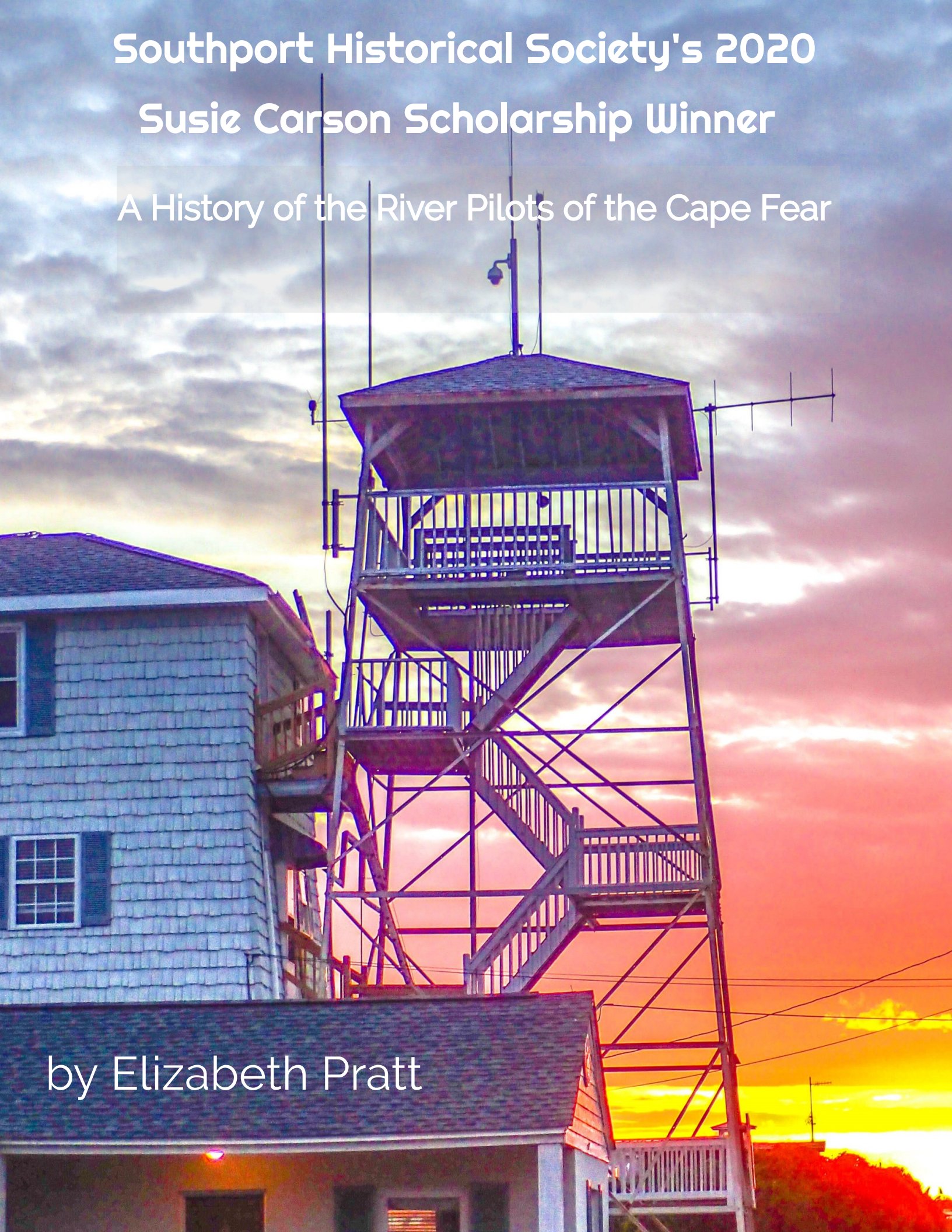


Southport Historical Society's 2020

Susie Carson Scholarship Winner

A History of the River Pilots of the Cape Fear

by Elizabeth Pratt



A History of the River Pilots of the Cape Fear

The history of river pilots is rich and deep in the waters surrounding the Cape Fear River. First given its name by the explorer William Hilton in October of 1663, the Cape Fear is a treacherous stretch of water not easily navigated by sailors unfamiliar with the area and its various shoals and submerged banks. For over three hundred years, local river pilots have guided ships seeking port in Wilmington up the Cape Fear River past the hazardous Frying Pan Shoals.

Cape Fear river pilots played a role in the establishment of the town of Smithville, supported the cause of the Revolution, defended the Atlantic coast during the War of 1812, staved off starvation during the Civil War, and still contribute to the well-being of our community today, supporting commerce and trade by bringing cargo ships into local ports.

To truly understand the continued feat of the Cape Fear River Pilot, one must understand the qualities of the Cape Fear itself. In his article, *A Brief Description of the Province of the Carolina*, Robert Horne observes the Cape Fear as such:

“The River is barred at the entrance, but there is a Channel close aboard the Cape that will convey in safety a ship of 300 tons, and as soon as a ship is over the Bar, the River is 5 or 6 fathoms deep for a 100 miles from the Sea; this Bar is a great security to the Colony against a foreign invasion, the channel being hard to find by those that have not experience of it, and yet safe enough to those that know it,” (Horne, 1666).

In the historic “Battle of the Sand Bars” in 1718, the renowned “Gentleman Pirate” Stede Bonnet attempted to flee from capturers in the confines of the Cape Fear, only to be defeated and captured by his pursuers due to the lack of escape routes from the Cape Fear into the Atlantic.

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Perhaps the most treacherous aspect of the Cape Fear River are the Frying Pan Shoals; these shallow sandbars named for their "curious configuration" extend approximately twenty-eight miles off the end of Bald Head Island, and range from two to twelve feet deep at any time (Cashion, 1991). Not only does the depth of the water surrounding these shoals range frequently, but the exact position of the mounds of sand and silt drift periodically, causing the grounding and shipwreck of many seacraft from the beginning of European exploration (Steelman, 2009). In his book *Masters of the Shoals*, Jim McNeil implores his readers to "think of the captain of a large ship at Cape Fear as a blind man entering an immense, strange house, cluttered with unfamiliar furniture and other hazards, with only one entrance and one exit," (McNeil, 2014). With this image in mind, one can now begin to understand and appreciate the history of the Cape Fear river pilots-- "those who know [the Cape Fear]," as put by Robert Horne.

Since the official commissioning of river pilots, these brave seamen have been entrusted with the "safe and expeditious" passing from the Atlantic Ocean to an inland destination (Lynch, 1992). Before the completion of Fort Johnston in 1749 that led to the establishment of the town of Smithville, river pilots guided boats past the Frying Pan Shoals to the Ports of Wilmington and Brunswick Town under direction of Carolina's colonial governors (Birmelin, 2007). The first true documentation of the local pilots so instrumental to the commerce of their region occurred surrounding a Spanish invasion in September of 1748. Three Spanish privateer boats entered the mouth of the Cape Fear River, and were met shortly by river pilots ready to lead them to port. However the pilots soon discovered the origin and intent of these boats, ready to capture the African American slaves constructing Fort Johnston. Unable to refuse the voyage for the sake of their lives, the river pilots guided the Spanish up the river, only to discover that the workers were not there, it was Sunday and they had been taken to Brunswick Town.

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The Spanish forced the pilots to take them further up the river to Brunswick Town, where they attempted to plunder the village. Two ships made off with stolen goods, while the third exploded and settled at the bottom of the river (StarNews, 2007).

In 1751, the NC State Legislature passed a law regulating the business of river piloting; this law set prices, restricted the number of pilots certified at one time, established a code of conduct, and organized a commission of five men to govern the piloting trade. Prior to this law, the state had no legislative authority of the river pilots. Competition was an integral aspect of the piloting trade; a pilot was not able to succeed if he could not beat the speed, prices, or expertise of his fellow pilots. According to *The Lower Cape Fear in Colonial Days*, the fees determined by the state were based upon the understanding of the typical pilot's run in three parts: the sailing from the main bar to Brunswick, the sailing from Brunswick to the Great Island, and the sailing from the Great Island to Wilmington (Lee, 1965). This law was slightly amended in 1764, but for the most part remained intact until the Revolution.

Though heavily traveled before and during the Revolutionary War, Fort Johnston stood on its own until the late eighteenth century, with no true establishment surrounding it. In 1784, however, the General Assembly of North Carolina granted licensed pilots an acre of residential land along the Cape Fear near Fort Johnston in order to encourage the contribution of these pilots to local commerce. The General Assembly also established the "Commissioners of Pilotage," a group of eight men set to govern and regulate the piloting trade, selecting no more than twelve men to act as commissioned pilots with licenses, binding them to their duty and confirming a set fee (StarNews, 2007).

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In 1786, Joshua Potts of Wilmington traveled to Fort Johnston with a local captain in order to rest and restore his health. During this time, Potts observed the residences of the local river pilots. Potts returned in 1790 with a family and became acquainted with river pilot Joe Swain. With the help of John Huske, Charles Gause, and General Benjamin Smith, the town of Smithville was established in 1792. The river pilots near Fort Johnston are today considered the first citizens of the town of Smithville, and contributed to its proper ratification and establishment.

The nineteenth century brought further development of the history of river pilots as the trade became even more prominent and ever-changing. Upon further conflict with England during the War of 1812, the river pilots of the Cape Fear continued to serve their locality. In May of 1812, the commission of river pilots organized into the "Sea Fencibles," a military group serving in the defense of the Brunswick harbors, both on land and sea (Reaves, 1978). Following this cooperation during the War of 1812, river pilots returned to their competitive ways, leading to conflict. On November 20, 1842, river pilot George Bowen was tarred and feathered by other river pilots after he undercut established prices in order to beat his competition following the introduction of reduced rates set in place by the shipping merchants of Wilmington (Reaves, 1978). Thirteen of these pilots were arrested and stood trial in the Court of Common Pleas and Quarter Sessions in Wilmington; of these, prominent pilots of the time included John and Christopher Burriss, Elijah Price, and James Newton.

The later part of the nineteenth century brought the turmoil of the Civil War. River pilots played a crucial role in staving off starvation of the local ports during the Union blockade, aiding blockade runners in reaching Wilmington and other local ports. Some accounts include the commissioning of Joe Burriss in April of 1863 to bring in a blockade runner from Nassau, and John William Anderson in November of 1863, who brought in a

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blockade boat only to die of fever shortly after it reached anchor. Almost all of the blockade-running ships were piloted by Smithville-area pilots, including Richard Doshier, J.M. Adkins, J.T. Burriss, and other prominent names of Smithville (Reaves, 1978).

Following the Civil War, the occupations of the river pilots returned to their normal routines, with little change until well into the twentieth century. The occupation of a river pilot was often romanticized by citizens of their towns, idealized through their harrowing runs and expert maneuvers; these men were affectionately known as "dandies of the town," (McNeil, 2003). However, competition had increased, which ironically resulted in a decrease in quality of piloting service, as pilots assumed second jobs such as shrimping or fishing. Even so, this competition also brought new cutthroat strategies to gain business and succeed over other pilots.

In an interview with current river pilot Tommy Brendle in a piece entitled *A Pilot's Life*, Renee Spencer details the era of "opposition pilotage" that arose, as pilots resorted to any means necessary to compete, even carrying weapons on their boats to defend their territory (Spencer, 2018). Though pilots were licensed, the regulations were loose, resulting in political favors and unqualified pilots. To combat this issue, the Wilmington Cape Fear Pilots Association was chartered in 1921, governed by the same Board of Commissioners of Navigation of the Cape Fear River as the law established in 1784 (Green, 2005).

This new law established a regulation that limited the number of licensed pilots to ten at one time, bringing a new and drastic change to the pilot's trade. The law also prohibited members of the same family from acting as river pilots at the same time. In 1985, the Cape Fear Pilots' Commission assumed the role of screening all river pilot applicants,

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recommending qualified candidates to the state board (Lynch, 1992). Today, river pilot applicants must have obtained a bachelor's degree, as well as hold an ocean license issued by the US Coast Guard. Some must also complete a four-year apprenticeship program to obtain their license.

Even with port improvements, increased dredging and channel-deepening technology, Cape Fear river pilots are still necessary to ensure the safe and expeditious passage of ships from the Atlantic Ocean to the port of Wilmington or to the Military Ocean Terminal Sunny Point. Within the written history of the Cape Fear and beyond, river pilots have contributed to the well-being of their locality, not only enriching commerce and trade, but by defending ports and serving their community faithfully. Without the river pilots of the Cape Fear river, Brunswick County and the town of Southport would not be the thriving coastal areas that they are today.



Blockading Fleet, December 1964

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In memory of the river pilots who have gone before us...



The winds and the Sea, Sing their Requiem, and Shall forevermore.

Thomas B Grissom, age 39

Robert S Walker, age 32

C.C. Piner, age 25

Charles Doshier, age 26

Laurence Gillespie, age 23

Pilots and crew of the Mary K Sprunt were lost 13 April 1877

Joseph Bensell, age 46

Thomas W Brinkman, age 32

John D Trout, age 24

James R Sellers, age 21

Robert St George, age 22

Cape Fear Pilots were drowned 11 December 1872

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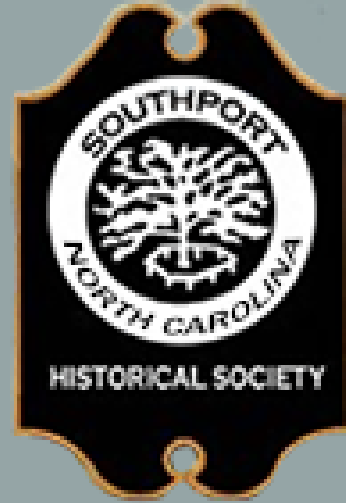
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Southport Historical Society

The Susan Sellers Carson Scholarship was established in 2003. It was named in honor of Miss Susie Carson, co-founder of the Southport Historical Society (SHS). For more than forty years, members of the SHS have worked to collect, preserve and share the history of Southport. The SHS created this scholarship out of a belief that an understanding of the past is the best foundation for building the future.



Each year South Brunswick High School Seniors submit essays that demonstrate their knowledge of Southport's history. Winners receive a \$2000 scholarship given in annual installments of \$1000 over the course of their first two years in college.



Elizabeth Pratt, Photo Contributed

Elizabeth Pratt is the 2020 Susie Carson Scholarship winner. Lizzie is graduating first in her class at South Brunswick High School. She has obtained high achievements in academics and sports and is an active community volunteer. She will attend Messiah College in Mechanicsburg, PA where she will major in Applied Health with a Pre-Health Professions Concentration.