ancestors whose ability, valor, sufferings, and achievements are

¹⁸³ Anonymous, Curator and Restorationist of Colonial Dames Archive, private interview by author.

¹⁸⁴ *The 37th Annual Report of the National Society of the Colonial Dames*, 18.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁸⁶ *The 38th Annual Report of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of North Carolina* (privately printed, 1932), 15, File "Colonial Dames," New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

beyond all praise.”¹⁸⁷ In the 1930s this meant preserving aristocratic and Old Southern history and the American Revolution as symbolized by the Burgwin-Wright House.

A salient example of their brand of preservation also became Wilmington’s missed opportunity for fame in the movement. William Murtaugh describes Charleston’s 1931 zoning ordinance establishing the Old and Historic Charleston District at the Battery end of the city’s peninsula as a “concept with manifold impact. It created a major divergence in the path of the preservation movement and laid the basis for the mainstream planning position which exists in America today.”¹⁸⁸ A little known fact is that Wilmington had the opportunity to precede Charleston as the first city to designate a historic district and mark itself as a preservation pioneer. On October 16th, 1930, the *Wilmington Morning Star* reported that the Cape Fear Chapter of Colonial Dames had petitioned the City Board to create a commission, “to whom shall be transferred all transactions involving the remodeling, removal or demolishing of historic buildings, none of which shall be undertaken except by authority of said commission.”¹⁸⁹

On October 29th, the *Wilmington News* added to the story, commenting that the commission was supposed to have “the power to regulate changes of any kind with privately owned historic buildings” but its petition had been denied that morning.¹⁹⁰ The article states that City Attorney John J. Burney instructed the City Board to deny the request because it did not possess the authority to create such a commission. Mr. Burney concluded that such a commission could not be appointed, for it “would have no

¹⁸⁷ *The North Carolina Society of Colonial Dames of North America, Constitution and By-laws* (Wilmington, N.C.: privately printed, 1936), 4.

¹⁸⁸ Murtaugh, *Keeping Time*, 59.

¹⁸⁹ “Historic Building Commission Asked,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Morning Star*, 16 October 1930, File “Historical Commission,” New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

¹⁹⁰ *Wilmington (N.C.) News*, pages 1 and 10, 29 October 1930, File “Historical Commission,” New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

authority, as it is a uniform law and well recognized in all the courts that a person has a right to use his own property as he may deem best.”¹⁹¹

In hindsight, the decision was a sadly missed opportunity for Wilmington to do what Charleston would the following year. If Wilmington’s City Board (the forerunner of the current Council) had created such a commission instead of upholding unrestricted private property rights, they would have had jurisdiction to create a zoning ordinance that limited demolitions and alterations without oversight. Subsequently, they could also have created a historic district in which those rules would be enforced. On the day the Colonial Dames, led by Mrs. Alfred Moore Waddell, Mrs. R.A. Parsley and Mrs. William Latimer, presented their petition, they revealed they had been moved by a similar idea they believed was taking shape in Charleston.¹⁹² Although the Colonial Dames’ commitment to preservation is evident through the case study of the Burgwin-Wright House, they also memorialize Old South ideals and the past glories of white, aristocratic society. However, they certainly were local preservation pioneers, and their investment in the potential of the historic district idea was thwarted by the government’s inability to recognize the benefit of the plan. The event of the city’s refusal to restrict property owners by sanctioning a historic commission was a preservation failure, or at least a missed opportunity, which denied Wilmington a place in the history of historic preservation. The upper class was clearly invested in preservation by means of oversight here. It was the weakness of imagination from local government that prevented this instance from being successful.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² “Historic Building Commission Asked,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Morning Star*, 16 October 1930, File “Historical Commission,” New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

In both the preservation of the Burgwin-Wright House and the idea to create a historic district altruism has to be considered one positive factor, with an attachment to heritage being another. However, the Colonial Dames are elitist, secretive and white, so the preservation of the Burgwin-Wright House, like Mount Vernon, is more than good versus evil, or solely successful “through the Sisyphean efforts of well-intentioned, public minded individuals”, which are the “cherished myths”¹⁹³ of preservation’s history. The Burgwin-Wright House itself, seen through a critical lens, is a bastion of the planter elite that it represents. Looking at the case of its preservation, even the repulsion of the proposed gas station on the site, is a symbolic rejection of modernization and industrialization in favor of the upper, Bourbon, classes and their regional history. Mrs. Waddell herself was alongside her husband as he claimed the city for white supremacists in 1898, and he was a Confederate officer. The logic that the elite memorialized itself, and did so through a club house for an organization that represents them in the form of the Burgwin-Wright House, does not diminish the efforts of the Dames, but it does shed a political light on their mission statement of preserving their own Colonial past.

Not only did the Colonial Dames perceive the historical value of the property, and claim the house as an implicitly white aristocratic fortress, but they were persistent in pursuit of its purchase. In 1931 \$500 was given as seed money for a headquarters fund, which grew in each subsequent year. Mrs. Waddell called on the membership to continue fundraising and to use the argument that “preservation is not only a vital matter to such a Society as ours, but of momentous importance to this old town, now beginning to realize that its history is a tremendous asset.”¹⁹⁴ In 1936 their new President, Mrs. J. Walter

¹⁹³ Page and Mason, *Giving Preservation a History*, 7.

¹⁹⁴ *The 37th Annual Report of the National Society of the Colonial Dames*, 22-24.

(Eliza) Bellamy Williamson, a daughter of Dr. John Bellamy and a resident of the Bellamy Mansion, successfully lobbied the local government for a survey of the site¹⁹⁵ and petitioned the Federal government to designate the house as “a historical shrine.”¹⁹⁶ Mrs. Williamson was of the elite class in historic downtown Wilmington, and had a vested interest in preserving the Old South grandeur of the area due to her family connections. Finally, the Dames negotiated the sale with the Wilmington Savings and Trust Company, who had held the property after Miss Wiggins’ death in 1930. They had secured their own rendering of planter history and repelled the reinvention of that corner of downtown – making real the idea of “spatializing memory – preserving and expressing historical memory in material form.”¹⁹⁷

The attention to detail and high quality workmanship employed on the house were remarkable for a historic preservation project during the time. Erling H. Pederson, a well respected architect famous for his work in restoring Society Hill in Philadelphia and Stratford Hall, was hired for the 1938 restoration because he was a leader in the field.¹⁹⁸ The Colonial Dames hoped that original architectural elements, colors and period antiques would enhance the historic character once the structure was renovated.¹⁹⁹ Pederson’s architectural plans, dated April 21, 1938, show how the original 1771 plans

¹⁹⁵ *The 42nd Annual Report of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of North Carolina* (privately printed, 1936), 19-20, File “Colonial Dames,” New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

¹⁹⁶ “Mrs. Williamson Is Re-Elected,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Star*, 7 May 1936.

¹⁹⁷ Randall Mason, “Historic Preservation, Public Memory, and the Making of Modern New York City” in *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States*, ed. Max Page and Randall Mason, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 140.

¹⁹⁸ Anonymous, Curator and Restorationist of Colonial Dames Archive, private interview by author.

¹⁹⁹ *The 42nd Annual Report of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of North Carolina* (privately printed, 1936), 19-20, File “Colonial Dames,” New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

had been consulted and compared to previous renovations in 1845 and 1885.²⁰⁰ Pederson planned to keep the 1845 dining room at the rear of the house as a Committee Room, but the 1885 addition of a kitchen and bathroom on the rear of the house was less well built and was removed.²⁰¹

An unpublished 1991 report details the progression of all previous renovations to the Burgwin-Wright House, many of which can still be seen in its current composite form.²⁰² For example, in 1938 the front steps were repaired in their original configuration.²⁰³ Updates from the mid-1800s are evident in the molding, which features some late Greek or Italianate paneling that conformed with the style of the Italianate front door, added in 1847. On the first floor rear porch only one 1771 column remains, and it is likely that both front and rear porches were rebuilt in 1847 and again partially in 1938.²⁰⁴ Upon his acceptance of the job in 1938, Pederson contended with the many alterations in a considered fashion. His architectural report notes that the original 1771 house was essentially a rectangle, twenty five feet by fifty two feet, with two-storied porches to the north and south. During the ownership of Thomas Wright in 1845, the large rear extension was added and Pederson recommended it remain intact as evidence of “a natural sequence of construction in the development of the building.”²⁰⁵ Besides the removal of the 1885 addition and the retention of the 1845 changes, Pederson also restored the upper story rooms to their original configuration and remained deeply

²⁰⁰ Erling H. Pederson, *Architectural Drawings of the Burgwin-Wright House Restoration, Job #84, 1921*, architectural reproductions, private archive, Burgwin-Wright House Museum, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² John Bivins, “Preliminary Investigation: North Steps and Porches of Burgwin-Wright House, Wilmington, NC,” 1991, private archive, Burgwin-Wright House Museum, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁰³ Pederson, *Architectural Drawings of the Burgwin-Wright House*.

²⁰⁴ Bivins, “Preliminary Investigation.”

²⁰⁵ Erling H. Pederson, “Architect’s Report of Restoration of the Cornwallis House,” 1938, private archive, Burgwin-Wright House Museum, 8.

conscious of the character the Dames wished to preserve throughout the house. The Dames organization remained true to their mission throughout the 1930s with respect to the Burgwin-Wright House. Their investment in the property was such that it now seems that success was assured simply by the strength of their commitment to the project.

In keeping with the meticulous standards of the restoration work, which ranks as the most thorough in Wilmington up to this time, Pederson includes in his report a discussion of two policies of historic preservation. He describes the French Viollet-le-Duc school of thought, which strictly requires the removal of all later additions to an original structure; and the John Ruskin model, which dictates that no actual restoration should take place on a historic structure, merely repair work to all additions.²⁰⁶ Pederson's considered view is that the former model destroys valuable changes and the "natural sequence of construction", whereas the latter is timid, leaving clumsy and temporary additions in place as if they were fine, historic craftsmanship.²⁰⁷ Pederson's approach rehabilitated the house for use as the Dames' headquarters, creating offices and meeting areas while scrupulously preserving all original features and valuable additions in order to maintain the historic importance and artistic value of the house.

The property also featured a well house, carriage house and a detached kitchen.²⁰⁸ Such kitchens were a common feature for large houses as they pre-empted the threat of fire. Two blocks away the George French house, on the southeastern corner of Fourth and Dock streets, has a similarly detached kitchen. The structure that became the Burgwin-Wright kitchen was built thirty years before the house, and its renovation shows the pains to which the Dames went in trying to retain the character of the whole

²⁰⁶ Pederson, "Architect's Report of Restoration," 8.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ In 1955, this detached kitchen was rebuilt for use as offices by the Colonial Dames.

property.²⁰⁹ The kitchen was in terrible disrepair by the 1950s and was effectively rebuilt “using the remaining original stone walls, massive brick chimney and much of the old material.”²¹⁰ Even the gardens were restored to conform to the historic period. No expense was spared in hiring Alden Hopkins and Donald Parker, the landscapers of Colonial Williamsburg, to complete the Dames’ vision of a perfectly preserved house. The designers had no records of the original gardens to follow, but they attempted to approximate a historically appropriate recreation in an effort to restore the historic character. As Hopkins noted, “I have designed the garden in the spirit of the period of the house with the same elegance and grace shown in the architecture.”²¹¹

The Colonial Dames not only exhibited persistence in pursuit of the property, but they were also organized, dedicated and knowledgeable enough to recognize that this was a valuable purchase for the town and for their own mission. Jackie Margolis, Director of the Burgwin-Wright House Museum, explains their dedication: “The Colonial Dames restored many buildings across the state out of a sense of duty to the long history of the region. The Burgwin-Wright House was seen as an ideal state headquarters and matched the aims of the Colonial Dames organization to preserve our state’s history.”²¹²

As exhibited at Mount Vernon and recorded in the historiography of preservation, it often fell to the passion of individuals to dictate the success or failure of preservation. Wilmington’s Colonial Dames felt that the house was not just important

²⁰⁹ “Famous Landmark is Restored by Colonial Dames,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Star*, 17 October 1955.

²¹⁰ Mrs. Kauno A. Lehto, President of the North Carolina Colonial Dames, to membership of the North Carolina Colonial Dames, undated, private archive, Burgwin-Wright House Museum, Wilmington, North Carolina. This letter addresses the membership and discusses both the 1937 purchase and restoration, the reconstruction of the gardens, and the 1955 rebuilding of the detached kitchen structure.

²¹¹ Alden Hopkins; quoted in Mrs. Kauno A. Lehto President of the North Carolina Colonial Dames, to membership of the North Carolina Colonial Dames, undated, private archive, Burgwin-Wright House Museum, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²¹² Jackie Margolis, Director of the Burgwin-Wright House Museum, interview by author, 19 January 2006.

locally, “but to the nation”; according to Mrs. Kauno A. Lehto, President of the North Carolina Colonial Dames, “each Dame should consider it a privilege to share in the work of its restoration and its preservation.”²¹³ In this case the conservative and upper class desire to preserve a glorious past produced successful results that proved to be a progressive example of how to campaign for a property, raise funds, research the history and rehabilitate and reinvigorate an important piece of Wilmington’s character. Such success was certainly directly proportional to the degree of investment in the house by the Dames and the social class they represented. The mission and motivations of the organization fit perfectly with the needs of this particular property in the 1930s. Also, they are direct successors to the legacy of Mount Vernon, which also took attitudes of ‘noblesse oblige’ and “civic patriotism”²¹⁴ to create history through preservation. The Burgwin-Wright House is a class symbol and the Colonial Dames are a reactionary organization, together they succeeded in preservation and retained their own characteristics through a highly visible, historically valuable landmark.

City Hall-Thalian Hall [Figure 2]

City Hall-Thalian Hall is a dual purpose building constructed between 1855 and 1858. In that period Wilmington was the largest city in the state and its port made it relatively cosmopolitan. While not unique, this building is a rare example of the dual function concept. The building accommodates two styles of architecture, Italianate and Classical Revival, and was grand for a city of 9,000 people.²¹⁵ Besides housing a theater and municipal offices, Wilmington’s library was located here from 1858 to 1872 and

²¹³ Eliza Bellamy Williamson, President of the North Carolina Society of the Colonial Dames in North America, to membership of the North Carolina Colonial Dames, 24 July 1937, private archives, Burgwin-Wright House Museum, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²¹⁴ Page and Mason, *Giving Preservation a History*, 10.

²¹⁵ Wrenn, *Architectural and Historical Portrait*, 76.

again from 1906 to 1956, adding to the building's centrality to cultural life. The theater's first performance was in 1858, making it one of the oldest working theaters in the country. The theater was also the largest in the South.²¹⁶ For a city of Wilmington's stature, the importance of such a magnificent structure was assured when President Taft addressed a crowd of 20,000 from the steps in 1909.²¹⁷ The Hall became central to the identity of the town through its location and its roles in entertainment and government.

In the 1850s an earlier educational building, known as the Innes Academy, was demolished to make way for the Hall, and the Thalian Association and city government became business partners in the new project.²¹⁸ Many well-known performers and speakers, including John Philip Sousa, Oscar Wilde in 1882 and William Jennings Bryan in 1912, are associated with the building's history.²¹⁹ The talent that went into the construction process was also significant. The supervising architect was New York's John M. Trimble, a premier architect of his day who designed more than 40 concert halls before his death in 1867 at age 52.²²⁰ Since 1959, Thalian Hall has been the last surviving example of his work. Local talent was supplied by architect James F. Post and builders George Rose, Robert Wood and John Wood, who literally put the project together.²²¹ In short, this was a structure of great pride for the city, a hub in the center of downtown and a symbol of culture and metropolitan growth.

²¹⁶ Hutteman, *Wilmington*, 53.

²¹⁷ Souvenir brochure, photocopied, File "Thalian Hall," Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina, 10.

²¹⁸ Rivenbark, Executive Director of Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, interview by author, 26 January 2006.

²¹⁹ Wrenn, *Architectural and Historical Portrait*, 190.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

²²¹ Wilmington, N.C., Archive "Plaques," Historic Wilmington Foundation.

Grand as it was, Thalian Hall became the center of the city's cultural identity.²²² Most of the activities held within the building were arranged and attended by the upper classes in society. The history of the theater and attached City Hall auditorium included lectures, music, political rallies, memorial services, speeches, scientific exhibits, freak shows, circuses, roller skating, lavish balls and much else.²²³ While some of these entertainments obviously attracted widespread interest, the theater was usually the purview of the wealthy and educated. As a dual-purpose building also functioning as the center for local government, City Hall-Thalian Hall was certainly used much more frequently by Wilmington's ruling elite than by any other segment of the population.

The Thalian Association predated the building and is an early example of an amateur local theater group. The name Thalian is derived, incidentally, from Thalia, the Greek muse of comedy. According to the fashion of the day, Thalian Hall has been known over the years as both the Opera House and the Academy of Music; these monikers were thought more distinguished than the title of theater.²²⁴ Early productions were stock plays of the time, farces and tragedies. Because the building was inadequately heated, the weather often kept crowds away. Other competing events included election campaigns, trials, or executions, and because of the connotations for seediness associated with urban theaters, Victorian women in particular did not regularly attend.²²⁵ Weak profits led early critics to speculate on the wisdom of maintaining the theater, but the

²²² Souvenir brochure, photocopied, File "Thalian Hall," Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina, 12.

²²³ Wrenn, *Architectural and Historical Portrait*, 76.

²²⁴ Rivenbark, Executive Director of Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, interview by author, 26 January 2006.

²²⁵ Wrenn, *Architectural and Historical Portrait*, 76.

symbol of a dynamic cultural life for local society seems to have proved stronger at the time than worries over it being a white elephant.

While the case study here centers around 1939, threats to the preservation of City Hall-Thalian Hall make regular appearances in its history. A 1909 restoration was halted outright as the owner, theater impresario S.A. Schloss, spent time considering the idea of building a new theater before he finally signed the contracts to remodel.²²⁶ A 1909 *Wilmington Star* article reported that in this rehabilitation the “high ceiling has been repainted,” old and leaking windows “have been skillfully walled up” and improvements to the building’s substandard condition now meant that “the entire interior of the playhouse is up-to-date and handsome in appearance. Nothing remains to remind one of the past except the four walls.”²²⁷ When the theater opened in 1858, it was lit with gas and contained modern appointments, and over the years the interior has been repeatedly brought up-to-date in order to retain this aura of modernity. While the original interior design was austere, the building’s interior is currently ornate due to multiple such projects.

Although the 1909 rehabilitation was personally supervised by architect Henry Bonitz, who originally designed the new theater, profitability and the cost of renovation remained a concern. The cost of building was \$5,000 over budget at \$17,800.²²⁸ Even by 1909, financial difficulties had long troubled Thalian Hall, and fiscal issues presented problems in subsequent years. In fact, Thalian Hall has only generated approximately

²²⁶ Archive Files, Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²²⁷ *Wilmington (N.C.) Star News*, 1909, File “Thalian Hall,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²²⁸ Souvenir brochure, photocopied, File “Thalian Hall,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina, 12. This brochure was published in 1990 to mark the rededication of Thalian Hall.

one-third of its operating costs in revenue throughout its life, an issue that has been an obvious risk to its preservation.²²⁹ That the building remains today is an unlikely preservation success, as the fact that it was under threat on many occasions is hardly surprising from an economic standpoint. Unlike the Bailey, Bijou, Carolina, Colony, Royal and Victoria theaters in Wilmington, this building was fortunately regarded as a symbol, described by Beverly Tetterton as the “town’s crowning pre-Civil War architectural achievement,”²³⁰ and was therefore central to the cultural life coveted by higher social classes. It is this symbolism, particularly for the conservative elite who lived and worked around the Hall, that seems to have motivated its preservation through the years.

Some work on Thalian Hall was small in scale but still illustrative of the community feeling for the building. In 1931 George E. Kidder, chairman of the Wilmington Relief association, organized an interior and exterior rehabilitation of the building. The association was one of many formed in the 1930s to assist the community during the Depression, and it brought together building materials from the Thalian society, workmen employed by the Wilmington Relief association, and an interior decorator.²³¹ The work and logistics were free of charge to the City and gratefully accepted by Mayor Walter Blair, who deemed the gift exemplary of “an unusually fine spirit of civic cooperation”. Seeing a need to help, a local group of concerned civic leaders found labor from carpenters, plasterers and painters who were eager to work.²³²

²²⁹ Rivenbark, Executive Director of Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, interview by author, 26 January 2006.

²³⁰ Tetterton, *Lost But Not Forgotten*, 6.

²³¹ “Renovation of Academy Added to Relief Projects,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Star*, 1 December 1931, File “Thalian Hall,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²³² *Ibid.*

Local government had no funds whatsoever, and the association could employ workers in need of jobs. Work continued until April of 1932 and shows how preservation progressed directly through local community spirit. This is an example of the type of investment in a property by the upper classes that would lead to its salvation during times that its efficacy was in question.

In 1935 a debate reopened over the continued use of Thalian Hall as the city's main stage. The Exchange Club of Wilmington, a civic group, is reported to have begun the discussion by insisting on a new auditorium for the city, and not a remodeled Thalian Hall. The Exchange Club's demand resulted from a City application for \$100,000 from the federal Public Works Administration.²³³ Various members of the club berated the City for "useless spending of any money on Thalian Hall" and for having "lost all the daring that is necessary to achieve progress."²³⁴ This is an interesting precursor to the arguments against repairing City Hall-Thalian Hall a few years later, and it should be noted that in this fight the progressives were not preservationists. Progressive voices, often representing the middle class, called for a new facility while older, more conservative voices spoke out in favor of retaining the Hall.

The biggest test of City Hall-Thalian Hall's longevity came on Monday, January 16, 1939. On that date the *Wilmington Star* ran the headline "City Wall Crumbles Here" accompanied by alarming photographs of a hole forty feet high by thirty feet wide in the exterior wall of the north front wing. The story describes how five workers narrowly escaped injury when a section of the 83 year old building which comprised Mayor Thomas E. Cooper's office, the Commissioner of Public Works' office and part of the

²³³ Archive Files, Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²³⁴ "Exchange Opposes Hall Conversion," *Wilmington (N.C.) Star*, 7 November 1935, File "Thalian Hall," Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

public library collapsed.²³⁵ Paradoxically, it was an attempt at renovation and modernization that brought about the collapse and sparked debate over removing the entire building and led to a struggle to preserve it.

A few months earlier, the *Wilmington News* of April 28, 1938, reported that Commissioner of Public Works J.E.L. Wade had applied for a grant of \$100,000 to renovate City Hall.²³⁶ The money came from a new federal Works Progress Administration initiative that had allocated funds of \$4,500,000,000 across the nation to public works projects. Commissioner Wade had spent almost two years corresponding with the federal government and waiting for approval of the funds.²³⁷ In May 1938 he advanced his plans to maintain and enhance City Hall-Thalian Hall by moving the city library from the top floor of Thalian Hall to the Bridgers Mansion on the corner of Third and Dock Streets. The library move would create much-needed meeting space for the city government, allow renovations to Thalian Hall, and satisfy local residents who had agitated for better library facilities.²³⁸

The plan was approved while Wade continued to wait for federal funding for the larger renovations. The *Wilmington News* for September 10, 1938, reported that plans were moving along to vacate city hall in time for renovations “so that work on reconstructing the ancient city hall”²³⁹ could start. Renovation apparently necessitated

²³⁵ “City Wall Crumbles here,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Star*, 16 January 1939, File “Thalian Hall,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²³⁶ *Wilmington (N.C.) News*, 28 April 1938, File “Thalian Hall,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²³⁷ Archive Files, Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ “City Hall to be Renovated,” *Wilmington (N.C.) News*, 10 November 1938, File “Thalian Hall,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

the “absolute gutting” of the building.²⁴⁰ The paper notes that officials planned to rebuild Thalian’s stage and install an elevator.²⁴¹ The project was meant to revitalize the Hall and safeguard its role as the center of City government and cultural life.

The flaw in the plan appeared when workmen dug the foundation for the elevator. Like most of Wilmington, City Hall-Thalian Hall is built on soil comprised mostly of sand, and the wall was brick and plaster that had become brittle with age. So it was with some predictability that the nearby wall fell as a result of the excavations. Nobody was hurt in the collapse, but the immediate aftermath was the question of whether to repair or replace the building.²⁴² On January 21, 1939 the newspaper asked the “simple question of whether we are to protect the lives of Wilmington servants and inhabitants or whether sentiment shall prevail to risk these lives for the sake of tradition” and ends the argument with the opinion of the fire marshal, who believed the building unsafe.²⁴³ To the editor of the newspaper at least, it was clear that the time had come to replace the building. This conclusion was reached five days after the collapse and was a reflection of an initial report from the city’s engineer, building inspector and architect published in the same article. That report deemed the walls unsafe and determined that a steel frame would be needed to ensure the structure’s stability. The newspaper editorial contentiously labeled the continued preservation a waste of money and the proposed repairs an inadequate guarantee of public safety.²⁴⁴

²⁴⁰ *Wilmington (N.C.) News*, 1 November 1938, p. 1, File “Thalian Hall,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² Archive Files, Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁴³ “Officials Term City Hall Walls Unsafe,” *Wilmington (N.C.) News*, 21 January 1939, archive files, Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

The City Council decided to wait on more detailed reports from Sherwood Brockwell, state building inspector, and Allen B. McDaniel, an architectural engineer from Washington, D.C. who was hired as an impartial expert on the future of the building. James Wade, Commissioner of Public Works, recommended further reports by the city architect Foard and city engineer Loughlin, and requested that they both go to Atlanta to meet regional representatives of the Public Works Administration in order to explain what had happened and secure continued federal funding.²⁴⁵ Wade's cautious approach was echoed by local landowner Hugh MacRae, a conservative town elder, who appeared before the City Board to argue that all efforts be made to repair City Hall-Thalian Hall as it was "an heirloom worth \$100,000."²⁴⁶

MacRae is the epitome of Wilmington's elite, and yet he is also representative of the evolution of the fading bluebloods who became an entrepreneurial class as the country changed into the twentieth century. The MacRae family accumulated ownership of a great deal of land in Wilmington and Hugh's father, Donald, was an officer or president of Wilmington Cotton Mills Company, the Bank of New Hanover, the Gaslight Company, Wilmington and Weldon Railroad and Navassa Guano Company. Hugh MacRae himself (1865-1951) organized and ran the suburban streetcar system, was a mining engineer, cotton mill executive, ran public utilities, a banker, realtor and developer.²⁴⁷ Thalian Hall-City Hall remained a symbol of the old elite and that thread of MacRae's character blended with his desire to retain 'old Wilmington'. However, as Page and Mason describe in *Giving Preservation a History* urban development, local 'patriotism' and the old planter class and new industrial class did not always oppose each

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Tetterton, *Lost Wilmington*, 34.

other.²⁴⁸ While MacRae defended the elite attachment of his peer group to a historical view of Wilmington through the Hall, he also opposed the modernizing forces of change. He is, in fact, the personification of a bridge between the two eras.

MacRae read a letter to the City Board from another prominent citizen, Walter Parsley, which referred to the character of the building and the prominence of its designer, James F. Post.²⁴⁹ Both MacRae and Parsley lobbied in favor of the building because of its history, and they disagreed strongly with the initial impressions of Mr. Brockwell, who recommended that the City “stop work now and start over.”²⁵⁰

The divergence of opinion did not end there. While Commissioner Wade organized a number of different reports and the City Board waited on their results, the local Kiwanis Club gathered a group of business leaders to urge for a new hall. Led by Bruce Cameron, the Kiwanis meeting described Thalian Hall as “rotten” due to its construction of weak lime mortar and no steel framing.²⁵¹ The Kiwanis did regret the loss of a landmark, but the businessmen present were far more interested in the prospect of a new and modern large-capacity conference center and auditorium. Because Thalian Hall was perceived to be old and in poor condition, more progressive elements of society saw this as an opportunity for redevelopment and the “complete demolition of the present building.”²⁵² Once again the paper expressed accord with this view, advocating removal of the historic landmark because it was unstable. As the building had not been fully

²⁴⁸ Page and Mason, *Giving Preservation a History*, 10.

²⁴⁹ “Officials Term City Hall Walls Unsafe,” *Wilmington (N.C.) News*, 21 January 1939, archive files, Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁵⁰ “Brockwell Says Old City Hall Not Safe,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Morning Star*, 20 January 1939, File “Thalian Hall,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁵¹ “Kiwanians Hear Modernity Pleas,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Star*, 19 January 1906, File “Thalian Hall,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁵² “Committee Urges Modern City Hall,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Star*, 20 January 1906, File “Thalian Hall,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

repaired in many years and the construction was of an old style, the editors saw the structure as “a menace to life and limb...and we doubt that the most skilled repair job can make it wholly safe.”²⁵³ However, more conservative heads prevailed. Mr. MacRae and Parsley were supported by a group from the Colonial Dames who lobbied in favor of retaining the building, using their considerable influence as public leaders.²⁵⁴

Repairs were recommended in large part because the reports called for by Commissioner Wade did conclude that excavations alone brought down the wall. The collapse was not, as was supposed by those wishing to replace the building, due to the structure’s poor original construction.²⁵⁵ The connection felt by the old elite class to this symbol of the city’s cultural life meant they lobbied for its retention. Conservatism overcame modernity in this instance and the refurbishment, including new murals in the theater lobby by artists Claude Howell and Henry MacMillan painted in the early 1940s, successfully secured the future of the historic landmark.²⁵⁶

However, the narrow escape in 1939 was not the end of the story. In 1941, as the wall was rebuilt and the building declared sound, still more problems appeared. A letter to F.M. Thompson, the general contractor responsible for the repairs, from the City Clerk’s office noted “serious defects”²⁵⁷ with the strengthening work in the floors. The state of the building seems to have continued a slow decline during World War Two and

²⁵³ “Our Crumbling City Hall,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Evening News*, 19 January 1939, File “Thalian Hall,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁵⁴ Rivenbark, Executive Director of Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, interview by author, 22 January 2006.

²⁵⁵ Perry, Shaw and Hepburn, architects to J.E.L. Wade, Director Public Works, Wilmington N.C., “Report on Thalian Hall-City Hall,” 1941, archive files, Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁵⁶ Rivenbark, Executive Director of Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, interview by author, 22 January 2006.

²⁵⁷ Wilmington City Clerk’s office to F.M. Thompson, 19 February 1941, archive files, Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, Wilmington, North Carolina.

in 1947 a *Sunday Star-News* article featured pictures of the badly damaged interior of Thalian Hall under the headline “Not An Explosion – Just Thalian Hall.”²⁵⁸

The new damage was extensive and the sentiments it aroused were familiar. Proposals for demolition were quick to reappear. An architectural engineering report created in response to the damage stated that the balconies were pulling away from the walls and decaying wood was a serious problem. The architects and engineers proposed patching the timber framing, removing the lath and plaster ceilings and reinforcing the whole balcony structure and walls with steel. This new work would “cost a great deal, possibly Twenty or Twenty-five Thousand Dollars.”²⁵⁹ The building inspector condemned the balcony and gallery as unsafe at the time, pending repairs, and the report by the construction company of John A. McPherson stated that the structural failings could be fixed “without replacement of any main structural members.”²⁶⁰ In short, the engineers concluded again that the building was structurally sound but beset with a major problem.

Tony Rivenbark believes the 1947 problem was blown out of proportion. Rivenbark is Thalian Hall’s historian and archivist and has been Executive Director of the facility since 1979.²⁶¹ He is also a lecturer on theater history, the developer of Historic Wilmington and Thalian Hall tours, and oversaw preservation of the Hall in the early 1990s. In 1996 he won the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society Cup for his

²⁵⁸ “Not An Explosion – Just Thalian Hall,” *Sunday (Wilmington, N.C.) Star-News*, 9 March 1947, File “Thalian Hall,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁵⁹ James B. Lynch of architects Lynch and Foard to Mr. Gilbert Morton, Building Inspector of Wilmington, N.C., 5 April 1947, archive files, Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁶⁰ John A. McPherson to Mr. H. E. Rodgers, Building Manager, Thalian Association, 28 May 1947, Archive “Tony Rivenbark/Thalian Hall Correspondence,” Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁶¹ Rivenbark, Executive Director of Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, interview by author, 26 January 2006.

contributions to local history for his work on the history of theater in the Cape Fear Museum book, *Time, Talent and Tradition*, and was awarded the League of Historic American Theaters' Outstanding Individual Contribution Award in 2005 for his contributions to local culture and history.²⁶² In his view this became a preservation battle but began as one of the many periods of maintenance that the Hall periodically requires. As in 1939 a notion of preservation was needed, and it came from old Wilmington elites, to offset an exaggerated problem.²⁶³ Rivenbark believes that interested, modernizing groups across the city and at local newspapers reappeared and called for demolition in 1947 and it was rumored that some city workmen pulled down sections of the walls to create a more dramatic picture of dilapidation.²⁶⁴ The 1947 photographs in the Wilmington *Star-News* show this damage, which was used as evidence to recommend demolition.²⁶⁵ Friends of Thalian, such as local resident James McKoy, commissioned structural reports of their own to refute the photographic, circumstantial evidence and succeeded in the continued preservation of the building.²⁶⁶ It took nostalgic sentiment from old Wilmingtonians to rescue the building again.

In the face of repeated threats, City Hall-Thalian Hall has survived. Its preservation is somewhat surprising given its deteriorating condition and the fact that the theater consistently loses money. Community sentiment for this landmark seems to have been its greatest ally. While modernizing forces wanted a bigger, better facility, voices of historical conservatism dictated their own preservation agenda and repeatedly won the

²⁶² Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts. "Thalian Hall's Executive Director Receives National Award." March 2006. http://www.thalianhall.com/Tony_Rivenbark_LHAT.htm

²⁶³ Rivenbark, Executive Director of Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, interview by author, 26 January 2006.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Archive Files, Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁶⁶ Rivenbark, Executive Director of Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts, interview by author, 26 January 2006.

day. The success of preservation directly related to the connection of the old upper class to this building. They saw City Hall-Thalian Hall as representative of elite power, through its classical architecture and its role in the city, and preserve this monument to their history accordingly.

In the United States, nationalism is often a rationale for preservation. And in Wilmington that focuses further into ‘civic patriotism,’²⁶⁷ or localized ‘nationalism’. Whether the strength of feeling is local or national it is reflected in architecture, and preserved by elites to strengthen a sense of identity and to strengthen their class heritage in direct connection to that local identity. To take a national example, the monumental nature of the public architecture in Washington, D.C. is very deliberately planned to place iconic buildings around the central Mall. The position of the Capitol Building overlooking the Mall is magisterial and its architecture is classical, imposing and deliberately dominant on the skyline. The White House, further down the Mall, is less imposing and removed, almost homely, in its own grounds. Both are reflections on the national characteristics that define America, namely leadership, pride and the concept of preeminence: this country prides itself on standing apart from and above all others.

In Wilmington, several large but understated buildings like the U.S. Post Office and Alton Lennon Federal Building similarly reflect national sentiments of leadership and power, imposing a purposeful grandeur through their massive sense of scale. Regional flourishes, such as the tobacco leaves featured in the acanthus, give this federal architecture a Southern flavor, though these structures are still far less stylized than regional architectural as exemplified by City Hall with its columns and portico or the Courthouse with its tower. What they all do is define the ruling class as regional and

²⁶⁷ Page and Mason, *Giving Preservation a History*, 10.

national leaders through architecture and preservation. City Hall-Thalian Hall even achieves this in its function, to provide entertainment for the upper classes and to house the ruling elite.

Orton Plantation [Figure 3]

As an example of how the investment of the upper class in a specific property leads directly to its preservation, one would be hard pressed to find a better case than Orton Plantation. Despite its situation downriver from Wilmington in Brunswick County, Orton Plantation is also an example of a type of familial preservation that bears noting here. Orton was built in grand style in 1725 by “King” Roger Moore with imported English brick, and has been owned over the years by local notables Governor Benjamin Smith, Richard Quince, the Hill family, Colonel Kenneth M. Murchison, Dr. James Sprunt and his son Laurence.²⁶⁸ The estate features the Greek Revival architecture popular in the colonial period and is beautifully located among live oaks on the banks of the Cape Fear, with ten thousand surrounding acres.

The history of the Moore family is both picaresque and instructive about the period in which the house was built. The first recorded settlement of the Cape Fear was by Puritan New Englanders in 1663 who sought to raise cattle. Due to unfriendly natives and the vagaries of climate, this enterprise failed.²⁶⁹ The river itself, charted by Spanish explorer Verrazzano in 1524,²⁷⁰ had been known as the Charles and then Clarendon River

²⁶⁸ File “Orton Plantation,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁶⁹ Andrew J. Howell, *The Book of Wilmington 1730-1930*, (Wilmington, N.C.: privately printed, Wilmington Printing Company, 1930), 9-16.

²⁷⁰ Bradford J. Wood, *This Remote Part of the World, Regional Formation in Lower Cape Fear, North Carolina, 1725-1775*, (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 46.

before taking the name given to its mouth by the navigators and pirates of the time.²⁷¹

Pirates, settlers and native Americans frequently clashed; pirates Steed Bonnet and Richard Worley were defeated in the Cape Fear in 1722 and Colonel James Moore, son of Southern colony governor James Moore, ran a campaign that removed Tuscarora Indians from North Carolina in 1711.²⁷²

In the same period, Moore's other son, Major Maurice Moore, played a prominent role in removing the pirate Blackbeard from his position of nefarious influence with local politicians.²⁷³ Maurice, joined by his brothers Roger and Nathaniel, founded Brunswick, a town north of Orton which is today an archaeological site as it was superseded in the 1700s by the growth of Wilmington.²⁷⁴ Orton, however, did survive after Roger Moore built the plantation in 1725.²⁷⁵ Moore was a generous host, a successful businessman with his slave-holding rice plantation, and a powerful local politician, earning the nickname "King" because of his leadership role in the colony.²⁷⁶ Folklore has it that his family's defiance of Royal Governors' power even led King George III to refer to them as "those pestiferous Moores."²⁷⁷

In 1826 Dr. Frederick J. Hill bought Orton House and rice plantation. Around 1840, Dr. Hill added several rooms, a second story to the one level building, and a large

²⁷¹ Andrew J. Howell, *The Book of Wilmington 1730-1930*, (Wilmington, N.C.: privately printed, Wilmington Printing Company, 1930), 10.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 9-16.

²⁷³ Moore, *Stories Old and New*, 13-14.

²⁷⁴ Bradford J. Wood, *This Remote Part of the World, Regional Formation in Lower Cape Fear, North Carolina, 1725-1775*, (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 15-19.

²⁷⁵ File "Orton Plantation," Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁷⁶ Bradford J. Wood, *This Remote Part of the World, Regional Formation in Lower Cape Fear, North Carolina, 1725-1775*, (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 201.

²⁷⁷ Moore, *Stories Old and New*, 14.

Doric portico.²⁷⁸ With the onset of Civil War, Orton became a useful location relatively near the mouth of the Cape Fear River. It was used as a hospital but after the fall of Fort Fisher and Wilmington, it was taken by the Union from owner Thomas Miller, a successful planter. After the war, the home was abandoned for approximately 15 years and rehabilitated in the early 1880s, falling badly into disrepair. It had been sold in 1876 after an auction to a young Englishman, Carrer Richardson Roundel, who committed suicide in the house.²⁷⁹ Roundel's heirs sold the house to Major C. M. Steadman and Captain D. R. Murchison, and subsequently Col. K. M. Murchison. The house and grounds, once the most famous and productive plantations on the Cape Fear, had become dilapidated to the point that trees had begun to grow inside the house.²⁸⁰ Colonel Kenneth Murchison, "who was architect for much of the work on the house" saved the structure.²⁸¹ After his death, his daughter Luola and her husband, James Sprunt, bought Orton and in 1910 added new wings to the house and created the extraordinary gardens.²⁸²

James Sprunt (1846-1924) is in many ways a case study in early preservation himself. Michael Kammen, in *Mystic Chords of Memory*, identifies immigration patterns through families who become assimilated as Americans. The second generation, he believes, dropped the customs, language and traditions of the country they came from in order to become unrecognizable from the society they found themselves in.²⁸³ James was

²⁷⁸ Lane, *Architecture of the Old South, North Carolina*. 187.

²⁷⁹ Background material, File "Orton Plantation," Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁸⁰ Laurence Sprunt, interview by author, 30 January 2006.

²⁸¹ Tony Wrenn, personal correspondence, 13 February 2006.

²⁸² "History of Orton," pamphlet, Local History Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina. Photocopied.

²⁸³ Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 232.

brought to the Cape Fear area by his father Alexander and Louis T. Moore describes Dr. Sprunt as a local historian of great value who both researched and wrote his own history books. In the process he wrote himself into local history as a local. His family history marks him as landowning, Southern aristocracy, although he was an immigrant from Scotland and worked his way into the Southern elite through wealth and marriage. Sprunt was very successful in business, donating heavily to churches, hospitals and missions. His cotton company was responsible for significant development of Wilmington's port.²⁸⁴ Born in Glasgow, Sprunt was brought to Wilmington by his parents in 1854. He left school at fourteen and taught himself to sail, later joining the Civil War as a seaman aboard blockade runners supplying the Confederacy up and down the coast. He was captured and made his escape by way of Boston, Canada and Florida, eventually arriving back in Wilmington and beginning a cotton trading company with his father, Alexander.²⁸⁵ The company they built became one of the biggest in the world, with fifty agencies across the globe. James was made British Vice-Consul and Imperial German Counsel, but is now best remembered for his interest in preservation of local history.

Sprunt owned and maintained a number of properties across town, including the Governor Edward B. Dudley Mansion at 400 South Front Street which he acquired and renovated.²⁸⁶ Sprunt bought Orton from the estate of his father-in-law, adding wings and rehabilitating the property extensively. He was directly engaged in the preservation of Wilmington's sense of place through his ownership of these landmark properties. A

²⁸⁴ Moore, *Stories Old and New*, x.

²⁸⁵ William S. Powell, ed., *The Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 5 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 417.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

leader in the North Carolina Literary and Historical Society and a member of the North Carolina Folklore Society and the University of North Carolina Board, he was dedicated to education and history.²⁸⁷ His numerous books include *The Chronicles of the Cape Fear* (1916), still an invaluable source of folklore and local history. A gentleman philanthropist in the Victorian tradition, Sprunt's benefaction extended across the community and beyond – one recipient school was located in China. He gave to hospitals, churches, and schools, including to the University of North Carolina fund for historical publications.²⁸⁸ As a model of preservation, Sprunt is an interesting paradox. On one hand he represents the impassioned private citizen from the aristocratic class with wealth, power and the zeal to preserve local history because of his attachment to place. On the other he is an outsider, a man who bought into Old South lineage and tradition and became assimilated in local tradition to such an extent that he is now synonymous with them. James Sprunt was an immigrant who married into the Southern elite. He and Luola expanded Orton, and his preservation work across town, especially through the purchase of the Governor Dudley Mansion, and the hosting of the Wilmington Pageant, are indicative of his attachment to the class and their history. Not only did James Sprunt find his way into the elite, he even went as far as to write their history through the folklore of *The Chronicles of the Cape Fear*. Sprunt's invention of himself as a Southern gentleman is memorialized by the preservation of Orton and directly demonstrates the ways in which the elite perpetuated its own history through the writing of history and through preservation. Sprunt's paradox and usefulness as a case study lies in the fact that

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

he reinvented himself and placed himself in the local, Southern planter tradition while memorializing that way of life.

When Luola Sprunt died in 1916, James built Orton Chapel in her memory. In her lifetime the couple also used a favorite fashion of the time for aggrandizing, that of classical architecture and grand columns. His addition of a massive Corinthian portico to the Dudley Mansion in 1895²⁸⁹ matched the grandeur of the fluted Doric columns added to Orton in 1840 by the Hill family.²⁹⁰ The aesthetic change showed he had arrived as a member of the leading class and helped memorialize him from immigrant entrepreneur into the collective memory as a favorite native son. Dr. Sprunt died in 1924 and his son, James Laurence Sprunt, took ownership, opening an old Colonial road that finally made the plantation fully accessible by means other than boats.²⁹¹ J.L. Sprunt died in 1973, his wife Annie Gray in 1978 and today the house is owned by the next generation of Sprunts, Laurence and Kenneth. While the house remains a residence, the estate and its beautiful gardens are open to the public. This type of preservation effort is ostensibly a family matter, but is also one of class. As historian Catherine Bishir notes, in preserving a monument built by their ancestors, the Sprunts and Murchisons exhibit, “The sense of celebrating a way of life briefly threatened perhaps, now strengthened. But not even that, just the sense of their own connections with their families’ pasts and the region and city’s past, which were entwined.”²⁹² The family’s investment in Orton is obvious, and it is their work in restoring the house over the years that accounts for its preservation.

²⁸⁹ Wrenn, *Architectural and Historical Portrait*, 55.

²⁹⁰ Background material, File “Orton Plantation,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

²⁹² Catherine Bishir, personal correspondence, 16 January 2006.

This is a view corroborated by Laurence Sprunt, who still lives part of the year at Orton. After years of neglect following the Civil War his great-grandfather Colonel Kenneth Murchison restored the property, “mainly out of respect for the family tradition that existed there.”²⁹³ The impulse that led James Sprunt to purchase the property for himself and Luola, improving the home and gardens and safeguarding its condition for his son and grandson, was slightly different. For James it was the establishment of a family tradition, building on the existing Murchison one, and Laurence Sprunt believes there was never any thought beyond maintaining the residence that has been home to generations of the family.²⁹⁴ What the preservation achieves is the creation of a dynasty and the successful linkage of the Sprunt family to the Moores, the Murchisons and the colonial history of the Cape Fear. In this way the immigrant James Sprunt created a history for himself that forever fixes him as part of the Southern planter, ruling elite. Ancestral links and the sense of identity fixed between a family and a grand house like Orton are powerful agents of preservation. Laurence Sprunt is one of a line that includes his brother Kenneth and their children, all of whom act as managers for the estate as it now functions as public gardens and private residence. He desires to see the house continue on through many more generations and preserve the history of his family.²⁹⁵

United States Post Office [Figures 4a & 4b]

Historian Charles Hosmer noted that, “The Depression years marked a turning point for the preservation movement as historical activity moved – for a brief period – into the mainstream of American life.”²⁹⁶ Because of the need for jobs and President

²⁹³ Laurence Sprunt, interview by author, 30 January 2006.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, Vol. 2, 1043.

Roosevelt's attempt to beat economic collapse with public works, the mood of the country was both insular and industrious. Focusing on America was a necessity for the population in the 1930s, and one result was a renewed interest in heritage and preservation. The case study of the U.S. Post Office Building in Wilmington is a failure of preservation in that an historic building was lost, and it is also unique in its motivations.

The main branch of the U.S. Post Office stands on the southeastern corner of Front and Chestnut Streets. The 1937 building that still serves as the main branch of the Post Office was a federally-funded Works Progress Administration project to create jobs for the unemployed during the Great Depression. This is a Neoclassical Revival structure, designed by architect R. Stanley Brown, and his detailing of the column capitals with tobacco leaves instead of the usual acanthus were a nod to the chief cash crop of the state at the time.²⁹⁷ The 1937 building was functional and modern, while also colonial and traditional in style, featuring artistic flourishes like the mural *Wilmington in the 1840s* by William Pfohl (completed in 1940 and commissioned by the Treasury Department).²⁹⁸

A larger, grander Post Office [**Figure 4a**] was originally located on the same site at 152 North Front Street and featured an imposing clock tower and Romanesque detailing. This building was designed by Colonel Will Freret, the supervising architect of the U.S. Department of the Treasury.²⁹⁹ Built between 1889 and 1891 and demolished in 1936, the original structure gives an unusual example of preservation failing because of a need to create construction jobs, a factor indicative of the era. If the original building had

²⁹⁷ Hutteman, *Wilmington*, 30.

²⁹⁸ Wrenn, *Architectural and Historical Portrait*, 35.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

not been deemed inadequate during the Great Depression, then it seems unlikely it would have been demolished. Instead, it simply would have been remodeled.

In 1887 the *Wilmington Messenger* ran a story outlining how Colonel Freret was designing a much needed Post Office building which was progressive, dignified, light, graceful, practical and Romanesque in character.³⁰⁰ The grand design and scale, modern fixtures, lighting, heating and appliances made the building appropriate for a town rising in prominence. Forty-five years later the building was deemed obsolete. The change in fortunes for the building was much more rapid than that, however.

In the early 1920s a weather bureau and elevator were added to the building and a city park was added to the lot **[Figure 4b]**. In 1931, reporting began on plans to extend and upgrade the building with an east-side annex. Despite a promise of funding, the 1931 money was channeled to the Civilian Conservation Corps projects instead and Wilmington waited until 1934, when \$140,000 was allocated for the annex thanks to persistent work by Congressman J. Bayard Clark and postmaster Wilbur Doshier.³⁰¹ Algernon Blair, a contractor from Montgomery, Alabama, had the lowest bid for the job and hired local workmen and construction superintendent R.A. Wood to begin the extension. While the new annex was built much of the Post Office's functions were to be moved to the Custom House on Water Street.

Between 1930 and 1933 there seems to have been little doubt that the rehabilitation of the old Post Office structure was the preferred plan for Wilmington. In 1930 Chamber of Commerce Manager Louis T. Moore wrote to Senator F. M. Simmons

³⁰⁰ "Our Public Building," *Wilmington (N.C.) Messenger*, 18 December 1887, File "Post Office," Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³⁰¹"\$140,000 Allocated for Post Office Annex" *Wilmington (N.C.) News*, 22 June 1934, File "Post Office," Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

asking for funds to extend the facility. A major motivation for Mr. Moore was “the passage of emergency appropriations to relieve unemployment”³⁰² at a federal level, which tied with Wilmington’s own funding of employment relief measures. The project at the time would create jobs and a better Post Office for the city. By 1932 contracts had been awarded and surveys were underway for a federally-funded \$130,000 extension and \$10,000 garage which would cover part of the park behind the existing building.³⁰³ However, the appropriation of funding stalled as the Civilian Conservation Corps took precedence, and by 1934 the extension project was still not started.³⁰⁴

Sentiment changed toward the old Post Office in 1934. For example, a *Wilmington News* report calls the “Building’s Bad State of Repair a Menace,” when a large piece of molding fell into the crowded lobby.³⁰⁵ Representative J. Bayard Clark, previously an advocate for the Post Office annex, shifted his position after meeting with local civic leaders and Chamber of Commerce officials. The idea of the group that met on September 27, 1934 was for an entirely new building instead of an annex.³⁰⁶ Chamber President R. B. Page and Manager Louis T. Moore led this new movement, asking for the backing of the four main civic clubs in Wilmington, the Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions and Exchange, and the support of local unions. In the meantime Clark took the issue to Washington and pursued further funding. Late in 1934, W. Smith Purdum, fourth assistant postmaster general, came to Wilmington and added to the calls for a brand new

³⁰² “New Post Office Asked for City,” *Wilmington (N.C.) News*, 15 December 1930, File “Post Office,” Louis T. Moore Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³⁰³ “U.S. Approves New Addition to Post Office,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Star*, 20 November 1932. File “Post Office,” New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina..

³⁰⁴ “\$140,000 Allocated for Postoffice Annex,” *Wilmington (N.C.) News*, 22 June 1934, File “Post Office,” New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³⁰⁵ “Moulding Falls in Post Office,” *Wilmington (N.C.) News*, 21 December 1934, File “Post Office,” New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³⁰⁶ “Move Opened for Adequate P.O. for City,” *Wilmington (N.C.) News*, 27 September 1934, File “Post Office,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

Post Office. As a federal official, his description of the building as “inadequate” and “unsatisfactory” carried weight that affected local politicians and the editorial writers at local newspapers.³⁰⁷ The old building’s fate was sealed when the federal government cancelled the funding for the annex in late 1934. The newspaper reported that, “the allotment was cancelled because no stone could be secured to match the old building,” and instead funds of \$400,000 were requested for an entirely new structure.³⁰⁸

When he switched from advocating for a Post Office extension to a whole new building in 1936, Chamber of Commerce Manager Louis T. Moore illustrated how social leaders need to be sentimentally invested in buildings in order to successfully preserve them. Louis Toomer Moore (1885-1961) was a descendant of the Moore family that built Orton Plantation.³⁰⁹ Moore’s elite family background did not define him, however, and his career began in journalism. The defining role of Moore’s professional life was his leadership of the local Chamber of Commerce. As Chamber Manager for twenty years, Moore became what local historian Beverly Tetterton often terms “Wilmington’s biggest cheerleader.”³¹⁰ Moore tirelessly advocated for Wilmington, attracting regional businesses and tourists and also preserving the city’s heritage from the vantage point of the local Historic Commission, for which he was chair from 1947 until his death in 1961. He assisted in the State Archives and History program and was a constant lobbyist for preservation to local government.³¹¹ It seems that there is no archive of preservation in

³⁰⁷ “Work on New P.O. Plans Will Begin,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Star*, 11 August 1935, File “Post Office,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³⁰⁸ “Plan for New Postoffice in Wilmington Furthered,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Star*, 14 December 1934, File “Post Office,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³⁰⁹ William S. Powell, ed., *The Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 4 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 302-303.

³¹⁰ Beverly Tetterton, interview with the author, 14 December 2005.

³¹¹ William S. Powell, ed., *The Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 4 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 302-303.

Wilmington that does not hold a number of letters from Mr. Moore advocating history or the retention of historic property. He was one of the first to research material for the highway sign markers that continue to grow in number today.³¹²

One of the six founders of the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, Moore, like James Sprunt, was a folklorist and the author of several books on Wilmington's history. As a model of preservation, Louis Moore embodied the impassioned private citizen and business-minded professional who ensured that municipal buildings and commercial areas are not threatened with demolition – seemingly by force of personality alone. Moore was a committed preservationist but even he changed his position on the Post Office when it became clear that modern construction and new jobs were on offer. He appears to offer an example of the pragmatism brought on by the Depression. One would expect Moore to advocate passionately for the preservation of the old building, but even he was not sufficiently invested enough to do so. Many of his contemporaries in favor of a new building would probably have pointed out that the Post Office building was not even old, let alone integral to Wilmington's sense of place. Louis Moore and others may well have seen the Post Office as not symbolic of the Wilmington they wished to preserve. It was built during Reconstruction and was part of an infrastructure created by Fusionists and Republicans. Moore was a member of the professional middle class with a background that was solidly Old Wilmingtonian, and he clearly saw that the needs of the town, in terms of jobs and modern facilities, were not outweighed by the value of the Post Office as a landmark. The removal of the Post Office and its link to the past could relate to the desire of the ruling classes to distance themselves from a past which was not

³¹² File "Historical Markers." Louis T. Moore Collection, North Carolina Room. New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

wholly in their control. Its destruction symbolized the sweeping away of a Fusion government and a progressive society, to be replaced by the status quo of white, elite rule. Once again, the elites had the power not just to retain, but shape, the view of Wilmington's history.

The sudden shift towards the demolition of the old Post Office was not without critics, however. Tony Wrenn notes, "Wilmington seems to have had no quarrel with the plan to construct a new building but objected to the demolition of the old building and the style of the new one".³¹³ Congressman Clark was warned by Mayor Walter Blair in the *Wilmington Star* on February 20, 1936 that the new building was "just nothing" and if Clark believed "the people of Wilmington want the brick building that is being planned, then somebody has led him up a blind alley."³¹⁴ A preservation battle ensued with strong arguments on each side. Plans were suggested by the City Board (who had no jurisdiction over this federal property), community groups and individuals for the "federal government to give the structure to the city for use as a library".³¹⁵ Mayor Blair and Commissioner Wade lobbied for the old building to be used for civic groups, to be leased to the city in the same manner as a former Post Office in High Point. At the same time, the County Commissioners joined their City counterparts in endorsing an alternative use.

One dissenting County Commissioner, J. M Hall, summed up the opposing view. His reasons were that there "were enough antiques on Front Street without keeping the

³¹³ Wrenn, *Architectural and Historical Portrait*, 34.

³¹⁴ "City Board Asks Old Postoffice" *Wilmington (N.C.) News*, 19 February 1936, File "Post Office," Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*

old postoffice and...if the old building is torn down it will give men work.”³¹⁶

Wilmington’s Central Labor Union supported that viewpoint. They saw the value of “creating employment” and stated that those wishing to turn the old building into a library, “have not considered the important fact that demolition of the old postoffice would result in taking a great number off the dole.”³¹⁷ And an editorial in the same newspaper listed not only the employment benefits, but the parlous condition of the old building, its inadequacy to the public and the waste of money in creating an annex when the original would still have to be expensively refurbished. More than one editorial also pointed out the irrelevancy of the City and County Commissioners’ role in this federal plan. One particularly scornful piece regarded the “plan for preservation of the current postoffice...may be mentioned as a matter of record and dismissed.” The writer continued on to say that the federal government would obviously replace a dilapidated building it had already condemned, and City and County Board objections were, in any case, “weightless.”³¹⁸ Two months later, with demolition assured, the *Wilmington News* did temper its rhetoric to acknowledge that “Architecturally, the doomed building is one of the most attractive federal structures in North Carolina, but unfortunately the material of which built is not the type that can withstand the incessant battle with the elements for centuries...hence gives way to the march of progress”.³¹⁹

The upper class created a new city in the image they wanted – their own.

The original Post Office in downtown Wilmington was not in their own image and it was

³¹⁶ “County Favors Saving Old P.O.,” *Wilmington (N.C.) News*, 25 February 1936, File “Post Office,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³¹⁷ “Union Would Raze ‘Old’ Postoffice,” *Wilmington (N.C.) News*, 26 February 1936, File “Post Office,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³¹⁸ “Of Little Weight,” *Wilmington (N.C.) News*, 25 February 1936, File “Post Office,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³¹⁹ “Landmark Goes,” *Wilmington (N.C.) News*, 28 April 1936, File “Post Office,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

open to all. Built as it was during a period of racial reconciliation, and the appearance of Fusionist politics, the preservation of the original Post Office became a question of image. When it was demolished a Colonial style building, with columns that nodded to a classical heritage and containing a mural that speaks of a busy port successfully run by white business owners, appeared instead. The inference of who was in charge of the city's cultural heritage is clear.

Demolition began on May 12, 1936, and the *Wilmington Star* immediately began revising its position, noting that, "One of Wilmington's ancient landmarks...will be but a memory within the week" and lamenting the loss of "Wilmington's most beautiful and beloved building."³²⁰ Never mind that the newspapers were leaders in the call for a new building or that the old Post Office was less than fifty years old. Modernity and progress had won the day. While there was some sentimental feeling for the 1880s structure, it was not a defining landmark and was tied neither to Wilmington's heritage nor the upper classes. In fact, the Post Office is not a building tied to any class; it is functional and utilitarian. Unlike Thalian Hall, the Post Office was not a cultural center for Wilmington's upper classes, and the availability of federal money for a new building had gripped locals, including many who originally advocated saving the old building. Preservationists lost the day because of the immediate need to employ local people and the desire to have something new that replaced upon the old – symbolically restoring the elite's stamp upon the public life of the city and making a statement about the class and race that shaped that public life.

³²⁰ *Wilmington (N.C.) Star*, 12 June 1936; quoted in Wrenn, *Architectural and Historical Portrait*, 34.

US Custom House [Figure 5]

As a result of its solid railroad and port infrastructure, Wilmington had grown into a major economic center by the 1840s. In that decade, “eighteen vessels regularly sailed from Wilmington to New York, nine vessels to Philadelphia, four packets to Boston and four coasters to Charleston”³²¹ according to the *Wilmington Chronicle* in October 1845. To cope with the flow of traffic and expansion of Wilmington’s port, the Custom House was constructed in a protracted manner from 1843-47. The project replaced a previous Custom House, built around 1819, that had burned along with twenty-seven houses, forty-five businesses, a church and several railroad buildings in April 1843.³²² Poor oversight of the new structure by architect John Norris, who had commissions elsewhere and who spent little time in Wilmington, accounted for the delay. The *Wilmington Journal* for August 22, 1845 described the building as “three stories high, with attic in rear; has thirty-nine feet front and is sixty-five in depth. It has a pediment front, erected on a basement story of red sand-stone, rusticated. The front has antaes, and two columns, with capitals, after the manner of the Temple of the Winds at Athens, as well as red sand-stone from Connecticut and ‘the celebrated Baltimore pressed brick.’”³²³ By this account the Custom House was a grand building, but it was demolished in 1915, long after the local builders had noted that lengthy delays had probably assisted in some flaws in its construction.

Norris had initially come to Wilmington in 1839 to supervise construction of Thomas U. Walter’s plans for St. James Episcopal Church. He competed for the contract

³²¹ Mills Lane, *Architecture of the Old South, Greek Revival and Romantic* (Savannah, Georgia: The Beehive Press, 1996), 111-112.

³²² Tetterton, *Lost But Not Forgotten*, 30.

³²³ Lane, *Architecture of the Old South, North Carolina*, 56.

on the Custom House and won, but by 1845 had been absent so long from the project that the second floor had only just been built and Murphy Jones, Collector of the Port, complained about the architect's efforts. The Custom House was completed in May 1847 but it only took until November of 1848 for local builder John Wood to complain by letter to the Treasury Department about the poor design and construction of the new Custom House, citing cracking walls, settling walls and water-stained plaster.³²⁴

John Norris went on to design important structures in Savannah, Georgia, including a Custom House that still survives there.³²⁵ While there may have been some problems with the construction of Norris' Greek-Revival style Wilmington Custom House, it still served the booming port from a prominent position on the riverfront for almost seventy years. It was the success of Wilmington's port more than its imperfect original construction that resulted in the demolition of the 1840s Custom House in 1915. As more space was required for increased traffic and federal offices, the old building was removed.³²⁶ Wilmington boomed so much, in fact, that as early as 1906 the Chamber of Commerce was calling for a replacement. A resolution by the Chamber's board called for an appropriation of not less than \$250,000 and proposed to lobby local Congressional representatives to get the funds. A local paper reveals that the reasons were simple: "Wilmington should have a new and up-to-date custom house if such a slow town as Charleston, S.C., had one."³²⁷ Local pride was a reason for this preservation loss, but the article reinforces the main reason as the utility of a new facility for the port. It concludes that, "The building was erected some 60 years ago, and is entirely devoid of any modern

³²⁴ Lane, *Architecture of the Old South, Greek Revival*, 112.

³²⁵ Lane, *Architecture of the Old South, North Carolina*, 56.

³²⁶ Tetterton, *Lost But Not Forgotten*, 43.

³²⁷ "New Custom House Wanted," *Wilmington (N.C.) Messenger*, 25 January 1906, File "Custom House," Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

equipments and conveniences, and is altogether out of date and inadequate to our present demands, and to the importance of Wilmington as a port.”³²⁸ The Custom House, even more than the old Post Office, lacked a sentimental link to any class. While it was a landmark, it was not a building that secured the sympathies of the social elite, or any other class for that matter. The building was not viewed as old, was considered small and its utility was therefore limited. For all these reasons, the upper class was subsequently not invested in its preservation.

The replacement Custom House was built between 1916 and 1919 in the Beaux Arts classical style by James A. Wetmore, supervising architect of the Department of the Treasury.³²⁹ While the loss of the nineteenth century commercial character was apparent, the new structure, named in 1976 for U.S. Congressman and Senator Alton Lennon, did feature two wings that replicate Norris’ 1840s temple form design façade.³³⁰ Homage is not a legitimate form of preservation, as the original structure’s distinct historic character is lost. However, Wetmore’s use of the pedimented porticos and cast-iron balustrades with eagles within the temple-form are decorative touches that do remind the viewer of the eminence of the original architecture and the completed federal building is a striking building in its own right.³³¹

Cornelius Harnett House – ‘Maynard’ [Figures 6a & 6b]

Louis T. Moore, the historian and ardent preservationist, wrote a history of Cornelius Harnett in the June 26, 1926 *Raleigh News and Observer*. In it he lamented that, “until a few years ago, Harnett’s mansion at Hilton was still there. Persons who

³²⁸ “New Custom House Wanted,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Messenger*, 25 January 1906, File “Custom House,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³²⁹ Tetterton, *Lost But Not Forgotten*, 43.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

³³¹ Wrenn, *Architectural and Historical Portrait*, 15-16.

owned the property later wished to develop it for industrial purposes. They offered to permit the house to be removed to any point in Wilmington so that it might be preserved for future generations. A short sighted policy actuated those in authority when the offer was not accepted. Thus this shrine of patriotism was permitted to become victim to a quickly forgetting generation.”³³² The mood of the time was progressive and industrial. Following the 1892 loss of Harnett’s house, called ‘Maynard’ and located in an area known as Hilton, a Peregoy Lumber Company mill was erected in its place.³³³ The Hilton site purchased at the time fronted Smith Creek, the North-East Cape Fear River and railroad tracks, and so was ideal for a commercial base.³³⁴ If the success of early preservation was usually based on the investment of the upper class in a property, then this is a case where the realization of Maynard’s importance to Wilmington’s identity was apparent, but the memorial was lost to the onrush of modernization.

Harnett himself was one of the three North Carolina signers of the Articles of Confederation and so vigorous an opponent of the 1765 Stamp Act that he led a group of Cape Fear men in February 1766 to New Bern to face down Governor Tryon. This was possibly the first armed act of resistance in the colonies and led the British stamp officer, Pennington, to resign and declare that no further stamps would be issued in the colony.³³⁵

Tributes to Harnett continually demonstrate his value as a Revolutionary figure. In June 1954 an article in the *Wilmington Star-News* described Harnett as “the Father of Wilmington” and recalls that after the Revolution his house, where he and fellow

³³² “Remembering Cornelius Harnett,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Star-News*, 27 June 1954, File “Cornelius Harnett,” Louis T. Moore Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ The site now houses Wilmington’s Sweeney water treatment facility and is noted with a historic marker to the Maynard house.

³³⁵ File “Cornelius Harnett,” Louis T. Moore Collection, North Carolina Room, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

revolutionary Robert Howe of Brunswick County strategized the British removal from the colony, was said to be the “birthplace of the Cradle of American Liberty.”³³⁶ In 1773 Harnett himself was visited by Josiah Quincy Jr. of Boston, who described him in a diary as “the Samuel Adams of North Carolina.”³³⁷ Harnett earned that reputation as chair of the local Sons of Liberty and president of the North Carolina Provincial Council in 1775, the latter role “making him, for a time, acting Governor.”³³⁸ He was a thorn in the side of British authority and the most prominent dissenter to their rule in the years before the revolution.³³⁹ Harnett was held in such high regard that the city of Wilmington made him an honorary resident with voting rights, despite his house’s location near Castle Hayne, well outside the city limits.

While writing to a colleague in the Sons of Liberty at the outset of revolution, Harnett’s own character and beliefs are revealed: “Worthless men as you very justly observed are the production of every country...Yet we can venture to assert that the people in general in this colony, will be spirited and steady in support of their rights as English subjects. They will not tamely submit to the yoke of oppression.”³⁴⁰ In May of 1776 a British fleet lay off Fort Johnson, near Brunswick Town, and General Clinton, Lord Cornwallis’ superior, proclaimed that all North Carolinians would be pardoned if they returned immediately to Crown rule. His exceptions to that pardon were Robert Howe and Harnett. For a Revolutionary to be accorded such special treatment would

³³⁶ “Remembering Cornelius Harnett,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Star-News*, 27 June 1954, File “Cornelius Harnett,” Louis T. Moore Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³³⁷ Diary of Joseph Quincey, Jr.; quoted in File: “Papers of Andrew J. Howell,” Local History Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³³⁸ Wrenn, *Architectural and Historical Portrait*, 31.

³³⁹ Bradford J. Wood, *This Remote Part of the World, Regional Formation in Lower Cape Fear, North Carolina, 1725-1775*, (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 245.

³⁴⁰ Cornelius Harnett to unnamed colleague; quoted in Louis T. Moore article, *Raleigh (N.C.) News and Observer*, p1 and 7, 26 June 1926, File “Cornelius Harnett,” Louis T. Moore Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

have been excellent evidence that his tactics were working. Another honor for Harnett occurred on August 1st 1776, when, in his role as President of the Council of Safety, he formally notified North Carolinians of the creation of the Declaration of Independence.³⁴¹

Harnett died in 1781 when he was captured in failing health by British troops and imprisoned in the jail at the Burgwin-Wright House. It is a testament to his local myth, and to the subjectivity of historical reporting, that each different source consulted on his death registers a different version of events. One suggests he was forced to walk from Brunswick County to Wilmington,³⁴² another that he fell and was tossed on the back of a horse like a flour sack,³⁴³ and a third that he was ridiculed in the streets by loyalists.³⁴⁴ There is still further disagreement over whether he died in jail or was released and died shortly after.³⁴⁵ What is clear is that this was a man of great historical importance to the area, and he has been revered and memorialized since his death. The memorial to Harnett in Wilmington is evidence that the upper class which preserves and retains Wilmington's history certainly invests in the memory of the man.

Harnett's Maynard house was built in 1750 and one hundred and forty two years later its fate was under discussion in the local newspaper. The *Wilmington Messenger* quotes Mr. Peregoy, in the midst of building his new lumber mill on the property, as willing to sell the old house to any interested party with the proviso that they must move it. The article recalls the memories and Revolutionary tradition instilled in the old house

³⁴¹ William S. Powell, ed., *The Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 3 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 36.

³⁴² "Our Heritage," *Mount Olive (N.C.) Tribune*, 13 June 1986, File "Cornelius Harnett," Louis T. Moore Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³⁴³ William S. Powell, ed., *The Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, vol. 3 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 36.

³⁴⁴ *Wilmington (N.C.) Morning Star*, 6 May 1974, File "Cornelius Harnett," Louis T. Moore Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³⁴⁵ Wrenn, *Architectural and Historical Portrait*, 31 and Tetterton, *Lost But Not Forgotten*, 21.

and discusses how the lathe and plaster walls were still sound, save in one or two places where it had been vandalized by people looking for reputed treasure.³⁴⁶ The newspaper asked a question which is much the same as that asked about many properties today: “Inasmuch as this historical house is to be torn down, would it not be as well for the city to purchase it and have it removed to a park or some other place where it can be preserved. If the city cannot purchase it, would it not be well for the citizens to purchase the old house and save it from demolition?”³⁴⁷ This desire to preserve was somewhat ahead of its time, it seems, but certainly points to the realization that built history is very easily lost.

This seems to be a case where the importance of memorializing this colonial history was realized, but there was no visionary savior who reacted quickly to maintain this landmark. Maynard was extremely important to North Carolina’s history, because it was where Harnett and his Patriot friends planned their part in the Revolution. And yet the debate continued as Mr. Peregoy replied to the newspaper that once again he was willing to take offers for the house, and in fact, “if any persons in Wilmington desire to save this historic old house, he will be glad to exchange it for brick...in order to gratify any desire there may be to save the old mansion.”³⁴⁸

The preservation of Maynard seems to have been tantalizingly close at this point and Wilmington had a group of men seemingly inclined to help. In the spirit of ‘noblesse oblige’ the Wilmington Historical and Scientific Society, upper class Victorian gentlemen with an enlightened educational agenda, had apparently taken the matter of

³⁴⁶ *Wilmington (N.C.) Messenger*, 17 January 1892, File “Harnett Mansion,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁸ *Wilmington (N.C.) Messenger*, 20 January 1892, File “Harnett Mansion,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

Maynard's preservation on as an urgent project and were planning to raise funds to save the house.³⁴⁹ The February 3rd edition of the *Messenger* noted that photos of the house were being taken, local sentiment was roused on the issue and that a memorial park on the site was being proposed due to the excellent location of the house on a bluff overlooking Smith Creek.³⁵⁰ The upper class leaders of the community mobilized to preserve their colonial history in the form of the house. However, despite the good intentions there is no evidence that any practical moves were organized and the *Messenger* carried a final story on March 27th indicating that the house was lost, noting "What a shame on Wilmington for not preserving this historic old residence of the Revolution period."³⁵¹

While this is an obvious preservation failure, it is also early evidence of the elite classes realizing that they were responsible for maintaining local history through preservation. Disorganization or a lack of funds may have resulted in the loss of the house, but the failure was not a result of apathy and did show an early appreciation for preservation in principle.

William Hooper House [Figure 7]

William Hooper was a Revolutionary like his friend Cornelius Harnett and served in the Continental Congress in 1776. He moved to Hillsborough from Wilmington in 1782, but his downtown home remained a landmark. Hooper first came to Wilmington in 1764 with a degree from Harvard and the reputation of being "an eloquent and cultured

³⁴⁹ Notes, File "Harnett Mansion," Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³⁵⁰ *Wilmington (N.C.) Messenger*, 3 February 1892, File "Harnett Mansion," Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³⁵¹ *Wilmington (N.C.) Messenger*, 27 March 1892, File "Harnett Mansion," Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

lawyer.”³⁵² When he signed the Declaration of Independence for North Carolina he was known as an orator, legislator and a lawyer who practiced across the colony. His success had led to the purchase of a larger house, ‘Finian’, overlooking Masonboro Sound.³⁵³

Dr. Armand deRosset bought the lot halfway between Market and Princess streets and between North Second and Third streets in 1741 and his widow inherited it upon his death. Mrs. Elizabeth deRosset sold it to William Hooper in 1770.³⁵⁴ When the lot was sold again in 1804 it was described as being, “where William Hooper dwelt.”³⁵⁵ The modest cottage was not well used by Hooper and his family but it was “Wilmington’s first known attempt at historic preservation” when Colonel Roger Moore tried to buy it and save it from demolition in 1882.³⁵⁶ Recognizing its historical importance as a landmark to a Revolutionary hero, local newspapers reported that Moore wished to move the house, but failed to execute his plan. As with Harnett’s ‘Maynard,’ this preservation failure seems to suggest that while there was sentiment to preserve it was still too early to practically organize the necessary action. The upper class, in the form of Colonel Moore, was apparently interested in the preservation of the historic property, but historic preservation had not evolved to a point where the building could actually be saved.

Cornelius Harnett’s ‘Maynard’ and the Hooper house have a commonality which was that their preservation cases predated the true reconstruction of the Southern planter elite. They were examples of the first steps, and a realization, that preservation is a social dynamic. Reactionary white supremacy had not taken hold of government yet, but

³⁵² “Wilmington Played Glorious Part in Early U.S. History,” *Wilmington (N.C.) Star*, 27 June 1954, File “Harnett Mansion,” Bill Reaves Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³⁵³ Tetterton, *Lost But Not Forgotten*, 21.

³⁵⁴ Macmillan, *Vanished Homes*, 28.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Tetterton, *Lost But Not Forgotten*, 21.

already the elite were ready to tie their dominance with the idea that they could preserve and glorify the history of their ancestors, halting modernity and an erosion of their power at the same time. They had just not grasped the practicalities of doing so in Wilmington just yet.

Mitchell-Anderson House [Figure 8]

Thomas H. Wright, Jr. (1918-1993) is representative of the type of philanthropy required to fuel preservation. As a businessman and civic leader he exemplified both the old elite who preserved Wilmington's character and the modern, urban, professional class who invested in preservation projects. In these respects he is part of the transition towards more organized preservation groups that appeared after World War Two. The Wrights are an old Wilmington family and Thomas was a director of St. John's Museum of Art, the President of the Thalian Hall Committee, a Director of the Downtown Area Revitalization Effort, and a member of the USS North Carolina Commission.³⁵⁷ He was described by David Brinkley as "the person for whom the term good citizen was invented."³⁵⁸ Tom and his wife Elizabeth directly saved more than thirty structures from the early 1960s onward, including the landmark deRosset House, the Governor Dudley Mansion, and the Mitchell-Anderson House.³⁵⁹ While the Wrights saved the grander structures from Wilmington's history, due in part to their position in the elite of society, times had changed enough to include the many smaller structures that they came to preserve. Many of these rescued structures were renovated under the auspices of the Historic Wilmington Foundation, which the Wrights founded in 1966 along with three

³⁵⁷ Elizabeth Labouisse Wright, interview by author, 22 February 2006.

³⁵⁸ Susan Taylor Block, *The Wrights of Wilmington* (Wilmington, N.C.: privately printed, 1992), File: "Thomas H. Wright Jr.," Local History Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina, 118.

³⁵⁹ Elizabeth Labouisse Wright, interview by author, 22 February 2006.

other pioneering men. Over the years Tom and Elizabeth raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to establish the HWF, and in 1978 they won the Ruth Coltrane Cannon Cup, the most prestigious state preservation award, for their cumulative efforts.³⁶⁰

Once again, the model for preservation through personality cannot be underestimated. Tom Wright's prescient and philanthropic investment in the historic buildings of Wilmington was pivotal in the town's redefinition. Indeed, as architectural historian Edward Turberg has noted, "Wright was a true inheritor of James Sprunt's zeal for saving the city's history."³⁶¹ The Wrights enacted the idea of 'noblesse oblige' for a new generation. They led the way from a position in the upper class, with the means and altruism to retain Wilmington's sense of place. Passionate preservationists inspired countless successors and historic preservation continued to gather momentum through the direct influence and accomplishments of those committed to the vision.

One property that has lasted from early Wilmington thanks to the vision of the Wright family is the 1738 Mitchell-Anderson house, built one year before the City of Wilmington was incorporated.³⁶² Its survival can also be attributed to its brick construction and its good fortune in being just far enough removed from commerce and industry to avoid the periodic fires. While its location, at the corner of Orange and Front streets, has always been close to central downtown, it was still relatively remote from the combustible dock area of the 1800s. The cracks in its exterior walls and the clearly visible ballast stone foundation, along with the discrepancy between the more expensive

³⁶⁰ Elizabeth Labouisse Wright, interview by author, 22 February 2006.

³⁶¹ Edward Turberg, personal correspondence, 13 February 2006.

³⁶² File "Mitchell-Anderson House," Archive "Plaques," Historic Wilmington Foundation, Wilmington, North Carolina.

Flemish bond brick on the roadside façade and the cheaper English bond around the back, mark this house as a building of longevity, resilience and character.

The Mitchell-Anderson House is the oldest surviving structure in Wilmington. At 102 Orange Street this Georgian-style structure is a distinctive building made unique in Wilmington not only by age but by the triple-hung sash windows on the second floor and the plan of a central hall with two east rooms and one west with an enclosed porch. The house has been altered numerous times since Edward Mitchell, a farmer and carpenter, acquired two lots at the corner of Front and Orange streets for twenty-four pounds in 1738.³⁶³ At the time Orange and Front streets had designated lot numbers that made them the very center of downtown. Mitchell sold the house to John Smith in 1744 for two hundred and fifty pounds, the price rise indicating the house had been built.³⁶⁴ Smith passed the house to his daughter and it proceeded through generations until finally leaving the Smith family in 1799. Alexander Anderson bought the property in 1829 and, with a number of tenants and family residents, the house remained in Anderson family ownership until 1910.³⁶⁵

The house was never used as a single-family home after this time. In its long history it had been used as a boarding house and was again when E.P.H. Strunck bought the property in 1912 and remodeled it for that purpose.³⁶⁶ As it was an income producing property, Ernestine Avant, daughter of Mr. Strunck, retained the property into the 1960s. During that time, it appears the fortunes of the neighborhood and of the house went

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Wrenn, *Architectural and Historical Portrait*, 235.

³⁶⁵ File "Mitchell-Anderson House," Archive "Plaques," Historic Wilmington Foundation, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³⁶⁶ *Wilmington (N.C.) Star*, 5 January 1912, File "Mitchell-Anderson House," Archive "Plaques," Historic Wilmington Foundation, Wilmington, North Carolina.

downhill. Given the rough use of the house and the many alterations required to make it multiple apartments, its continued survival seems to have been more luck than judgment in this period.

In 1963 Elizabeth and Thomas Wright purchased the site and restored it to use as a commercial rental property. Elizabeth and her husband bought a property which was “in awful shape.”³⁶⁷ The property was not grand but spoke directly to the history of the city and Wilmington’s sense of place. The Wrights were descended from the ruling elite of Wilmington and that class had evolved into entrepreneurs. Tom and Elizabeth were directly invested in the defining qualities that the historic urban fabric brought to downtown Wilmington as they lived and worked among it. The Mitchell-Anderson House itself was subdivided into many small apartments and the Wrights were told with irony by tenants that it was being sold because the owners were “diversifying their interests” away from a flophouse and haunt of prostitutes.³⁶⁸ In World War Two the house had been subdivided into apartments for military personnel and had retained that form.

The Wrights were just in time, as by the early 1960s the building had been so long an eyesore that it was scheduled for demolition. After many years of disrepair the City planned to demolish the structure and the bricks were already appointed for reuse in a Savannah project. The Wrights were paradigms of a new breed of preservationists, both sharing a mutual passion for historic buildings and seeing areas like the derelict Orange Street as ideal for redevelopment and investment. They are excellent models for the amateur nature of preservationists and they, alongside the other founders of the Historic

³⁶⁷ Elizabeth Labouisse Wright, interview by author, 22 February 2006.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

Wilmington Foundation, deserve great credit for evolving their passion into organized institutions for historic preservation. This institutional growth marked the evolution of preservation in the 1950s and 1960s.

The economics of preservation are more complicated than the idea that either, “preservation is anathema to the market, or that preservation pays and should be promoted as economic investment.”³⁶⁹ The Wrights recognized this before others in Wilmington and knew that property values, tourism and the marketing of their home town would benefit from the action of preservation. This is why the Mitchell-Anderson House is only the first of their projects. The upper middle-class business owner often became the preservation leaders from the 1950s onwards and the Wrights were pioneers of that model. The Mitchell-Anderson House is an example of how this new elite built on the earlier work of their aristocratic forbears and continued to maintain Wilmington’s sense of place. The success of early preservation was based on the leadership of the upper classes, and while the faces in that class may have changed since the beginning of the century the motivations had not. Preservation was still an investment in the character of the city. The sense of identity that the upper classes felt for Wilmington led them to successfully preserve it.

Concluding Case Studies

Throughout this work, case studies have shown how families and private groups from higher social classes came dominate early preservation. Sentiment from classes with the money and talent to preserve led to investment in a property by a particular family, and this investment resulted in successful preservation projects. The Bellamy Mansion at 503 Market Street encompasses both elements of upper class organization and

³⁶⁹ Page and Mason, *Giving Preservation a History*, 11.

family ties in its successful rehabilitation. In the 1970s the Bellamy Mansion Museum was established on behalf of Preservation North Carolina, but before that concerned citizens led the site's preservation.³⁷⁰ The house was built between 1859 and 1861 and until 1946 it had been occupied solely by the Bellamy family. The motivation for its early preservation is simply stated: this was a well-maintained family home that was much loved by its owners.

In 1946 the last remaining daughter, Ellen Bellamy, died in the house, and ownership was suddenly shared by fifty-three heirs. Ellen was "an unreconstructed rebel" according to her grandniece, and the faded grandeur of the house in 1946 seemed to epitomize the romantic, but waning, spirit of the Old South.³⁷¹ It was this historic character, redolent of a time passed, that made the landmark important to its saviors.

In 1951 Lillian Boney and her cousin, Emma Hendren, bought the property simply "to keep it from being torn down."³⁷² The house had gone to public auction twice and had not received a minimum bid; such was its state of disrepair. The splitting of the property between many heirs meant it had a bleak future until Mrs. Boney intervened, restoring the house and, in 1954, holding her wedding reception in it when she married the architect and preservationist Leslie Boney. The Boneys were forces behind the resurrection of the house, but it was also a concerted effort by local historians and generous benefactors that gave prominence to and raised money for the restoration. Once again a landmark was saved through non-governmental, local efforts by the social elite to maintain a sense of place for the city, as well as to save a sense of their own history

³⁷⁰ Catherine W. Bishir, *The Bellamy Mansion, Wilmington, North Carolina: An Antebellum Architectural Treasure and Its People* (Raleigh, N.C.: Historic Preservation Foundation of North Carolina, 2004), 25.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁷² Lillian Boney, interview by author, 22 February 2006.

through this very visual landmark of the Old South. As at Orton the family connections were extremely strong to this property and that fed directly into a feeling of heritage for Wilmington's upper class – despite the fading grandeur of that class.

There are smaller examples of successful preservation in Wilmington. Most are undocumented and feature smaller residences but, as 450 Historic Wilmington Foundation plaques attest, there are many causes to celebrate. When viewed critically, however, it is the white elite that are most represented by memorials like preserved buildings or plaques. Generally the 450 plaques that memorialize Wilmington's history tend to congregate on the south side of downtown, an area traditionally settled by Old Wilmington families, social elites and rich business owners. Only in very recent times have houses on the north side of Market Street and in the suburbs of Carolina Place and Heights begun to accumulate historic plaques.

Preservation is both local and driven by elites. In *Giving Preservation a History* that fact is seen as part of an evolution, “On the one hand, preservation in the United States has always been driven by patriotism – not just national patriotism but also a more local ‘civic patriotism’...On the other hand, preservation was, from early on, involved in debates about the character and pace of urban development.”³⁷³ As has been seen in Wilmington with the Custom House and Post Office, urban development actually joined forces with local patriotism in this way. The business class and old elites came together. Far from being mutually exclusive these forces combined to move development forward into modernity, through utility, and show clearly the evolution of the class who controlled preservation. When James Fitch asserted that preservation was the purview of the elite

³⁷³ Page and Mason, *Giving Preservation a History*, 10.

he was correct, but it is important to note that the elite changed and the motives for preservation evolved accordingly.³⁷⁴

As we have seen the roots of historic preservation in Wilmington came from a variety of sources. The process of preserving resulted in successes and failures and evolved as a result of nostalgia, the investment of the upper class in specific properties, family ties, individual leaders with vision, investment opportunities, the need to retain a sense of place, utility and good luck. Early on results were also defined by the Civil War, when elite groups in society redefined history to regain their power. After the Civil War, patrician society in North Carolina was moved to preserve their own version of history; as Bishir explains, “for as Southerners they alone...had experienced devastating military and political defeat along with jolting impoverishment.”³⁷⁵

Preservation was also an amateur and private field until well into the twentieth century. John Debnam, a founder of the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society and charter member of the Historic Wilmington Foundation, notes that not only was the City responsible for demolishing many fine properties up to and including the urban renewal 1960s, early preservation after World War Two was still “on an individual basis only, with no real organization and nothing to prevent the wholesale razing of neighborhoods, which happened particularly on the north side of town around Brooklyn.”³⁷⁶ Early preservation had small successes for assorted reasons, but often the forces of modernization had more sweeping power and neighborhoods without a direct link to the upper classes which could save them were the first to suffer.

³⁷⁴ Fitch, xi

³⁷⁵ Bishir, “Landmarks of Power,” 7.

³⁷⁶ John Debnam, a founder of Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, interview by author, 22 February 2006.

The evolution of preservation occurred during the early twentieth century through the necessities of the Depression and cultural battles between progressive urbanization, industrialization and modernization and conservative heritage. Successes and failures came as a result of these battles for control of the built environment and public memory. The city's early preservationists succeeded in maintaining many fine structures because of their attachment to Wilmington's sense of place. Failures were born of economics, changing taste, utility, modernizing urges and relative ignorance on the part of many – including governments – to the value of preserving historic resources.

At least the losses have had the positive effect of bringing the idea of preservation to the forefront of public discourse in Wilmington. Based on the work of early preservationists, organization occurred. Even when buildings were lost, public debate was aroused and opinion evolved into a better educated understanding of the powerful role history has in shaping the present. Both as invested individuals and through organizations like the Colonial Dames or the Historical Society, it has always been the upper classes who have led the way. Even the failures prove how class relates to preservation. When business and industry expanded it was only upper class nostalgia for the history of the city that had the power and money to block 'progress'.

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE HISTORY OF THE FORGOTTEN

As this thesis has demonstrated, only certain groups in society have the luxury of deciding what is important to memorialize. This truth is unfortunately compounded by the fact that many of these groups use and abuse historical facts to fit a specific agenda in ways that significantly affect our understanding of the nation's history. Historian James Loewen wrote *Lies Across America* with the thesis that the mythology of America is very often flawed. Loewen challenges assumptions about what is real within the collective national memory by examining who presents history and for what ends. He argues that melodrama, along with a very subjective analysis of historical fact, has infiltrated numerous historical accounts. Loewen believes that American culture is ultimately concerned with reproduction rather than authenticity, and he demonstrates how movies and television shape a view of the past that is derived solely from contemporary images, rather than from documented facts or the physical presence of historic buildings.

This lazy and reductive American tendency to mythologize the past is reflected in numerous markers and monuments across the country. Loewen is often bemused by the array of examples he cites in which the actual facts do not impede the construction of a good – or an easy – historical story. What lends gravitas to this work is the fact that the writers of history in house museums, at interpretation sites and within marker programs routinely exclude minorities from history through oversimplification and ignorance. Loewen's book as a whole illuminates the pervasive misrepresentation of history across the country, demonstrating exactly how institutionalized misinformation can become. It is alarming to conclude that the presentation of facts in a museum or on a marker have routinely elevated incorrect information into received wisdom.

Another text in the historiography, Mike Wallace's *Mickey Mouse History*, deals not merely with misinformation, but with the deliberate misrepresentation of history in America. Wallace is particularly annoyed by the lack of African-American representation in museums, and by the fact that there is comparatively little effort expended in attracting many minority groups to heritage tourist sites or public history in general. The title refers to the politically correct effects of corporatizing American history; the persistent leaching of import from the past leads to the interesting spectacle of a carefully middling, beige historicization. He argues that the attempt to be sensitively democratic often erases reality in a social and racial whitewash. Wallace delves into the history of museums, tourist attractions, and preserved sites and monuments in order to examine the educational impulse at their roots. Museums, originating at Mount Vernon, were patrician in their creation and attitude toward both their subjects and visitors. Throughout the twentieth century, house museums have become increasingly patrician. They have sought to Americanize by indoctrinating visitors into a set of ideals that have little to do with the actual history of the site.³⁷⁷

When examining the misrepresentation of history in America it is race, like no other issue, that is most illustrative of the nation's preference for flawed mythologies rather than factual truths. Although slavery officially ended with Lincoln's 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, Old South values died hard after the end of the Civil War. The regional persistence of sharecropping, Jim Crow institutions and Black Codes meant that old societal values lingered³⁷⁸ - arguably into the 1960s. The most infamous moment in Wilmington's race relations happened on Monday, November 14, 1898 with the

³⁷⁷ Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, 8.

³⁷⁸ Hugh Brogan, *The Penguin History of the United States of America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 474.

racially-charged violence that later became known as the race riot. Because Colonel Alfred Moore Waddell became Mayor after he and a committee of allies removed the elected city government, the 1898 Wilmington riot has been described as a coup d'etat, but it was figuratively more of a lynching.³⁷⁹ Mob rule, racially motivated violence and the swift repression of a burgeoning black middle class were central to the riot.

The views of the Old South's white elite are exemplified by Alfred Moore Waddell, a paradigm of the Reconstruction era and a Southern Democrat leader with fairly unreconstructed views. Philip Gerard's *Cape Fear Rising*, a mostly fictional account of the Wilmington race riots, is correct in painting Alfred Moore Waddell as a firebrand orator well capable of inciting racially motivated agitation. In describing Waddell's inflammatory remarks during the riot, Gerard writes "Sizzling, that was the character of the speech. . . He had them by their heartstrings, then he grabbed them by their throats. He had them roaring along on a wave of remembered glory."³⁸⁰

White supremacy was not hidden during Reconstruction, and the supremacist agenda favored an ideal of a Southern culture dominated by whites and united by the shared distaste for the perceived Negro threat. This is the cultural mindset that the rioters fought to promote. In terms of preservation, the event serves to illustrate how the majority of genteel Southern society viewed itself. In 1898, the upper class was exclusively white, and race was an intrinsic element of class identity. This is not to say that there existed a strict equation between race and class, such as blacks being lower class and whites being upper class. The internal social strata of each race had been separate for so long that race superceded class concerns; to whites, blacks were a second

³⁷⁹ 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report. Raleigh, N.C.: North Carolina Department of Archives and History, 2005. 151

³⁸⁰ Philip Gerard, *Cape Fear Rising* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: John F. Blair, Publisher, 1994), 207.

class, period. The rise of professional blacks during Reconstruction ignited varying degrees of white resentment, as many whites were uncomfortable with the notion of being forced to recognize any particular class identity of blacks at all. The shorthand function that class striations customarily perform in a society – indicating the relative value of one group to another and suggesting the manner in which a particular group might be reasonably be treated by another group – was invalidated in this period.

When it became apparent that some blacks considered themselves equal members of society, allowed to voice their opinions and in fact to hold a varying opinion from the white majority, the Old South revolted against this inclusion. The 1898 riot is a representative microcosm of the manner in which history was reinvented, shaped and rooted in the elite's idealized view of its past – not the past, but a past exclusively belonging to them and firmly under their purview. Any dissenting voices were quickly quelled, as in the race riots. In their continual memorializing of the Confederacy, elites of the Old South created an uncontested history of the region which their successors subsequently preserved.

Wilmington in the 1880s and 1890s was a progressive town in the fact that it contained middle class, professional African-Americans, as well as freed slaves and working blacks, in a relatively integrated population. Wilmington's booming economy and its nature as a port city fostered tolerance of integration. A Fusionist city government consisting of Populists and Republicans from the Lincoln mold meant that for the most part, the city's institutions supported black newspapers and businesses.³⁸¹ The story of the 1898 riot began when Alexander Manly, the African-American editor of the

³⁸¹ *1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report*, <http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/1898-wrrc/report/report.htm> (Raleigh, N.C.: 2005) Research Branch, North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina, 47-52.

Wilmington *Daily Record* newspaper, reacted in an editorial to comments made by speaker Rebecca Latimer Felton at the August 1897 meeting of the Georgia State Agricultural Society.³⁸² Felton expressed a view that white men were leaving white women dangerously exposed to rape by black men, particularly in rural areas. Felton's words were informed by her society's inherent distrust of the free black population, a distrust which included a preoccupation with the ideas of miscegenation, mongrelization and rape. An underlying fear for much of white society centered on the supposed sexual depravity of 'black beasts,' and Felton succinctly expressed this paranoia in her speech.³⁸³

The myth of African-American sexual predation on white women was not new, and neither was Felton's solution of lynching by mobs. During the election of 1898, Democrats capitalized on white fear for political gain, and the rhetoric of their platform became rooted in white supremacist sentiment, organized as a political "machine."³⁸⁴ After the *Wilmington Messenger* reprinted Felton's speech in an effort to bolster the Democratic campaign, Alex Manly responded in an editorial. He questioned who was to blame for the stereotype of the rapacious black man, asserting that black men "were sufficiently attractive for white girls of culture and refinement to fall in love with them."³⁸⁵ The implication that white women may at times be consensual in sexual encounters with black men fueled the Democratic fire.

³⁸² Ibid., 347.

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ *1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report*, <http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/1898-wrrc/report/report.htm> (Raleigh, N.C.: 2005) Research Branch, North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina, 60.

³⁸⁵ *Wilmington (N.C.) Morning Star*, 24 August 1898; quoted in *Race Riot Report*, 349.

The events that followed are recorded in the pages of the *Wilmington Messenger* for Monday, November 14, 1898. Two groups of white men reacted with force to Manly's arguments. While one group enacted a governmental coup d'etat under the direction of former congressman Colonel Alfred Moore Waddell, the other burned the offices of the *Daily Record*, chased Manly out of town, and shot up African-American neighborhoods, killing a number of residents. Stories featured in the newspaper that day illustrate the intense manner in which the society's conservative and progressive impulses conflicted.³⁸⁶ At stake was the elite white Southern male's view of his own image, and the results demonstrate how history is shaped by those with the power to define, and therefore to preserve, their own idealized group image. Just as self-definition requires an 'other' to define oneself against, the formation of a group requires the exclusion of those who are dissimilar; groups are by nature exclusionary. A petition was signed by hundreds of worthy men of the town, proclaiming that the upstanding citizenry "hereby declare that we will no longer be ruled, and will never again be ruled by men of African origin."³⁸⁷ Manly was banished as a "defamer of white women", and sitting Mayor Wright, aldermen, and the police chief were forced to resign as "the outraged dignity of a proud dominant race calmly determined to assert its innate right to rule." Summarizing the sentiment of the day, one letter to the editor states it baldly: "White supremacy must rule."³⁸⁸

The horrific events of that day destroyed Wilmington's burgeoning African-American professional class. Waddell was made Mayor and the Democratic white elite

³⁸⁶ *The Wilmington (N.C.) Messenger*, 14 November 1898, p1-4, Local History Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁸ *The Wilmington (N.C.) Messenger*, 14 November 1898, p1-4, Local History Collection, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina.

claimed victory by justifiable violence and murder. This is the backdrop to the preservation and memorializing that follows. Preservation is usually an action of the upper class, and it is important to understand who ruled society at the beginning of the twentieth century.³⁸⁹ When discussing Alfred Moore Waddell as a model of the ruling elite, it is easy to ascribe to a monolithic view of Waddell as a racist. He was, of course, but it is also true that the label signifies modern values; its application is anachronistic and hardly instructive.

In *Giving Preservation a History* the authors assert that preservation has perpetuated limited notions of American identity and is a tool for “using history to perpetuate white racial supremacy” going so far as to suggest that segregation and slavery are often covered up by the view of history as defined by the preserved urban environment.³⁹⁰

Application of the Bishir, Loewen and Wallace texts used in this chapter redefine Waddell as a product of his time and expose our own immediate need to expiate the views of an era of which it is presently difficult to conceive. However, when viewing Wilmington in the light of the city’s race and class issues, the majority of the buildings preserved can be seen as tacit monuments to moneyed, white history. There are some notable exceptions to this rule, but for the most part what remains of working class and black history in Wilmington is accidental – these buildings were not kept or preserved on purpose. Many houses and churches in Wilmington, usually on the north side of Market Street, do contain much valuable African-American history, and the warehouses on Water Street speak of a sense of place for industry, laborers and workers. While

³⁸⁹ Fitch, *Historic Preservation*, 23-24.

³⁹⁰ Page and Randall, *Giving Preservation a History*, 15.

Wilmington's architecture does not completely exclude the memory of minorities, tradesmen or the working class, it hardly celebrates these groups by preservation and memorializing. In the period from 1880 to the 1950s, only the architecture considered by white society to be notable or remarkable was preserved. The Bellamy Mansion, the Burgwin-Wright House, Thalian Hall, Orton Plantation and St. James Church all legitimize a history created by the white elite for their own consumption.

Monuments and memorials are a society's most overt form of embodying the preservation of memory and it is particularly instructive to review exactly which events and people are memorialized in Wilmington. The prominent monuments to Cornelius Harnett and George Davis and their achievements deserve memorials but require the criticism that they are elitist and exclusive. Plans for an 1898 Riot memorial park were initiated in the last four years, but as of yet it remains unbuilt; the empty lot proposed lies vacant near the Holmes Bridge on North Third Street. Alex Manly has not received a monument, nor have other local African-American notables such as Althea Gibson, Michael Jordan or Meadowlark Lemon. Obviously modern African-American notables are not pioneers of a similar venerability to Harnett or Davis, and certainly there are proportionally far fewer blacks than whites in the population.

What we can glean here is that in the first half of the twentieth century, no attempt whatsoever was made to commemorate the experience or influence of minorities in Wilmington. Such omissions are easily explained, as institutionalized repression was not dealt with legislatively until the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of the 1960s. However, such omissions are still deliberate, and they constitute a failure for preservation of history and memory through architecture. Social memory in Wilmington was

imagined and then cast in stone by those who led society – they built what Catherine Bishir has termed “Landmarks of Power.”

Preservation in the period failed to be socially inclusive in any way. In the decades immediately surrounding the start of the twentieth century, elites reinvented their history by “erecting public landmarks celebrating that history and proclaiming a legitimizing continuum from the Old South to the New South,” which in turn defined public memory for the generations that followed.³⁹¹ Preservation was successful in preserving a past, but thoroughly unsuccessful in preserving anything beyond a rich, white past.

Generally speaking, American culture celebrates winners. Those who are not newsworthy for their success most often pass unremembered by society, and this preoccupation with winning affects preservation as much as any other field. Times have changed since the 1960s in this regard, but competition and success are still bred into the culture in such a pervasive manner that most Americans are hardly aware of any existing alternative. While the memory of the great and the famous usually outlasts the memory of the masses in most countries, America is particularly egregious in its often blatant refusal to acknowledge the history of the masses, let alone to celebrate their truths.

The lower classes, the poor, Native Americans, African Americans, women, Jewish-Americans and other groups in society have histories that have been traditionally ignored. In discussing dominant groups in society – usually comprised of rich white men – Loewen notes, “In most places Americans have not shown the moral courage to tell what really happened there, let alone offer a hint of apology or rectification.”³⁹² Across

³⁹¹ Bishir, “Landmarks of Power,” 6.

³⁹² Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 448.

America, the urge to preserve the grandest building, to memorialize and legitimize the structures that represent the most successful people and communities, is omnipresent. Loewen and Mike Wallace both conclude that this is a changing trend, but that was not the case in the period prior to the 1950s.

The view of history that preservation fixes in time is a lasting one, as the built environment sets a historic scene when viewed by current generations. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that a more complete view of history became clear. The Civil Rights movement, the change in women's roles and the socially revolutionary decade of the 1960s challenged and changed old notions. In the modern era, inclusion of all histories is the norm and preservation is successful because of this broadened perspective. Paradoxically, modern preservation owes its origins to the urge to preserve that arose in the first half of the twentieth-century, when preservation occurred almost exclusively to revise history and to exclude parts that the preservers did not want to keep. Despite the modern emphasis, these old habits of exclusion die hard. The Old South is not forgotten, and "public memory has been slow to change. In the sagas told by memorials and the seemingly unbroken continuity of colonial architecture, the old history persists."³⁹³ Preservation retains a past, but that past cannot be interpreted without education. The role of history teachers is to supply the education that buildings cannot and that definition leads to the question, asked in *Giving Preservation a History*; "Whose history is important?"³⁹⁴ Preservation has its own history that should be scrutinized and has been a fiction used to subtly direct cultural politics. It is a modern point of preservation that

³⁹³ Bishir, "Landmarks of Power," 37-38.

³⁹⁴ Page and Mason, *Giving Preservation a History*, 6.

focuses attention on the interpretation of a site, rather than on the received wisdom presented by those doing the preservation.

In *America's Forgotten Architecture*, authors Tony Wrenn and Elizabeth Mulloy highlight the value of retaining the historic landscape and clarify several methodologies for preservation. The authors also describe how to document history through buildings by surveying, researching and establishing districts which protect historic properties. By relaying specific instructions to the average reader unfamiliar with preservation, the authors intend to provide a handbook of examples that encourage readers to both evaluate and preserve their own architectural heritage. This last lesson is possibly the most significant, as it directly ties the history of the people, and therefore of the city, to the buildings within its bounds. The masses that have been routinely overlooked in historic preservation to date are the masses to which America's forgotten architecture – as well as America's forgotten history – belongs. Wrenn and Mulloy continually point out the intrinsic link between an urban area and its people. They draw the conclusion that without a fully realized exploration of the historic built environment, the United States is doomed to be a culturally vacuous nation, willfully ignorant of the diversity of its history in favor of the convenience of a nationwide strip mall.

CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION

Historic preservation in Wilmington, particularly in our historic central business district, is essential to our future. The historic nature of our downtown makes our community unique and special. Our future is predicated on our past. As our downtown evolves into a vibrant, exciting business district embracing thousands of visitors from our proposed convention center and thousands of new jobs already planned, it is essential that we maintain the historic character which is the backbone of our success. Historic preservation is good for business and it is simply the right thing to do for our community.

Mayor Spence Broadhurst³⁹⁵

Early historic preservation in Wilmington can be considered successful because of the historic urban fabric that remains with us today. If we define success narrowly as the retention of every historic building that has made up the cultural landscape in Wilmington since the 1700s then we are obviously being too rigorous and unrealistic, and overlook that preservation has evolved in the same way that the city has evolved. What we can say is that the evidence points to the successful growth of preservation as a movement. In terms of saving historic buildings that success is in direct proportion to the degree of investment that the upper classes had in specific properties. Wilmington's elite founded and led preservation in the city because they felt connected to the city's sense of place, they felt obligated to lead because they were best positioned in society to do so, and because preservation assisted them in memorializing their own class heritage for future generations. The fabric of Wilmington that has been retained to the present day is due in very large part to their efforts.

Figures like A. M. Waddell and his wife, Louis T. Moore, James Sprunt, Hugh MacRae and the organization of the Colonial Dames all share an affinity for Wilmington that goes some way to explaining their sensibilities and actions. The sense of place in Wilmington is based upon a busy industrial heritage, and also upon the creation of the

³⁹⁵ Spence Broadhurst, Mayor of Wilmington, personal correspondence, 24 January 2006.

history of the city by ruling elites. As in Charleston in 1931 the feeling of family connection was bound up in local heritage and preservation was used for the retention of an elite identity.³⁹⁶ City leaders and planners could define that only colonial or antebellum structures, or Confederate monuments, were of historic value and implicitly agree that histories other than their own was disposable by comparison. Historic preservation and memorializing became the preservation of a certain view of history. Preservation was used to create a sense of place as defined by the elite and it represented the history of class (and racial) conflict through buildings; a field of battle in the struggle to resolve whose history is most overtly represented in society.

The late NBC news anchor David Brinkley, born in Wilmington, addressed the Historic Wilmington Foundation in 1975 on the subject of sense of place. He began with the interesting perspective that preservation in Wilmington was assisted in part by the lack of development after the 1950s. The loss of the railroad meant that Wilmington stood still, and the haste which destroyed much of the urban fabric in other cities which rushed to modernize did not overwhelm this city. Atlanta, for example, has grown “like a weed”. Despite the demolition of a huge number of properties during urban renewal in the 1960s, Wilmington still retained elements of its former grandeur.³⁹⁷ Brinkley believed that the indefinable quality of presence and ambience makes Wilmington special. He supported this claim by pointing out that Wilmington has a greater number of interesting houses than does Williamsburg. As Brinkley was a once a Director at Colonial Williamsburg, he spoke with some authority on the matter. He also noted that

³⁹⁶ Robert R. Wyeneth, “Ancestral Architecture: The Early Preservation Movement in Charleston” in *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States*, ed. Max Page and Randall Mason, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 270.

³⁹⁷ See Beverly Tetterton, *Wilmington: Lost But Not Forgotten* (Wilmington, N.C.: Dram Tree Books, JFK Publications, 2005), for relevant pictures.

Charleston's preservation efforts earn the city both money and renown, and that Wilmington has a similar potential for profiting from the promotion of its own beauties. In the 50s and 60s, a period which Brinkley termed as "the uglification of America," Wilmington escaped irreversible damage. Both modern expansion and historic preservation could subsequently make the city a destination.³⁹⁸ Implicit here is a view that Wilmington's sense of place can build from its evolution as, first, a plantation based economy, then an industrial center, and, at the time, a blank canvas for redevelopment.

Historic preservation of the built environment is important to all people. James Fitch's assertion that "the city has been correctly defined as the theater of memory: that is, the cumulative scene of past actions" and therefore, "the historically evolved urban fabric offers a critically important life-support system to everyone who is sheltered there" is certainly true of Wilmington.³⁹⁹ As we have seen, memorializing of the past within the urban landscape is instrumental in retaining a city's sense of place for its residents. Years of successful preservation efforts also result in the establishment of a city's historical significance to the nation, and this in turn becomes another reason for residents' attachment to the place they call home.

In *Historic Preservation: Curatorial Management of the Built World*, Fitch discusses his view of American culture as inherently processional, quickly erasing its own history and wiping the slate clean time and time again. Fitch argues that urban renewal was a mistaken theory because it overlooked the importance of the architecture it destroyed. He begins with the premise that the replica has become as popular as the prototype in modern American culture, and he bemoans the fact that architectural

³⁹⁸ Junior League of Wilmington, *Old Wilmington Guidebook*. (Wilmington, N.C.: The Junior League of Wilmington, N.C., Incorporated, 1978), 6-9.

³⁹⁹ Fitch, *Historic Preservation*, xi.

preservation has been rendered less important by the easy access to new, improved versions of the same style. Fitch's argument is that preservation cannot fight that impulse, but should instead embrace the nature of American culture and redefine heritage as a cultural resource, rather than a disposable commodity. Fitch believes preservationists should be the progressives, leading the modernization of urban landscapes while keeping the existing history alive within them. He posits that the preservation of historic buildings can be sold as the maintenance of an economically valuable primary source, and celebrated as a representation of the time period in American culture in which they were produced.

Preservation in Wilmington today has thrived as a result of following Fitch's advice. Preservation has been sold to the public not merely as the maintenance of an economically viable primary source, but as the very foundation of the city's economy. In a similar fashion, the preservation of Edenton, New Bern, Asheville, Raleigh and Salisbury has been driven by money generated from heritage tourism, the film industry's utilization of North Carolina's urban backdrops, and the Federal tax incentives for rehabilitation given since 1976.⁴⁰⁰ In the late 1990s, North Carolina's tourism industry employed 161,000 people and paid \$2.5 billion in salaries; the state's historic resources are considered the number one drawing point for visitors.⁴⁰¹

Economics has always driven preservation, as money is needed from the outset to purchase or renovate a structure. Class-based wealth was originally the primary source of funds for preservation, as only elites possessed the money to initiate preservation for their own motives. However, the modern success of preservation and the rise of the civic-

⁴⁰⁰ Donovan D. Rypkema, *Profiting from the Past: The Impact of Historic Preservation on the North Carolina Economy* (Wilmington, N.C.: Preservation North Carolina, 1998), 23.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

minded preservationist groups have led to the widespread recognition that preservation can well be a sound financial investment. Many preservation visionaries have been able to demonstrate how actively maintaining buildings and a sense place can bring both economic and cultural rewards. As a deeply capitalistic society, American culture rarely embraces social movements that bring only intangible benefits to the table. Once government, corporations and individuals realized the full extent of the money that can be made from the retention of the historic built environment, preservation was assured of its continued success – at least to a certain degree. Both the successes and failures in saving historic buildings in the era of early preservation in Wilmington were directly proportional to the degree of the upper classes' investment in each property.

Perhaps most surprising is the realization that class investment is still a primary factor linked to whether or not a site will be preserved or demolished. The recent losses of the Wilmington Ice House and Babies Hospital are present-day examples of the heritage that modernization regularly erases. Both of these sites would have stood a far greater likelihood of survival had their past use been strongly associated with the memory of the city's elite citizens. Today, the only factor more influential in a site's preservation than upper class identification with the property is the omnipresent motivator of finance. If the feasible restoration of a property can grant the site a lucrative historic presence, preservation is almost assured. America as a whole does not cling to its past, but rather cherishes and discards it simultaneously in a way which is often puzzling to an outsider. The framework for modern preservation is predicated on money and the dynamism of a free market, where even conservation advocates use change as a means of growth. It is

unusual to see a nation so rooted in the mythology of its past summarily dismiss and demolish the tangible, built evidence of that past.

In the modern era, as Donovan Rypkema asserts, the maintenance of an historic urban fabric “increases the tax base, increases loan demand, enhances property values, generates sales of goods and services, and - most importantly - creates jobs.”⁴⁰² Movies and television alone bring millions of dollars to the Wilmington economy. Screen Gems executive Chris Bromley has said that the primary reason for Dawson’s Creek, One Tree Hill, Scarface and feature films using a location like Wilmington’s Front or Third streets in the unbroken backdrop of period properties.⁴⁰³ In 1997, Bill Arnold, Director of the NC Film Office said that, “location shooting is the reason for the choice of North Carolina 85% of the time. Our locations are the beach, the wilderness, the foliage and primarily the variety of period buildings.”⁴⁰⁴

Preservation also seems to prime the economy in other directions. Federal tax credits and the increased value of rehabilitating a property for resale obviously spur preservation, but there are several less obvious results. Over the last forty years, the Historic Wilmington Foundation’s plaque program has designated 450 properties in Wilmington as historic.⁴⁰⁵ Many realtors and homeowners have commented that a home’s value rises upon their installation of a historic plaque. The Historic Wilmington Foundation plaques are educational and aesthetic, but afford no legal protection whatsoever to a property. However, they do seem to provide an aura of preservation that

⁴⁰² Chris Bromley, Screen Gems Studio movie producer, interview by author, 14 March 2005.

⁴⁰³ Rypkema, *Profiting From the Past*, 4.

⁴⁰⁴ Rypkema, *Profiting From the Past*, 23.

⁴⁰⁵ Wilmington, N.C., Archive “Plaques,” Historic Wilmington Foundation.

serves to insulate the property from threatening agents. Not one of the 450 plaque-holding properties has been demolished in the last ten years.

In the modern era, Wilmington's preservation has progressed quite rapidly through zoning and the existence of professional City staff, despite the destructive effects of urban renewal in the 1960s. One advance that exemplifies how early preservation developed with modern means is the National Register of Historic Places. Authorized under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the National Register lists US cultural resources worthy of preservation. The criteria for properties and districts deemed worthy are the quality in architecture, history and culture, and the integrity of location, design, setting, materials and feeling. The Statement of Significance within the National Register Nomination for Wilmington's downtown historic district describes this as the only truly nineteenth century city in the state.

The reasons for this commemoration include Wilmington's grid plan layout extending up from the river, the consistent scale of buildings, and the dense mix of commercial, residential, governmental and ecclesiastical building types. The character of the city is defined by the boldness of the different styles of architecture, across all periods, expressing the energy of a busy port city and the sailors, politicians and merchants who frequent it. It is noted that, "As a major center of political, cultural and commercial activity and as the most significant concentration of urban architectural fabric, Wilmington is of prime importance to North Carolina."⁴⁰⁶

The National Register lists well over two hundred blocks of properties and the Wilmington Historic District [**Figure 11**] itself, established in 1962, began as some

⁴⁰⁶ Janet K. Seapker, "Wilmington North Carolina Historic District National Register Nomination, 1974," North Carolina Room, New Hanover County Public Library, Wilmington, North Carolina, 8. Photocopied.

thirty-eight blocks covered by special zoning ordinances.⁴⁰⁷ The National Register district expands regularly to this day. The downtown Historic District is divided into CBD/commercial, residential and mixed-use zones and is one of several districts, Carolina Heights, Sunset Park, the Market Street Mansion District, Cape Fear Civil War Shipwreck District and one on Masonboro Sound. Individual properties listed on the National Register include City Hall-Thalian Hall, the US Customs House/Alton F. Lennon Building, Delgado School and Oakdale Cemetery.⁴⁰⁸

In 1962, City Council complimented their newly-zoned district by establishing an oversight body called the Board of Architectural Review, which later became the Historic District Commission and which is currently known as the Historic Preservation Commission. The larger, federally protected National Register district and the smaller, local Historic Districts provide different levels of oversight and protection for Wilmington's properties, but both areas have proved useful tools for preservation of the city.

There is a very definite flow to the formation of preservation organizations and each successive generation does not supercede, but enhances, the efforts of the last. Today, the Colonial Dames still preserve the Burgwin-Wright House and the Sprunt family still maintains Orton Plantation. The Historic Wilmington Foundation and Lower Cape Fear Historical Society coexist as partners in recording Wilmington's history: one through the direct preservation of buildings, the other through genealogy and archives. Wilmington is a fascinating example of how faces always change, but the names often remain: the Sprunts, Murchisons, MacRaes, Bellamys, and Boneys are still leaders in the

⁴⁰⁷ Junior League of Wilmington, *Guidebook*, 19.

⁴⁰⁸ National Register of Historic Places. "New Hanover County." 2006.
<http://www.nationalregisterofhistoricplaces.com/nc/New+Hanover/state.html>.

community today. Members of all those families have sat on the Board of the Historic Wilmington Foundation, for example, and at least four do today. This service for the HWF, as well as for many other charities across the city, does credit to these families and continues to prove the point that success in preservation relates to the degree in investment of the elite class in Wilmington.

The continued presence of these families in Wilmington's elite leadership reflects the manner in which influence, talent, money, class and ancestry breeds longevity in a location. In Wilmington and elsewhere, these are the reasons why history reflects those who write it - the golden rule. While the success of early preservation efforts in Wilmington was directly proportional to the upper classes' investment in a property, it was the elite's investment in the preservation movement as a whole that made the maintenance of an historic built environment a necessity for Wilmington. What has directly moved preservation to evolve has been the passion for the place demonstrated by individuals in the private sphere. Preservation has required a commitment from amateurs, volunteers and the backing of benefactors such as the Southern elite. Their cumulative efforts were inspirational enough to eventually elicit support from the various levels of government. Preservation in Wilmington has become a concerted effort on the part of all these disparate groups, a fact which stands as testament to the vision of the early preservationists who started the movement.

Retaining buildings was a challenge mainly undertaken by educated individuals and upper class private groups until the Historic Preservation Commission was instituted in the 1960s. Over the last forty years, the Historic Wilmington Foundation's plaque

program has designated 450 properties in Wilmington as historic.⁴⁰⁹ While the National Trust defines ‘historic’ as a property of 50 or more years, to gain a plaque in Wilmington, the property must be at least 75 years in age. For a property to have survived for 75 years or more in a city with limited statutory restrictions required vision in the face of urban renewal, particularly in the 1960s, and a great deal of luck before that.

Modern local preservation is successful primarily as a result of the legacy of these early preservationists. The field has become strengthened through its evolution, growing more inclusive of race, gender, wealth and class over time. As a result of the modern era, inclusion of the forgotten histories of minorities is now normalized, just as the idealization of the Confederate cause was normalized in its time. The preceding pages have demonstrated time and again the conservative, reactionary impulses that led the elite to seek the retention of their own past. However, these pages should also illustrate how frequently preservation demanded a progressive methodology to achieve its goals.

Wilmington’s early preservation movement is indeed illustrative of the odd paradox of preservation: despite its obvious reactionary nature, preservation often demands progressive tactics that inevitably spur progressive results. A progressive, dynamic community is spawned by vibrant urban growth, with mixed architectural styles, heritage tourism and the economic stimuli which are the modern results of early preservation. The altruism and philanthropy of Wilmington’s upper class preservationists drove the idea of preservation forward through innovation, while retaining many conservative motives. Their organizations proselytized the idea that saving the historic environment is part of both American life and Southern identity, and that its benefits include patriotism, revenue, comfort, identity, pride and sense of place.

⁴⁰⁹ Wilmington, N.C., Archive “Plaques,” Historic Wilmington Foundation.

The idea that history can teach us about the present through a glimpse of the past has always been worth the effort, even when the lens through which it is viewed is narrow, elitist, or racist. Historic preservation's added value is that it educates the viewer about a history we can experience directly, as it grants us the ability to touch, appreciate and empathize with an immediacy books cannot replicate. Wilmington's early elites recognized this and became invested in historic preservation because of its value to them as reminder of their own history. They shaped that history through selective preservation of what they saw as the best of Wilmington's built environment, with all the class, economic, racial motivations that selectivity implies. What has resulted is a city which retains that civic patriotism and has evolved into a more inclusive and successful preservation community across the centuries.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1a. Burgwin-Wright House, 1847



Figure 1b. Burgwin-Wright House, 1909



Figure 2. City Hall-Thalian Hall, 1900



Figure 3. Orton Plantation House, 1895



Figure 4a. United States Post Office, c. 1900

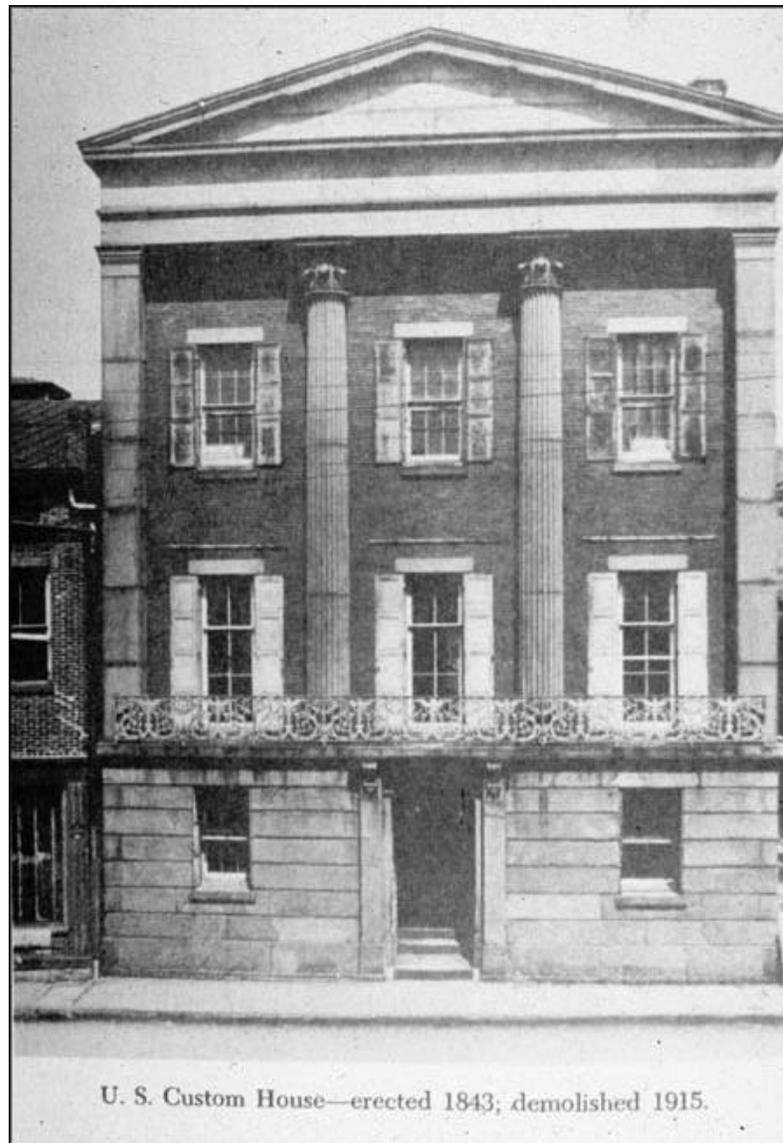


Figure 4b. United States Post Office (rear view) and Park



POST OFFICE PARK AND BUSINESS BUILDINGS.

Figure 5. US Custom House



U. S. Custom House—erected 1843; demolished 1915.

Figure 6a. Cornelius Harnett's 'Maynard' at Hilton, North of
Wilmington



Figure 6b. Harnett's former house at Hilton being demolished, 1892

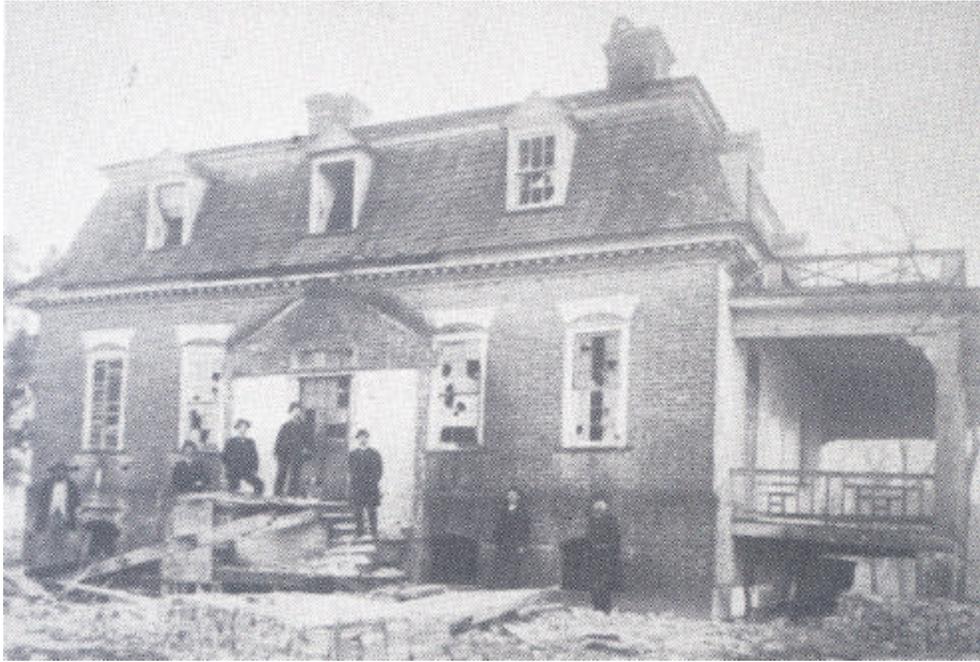


Figure 7. William Hooper House, 1883 sketch



Figure 8. Mitchell-Anderson House, 1949



The Smith-Anderson house, from an original etching by Louis Orr (Plate XXI, Album V).

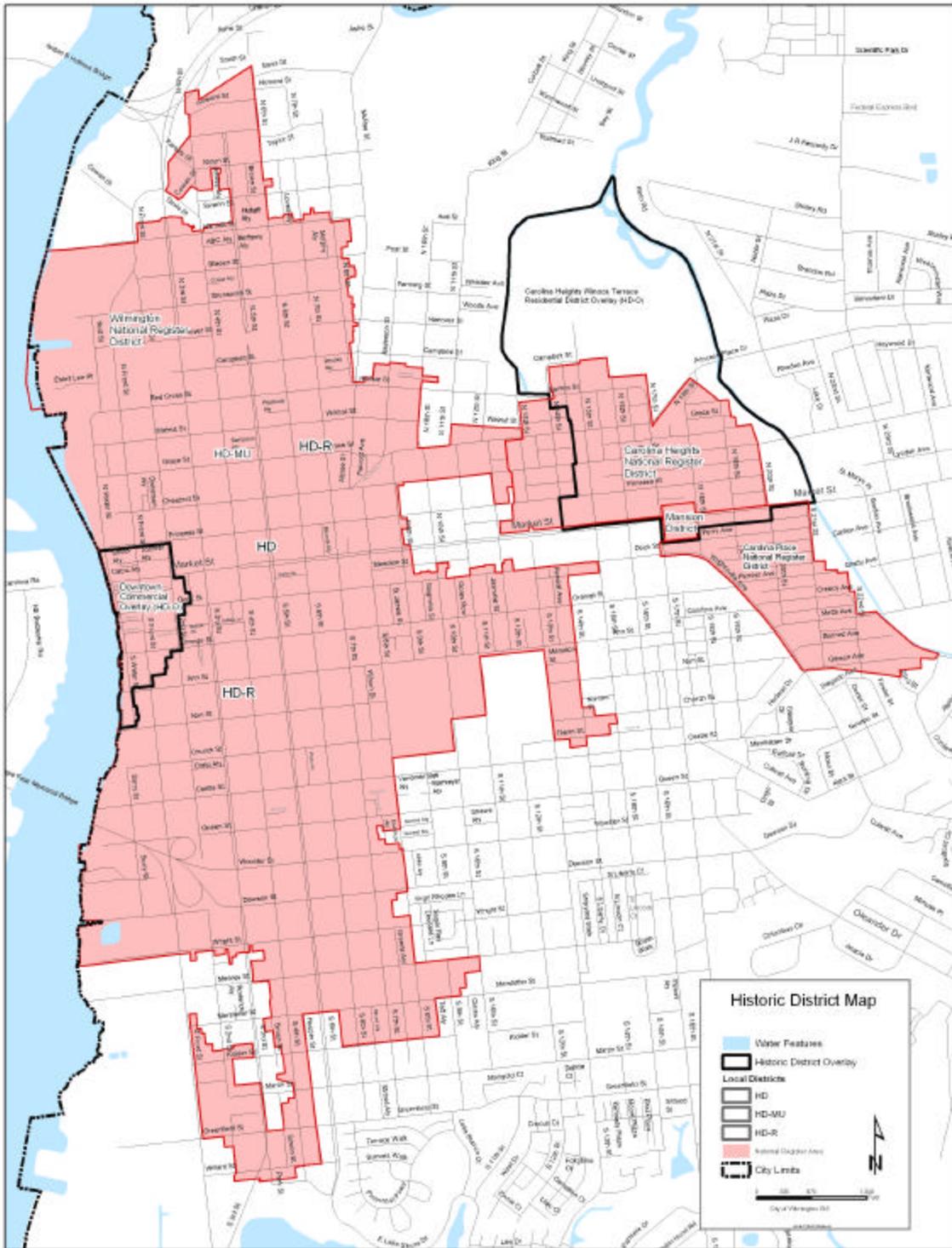
Figure 9. The Dram Tree



Figure 10. Confederate Memorial, South Third Street, between Market and Dock streets.



Figure 11. Map of Wilmington's Historic Districts, 2006



All figures are courtesy of New Hanover County Public Library, except number 11 which is courtesy of the City of Wilmington Planning Division.