

RECENT AERIAL PHOTOS BY MIKE CLEMMER RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY WILLIAM M. REAVES

This is the third in a four-part series of an in-depth study of Smith Island's colorful character and past, leading to its present-day development into a huge and exclusive resort area.
- The Editors.

By JOHN RANDT
Staff Writer

Use of Smith Island by man has been brief. Much of the significance of the island is the result of what man has not done there.

Lasting developments of any significance did not develop. The brevity of development was probably caused by the island's isolation and storm-swept character.

There are several early Indian sites on the island. Archaeologists have discovered the habitats of several small Indian family groups but not a large village. The discovery of fragments of pottery dates the settlements to the early 1500's.

Smith Island was first viewed by Europeans in 1526. The Spanish explorer deAyllon led the first of a series of French and Spanish expeditions in the region. At the mouth of the Cape Fear River, deAyllon lost his capital ship which is listed as the first recorded sinking on the Eastern coast.

One source reports one of the first ships constructed in the New World was built from native wood at Smith Island. Reportedly, the incident took place after the wreck of an European ship in the nearby shoals.

The first known settlement was attempted between 1662-1663 by a colony of New Englanders. The settlement soon faltered and the inhabitants abandoned the island and left their cattle to run wild.

Pirates and Indian traders—based on early accounts—are known to have used the island as a base of operation. Accounts indicate that one of the more "notorious" of the pirates, Stede Bonnet, was tracked down and captured off Bald Head in 1718.

First recorded owner of the island was Thomas Smith II, a South Carolina landgrave. The term landgrave refers to a Colonial term for Lord. Smith is described in historical accounts as a prominent South Carolinian who carried on a considerable trade with the Indians.

Smith was granted the island in the river mouth in 1713. Charts then called the island Cape Fear Island. Apparent justification of the grant was to allow Smith to escape South Carolina regulations concerning trading with Indians. The border between the two states was often roughly placed at the Cape Fear River and did not take its present position till 25 years later.

Lawrence Lee in his book "The Lower Cape Fear in Colonial Days" stated, "With more fertile land available it is unlikely that Smith acquired the land for cultivation. But it could have served as a trading center, and one beyond the reach of restrictive laws. It was outside the jurisdiction claimed by South Carolina, and North Carolina officials were too preoccupied with the Tuscarora Indian War and its aftermath to concern themselves with problems of trade on the remote Cape Fear."

In 1738—the same year the state boundaries of the sister Carolina states were made permanent as they are today—Smith willed the island to his four sons. He told them that the original name for the island was Cedar Island.

With the division of the land into four quarters to his sons the island became known as Smith Island.

Little is known of the settlement, or lack of it, in the years that followed. Historians report the island's natural inaccessibility frustrated permanent settlement.

Most development centered in Smithville which was the original name for Southport.

In 1776, as warfare erupted in the Revolutionary War along the length of the colonies, 5,000 British soldiers occupied Smith Island. The troops remained on the island in the period of March-October of 1776 and then withdrew.

A little over 20 years later, with merchant trade expanding, the first in a series of lighthouses was constructed on the island. Ten acres of land were donated to the federal government for construction of a navigation device by Benjamin Smith, a grandson of Thomas Smith.

By 1800, a community began to develop on the island which competed with Smithville on the west side of the river. Major occupations of settlers included fishing and farming. Old maps show a ship yard located to the immediate rear of the present lighthouse structure.

Also in evidence was a large structure known as Sea Castle. In later years, after the community dwindled away and the buildings were abandoned the structure remained.

One source reported groups would travel across the river from Southport and journey to the structure. The account described spirited parties in a large second-floor room of the building among participants.

In October of 1806, the "Wilmington Gazette" reported the accidental death of the lighthouse keeper of the island, Henry Long, in a hunting accident. Long was reported killed by a misplaced shot of a companion as he hunted for deer and wild hogs.

Jedidiah Morse in "The American Gazetteer" published in Boston in 1810 wrote that a "very fine breed of sheep" were being raised on the island.

Morse wrote, "On Smith Island, on the coast of North Carolina a very fine brand of sheep, their wool resembling that of Spain, run wild. The people on the main (mainland) shear them twice a year, being driven into a place enclosed by the sea."

In 1834, the State Legislature acted to amend a previous act and annex Smith Island to Brunswick County. In the same arrangement, a portion of Eagle Island on the west bank of the Cape Fear was transferred to the jurisdiction of New Hanover County.

In 1846, a newspaper known as the "Wilmington Commercial" reported the offer for sale of a turpentine distillery and wharf owned by John Hall and William B. Flanner to satisfy debts. Offered for sale were three stills and "fixings in complete working order."

The bright navigation lights at the river mouth were dark in 1861. Lights all over the nation began to go out as the Civil War burst the delicate peace within the country.

From the first day of the conflict the port of Wilmington—located 28 miles up the river from Smith Island—began to engage in trade with Europe and especially Bermuda.

The Union blockade, officially announced with a total of 10 ships for all Southern ports, began to be applied in earnest. New ship construction from the highly-industrialized North and captured blockade runners began to augment the blockade.

In the fall of 1863, soldiers from the 40th Regiment of North Carolina State Troops built a sand and log fort known as Fort Holmes in the area known as Bald Head.

During the Confederate occupation of the island someone took the time to order a survey of the island. John H. Hill of Goldsboro and others surveyed the island and laid out avenues through the thick foliage. As late as 1890 the survey lines were reported still identifiable through the "luxurious ambrosia."

An unusual tale related in a May 3, 1890 issue of the "Wilmington Messenger" reported the existence of "much treasure in specie (coins)" buried on Smith Island. It apparently originated during the occupation by Confederate troops.

The 1890 article reported: "Gentlemen intimately acquainted with the history of the island assure the writer that there is no question but that much treasure in specie is buried there, the location of some of which a member of the old 40th has in his possession, together with the spot where three gold watches are interred. Search for this hidden treasure may be made this summer, as a movement is on foot to arrange a reunion of the 40th Regiment of which J.J. Hedrick, of this city, was colonel, upon the island during the season."

In January of 1890 the island was offered for sale to settle the estate of the late John Walker. His holdings were described as "containing between 4,000 and 5,000 acres of land." Walker apparently obtained the land from the four sons, or heirs, of Thomas Smith.

Congressman John E. Reyburn of Philadelphia, Pa., showed interest in the property in April of that year.

An issue of the "Raleigh News and Observer" stated: "The island is well adapted for a hotel and summer resort and Mr.

Information from Library in Wilmington, N.C.

Arthur left in 1747