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JOURNAL OF THE NEW BERN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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The JOURNAL OF THE NEW BERN HISTORICAL SOCIETY is a semiannual publication of the New Bern Historical Society, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation of the rich heritage of New Bern. Articles, letters, photographs, and memorabilia relevant to the history of New Bern and Craven County may be submitted to the editor for review. (Post Office Box 119, New Bern, North Carolina 28563)

MIKE'S PLACE

John J. Phaup

I like old movies. I like Andy Hardy movies. Andy was a character in a series of MGM films made between the late 1930's and late 1950's. He was played by Mickey Rooney with his usual best girl Judy Garland. I know critics dismiss these movies as escapist fluff, but the small town setting, the optimism, and the belief in a better future associated with Andy Hardy movies I found alive and well in people I talked with about the cafes of New Bern in the 1930's. Mike's Place, one of several cafes operating during this period, was run by a Lebanese immigrant Mike Shapou and his family. Talking with people who ate there is like talking with members of a class reunion; a similar smile appears with the memories. I intend to return to Mike's Place after looking at downtown New Bern as a whole.

There is another side to these interviews as well, namely, in the surviving patterns of Jim Crow--the black code dictating, "If you're black, get back"--and the hunger of the Depression.

Originally a cafe was a place to serve coffee. I use the term to mean a small restaurant without a lobby or a separate dining room. Tables are wiped clean, and soft advertising is usually on the wall.

For my overall view of things I talked with Jack Morton, my choice for New Bern's historian regarding things within living memory. When I sit and talk with him, I feel like a kid at the knee of a story-telling uncle: I am presented with a world that is at once seen and unseen. Morton, now in his 60's, grew up in New Bern and worked with his father in the Morton Motor Company, a downtown firm which sold cars whose names are now only remembered--Reo,

Hudson, Franklin. The Mortons lived in Ghent, a neighborhood formed prior to World War I by extending Queen Street toward West New Bern. That extension is Spencer Avenue.

There are about 40 downtown cafes mentioned in the 1937 New Bern City Directory, depending on your definition of downtown. Of these, Morton said, the social scale climbed from the Trent River to Broad Street. The Long Wharf section along the Trent River and Lawson Creek, for example, had no running water in the houses. People would go to street pumps with spring-controlled shut-offs to get water. The cafes near this area, although equipped with running water, reflected the meagerness of the neighborhood.

In Jack's estimation the most elegant of the local cafes was Mrs. Williams's and Mrs. Waldrop's Green Door. It stood at the corner of Broad Street and Middle Street, now an empty lot. A Southern tearoom, the Green Door featured antiques, place mats, and tablecloths. A favorite meal for ladies who would meet friends there was chicken a la king, fruit salad, and Boston cream pie. Well-heeled travelers in route on the Ocean Highway U. S. 17 would plan their lunch for the Green Door. Mrs. Waldrop lived in the Joseph Rhem House, 701 Broad Street; the practice for many of the other cafe owners was to reside over their business quarters.

At this time George Street ran through the past and future grounds of Tryon Palace. Clapboard houses lined the street, and at its southern end a wooden bridge spanned the Trent River. A restaurant and a lunchroom were at the foot of George Street.

The Gaston Hotel, on the present site of BB&T's main office, served lunch in an atmosphere of faded glory. Gaskins' Soda Shop occupied today's quarters of Dixon's Soda Shop in the Elks Building.

Jack Morton's favorite cafe was the Metropolitan Club, perhaps because of its appeal as a forbidden place. Located in the 300 block of Pollock Street across from Christ Episcopal Church, the

Metropolitan had pool tables, Morton says, and pool was considered a corrupting influence on young boys. A child with a good reputation was not seen coming from or going into this club, he said. "I was 11 in 1937 and I would slip in, eat a sandwich and shoot some nine ball." Money was exchanged across the green felt after a game, Morton says, and upstairs a poker game was usually in progress, he added. Like a poolroom from a magazine cartoon of the same period, the Metropolitan had an operating stock market ticker tape machine.

One of my favorite lines from the author Thomas Wolfe is "Only the dead know Brooklyn". By that Wolfe means that life is so rich in detail and discovery that a lifetime is too short to experience all of it. I have this feeling when exploring the architectural details of New Bern. Peter Sandbeck's book THE ARCHITECTURE OF NEW BERN AND CRAVEN COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA, serves as a guide for many of these tours. Stanly Hall is richly documented by Sandbeck. When Mike Shapou came to New Bern, he eventually settled in this building at the corner of Craven and Pollock Streets. Agnes (Aggie) Shapou Derda, Mike's daughter, relates the journey. From Beirut, Lebanon, Mike entered the United States at Ellis Island. After a stay in Boston he came to eastern North Carolina like many other Lebanese immigrants.

Mike's first cafe was in the storefront of a clothing factory on Queen Street, directly across Pasteur Street from the train depot. The Great Fire of 1922 burned him out at this location, and in 1928 Shapou moved into 43 (now 305) Pollock, three doors west of the intersection of Craven Street. In a floor space of approximately 75 feet by 25 feet Shapou installed one long counter and about 10 tables. Close to 70 people could be seated at once.

Built in 1874, according to Sandbeck, Stanly Hall is L-shaped with fronts on Craven as well as on Pollock. A large meeting hall occupied the entire second floor, and at various times the upstairs was used for prizefights, dances, and political gatherings.

The building wraps two sides of another building on the corner. Shapou had moved into a community center where the ceiling in the upstairs meeting room was high enough to play basketball. Shapou's landlord was John Haywood Jones. The Shapous lived in a frame house on South Front Street, now Tryon Palace Drive, east of the Harvey House. They had moved to new living quarters just prior to the Depression.

The great crash occurred in 1929 about a year after Shapou had moved the cafe. I tend to personify economic abstractions, thinking everyone in the country was idled for a 12-year period until World War II brought recovery. Too many glances at Kathe Kollwitz's print MOURNING MAN, I suppose, which shows an unemployed German, hat in hand and shoulders bowed. I gather from interviews that things were not as bad in agricultural areas like eastern North Carolina as they were in industrialized regions, although that does not minimize the suffering here.

Wyatt Holton, who operated a grocery store in Bridgeton during the 1930's, tells the story of an unemployed man who came to his door begging for food. Holton gave him a loaf of bread. The man said there was quite a difference in people, that a cafe had refused him food, telling him, "We don't feed lazy bums". According to Holton the man maintained his dignity as he left. When Holton glanced out to see him turn a corner, he realized the man had torn into the loaf of bread like a ravenous dog.

Aggie Derda remembers her mother Genevieve feeding poor blacks in the kitchen of her home. Quite often there would be two or three people at the table when she came down for breakfast, she says.

What they could not make or grow the surrounding residents came to New Bern to get. A photo in John Green's A NEW BERN ALBUM shows the Copland Furniture Store on Middle Street. A sale day, the street is crowded with Model A's and farmers in blue bib overalls. Mrs. Derda still runs

into some of these people who would stop for a sandwich on Saturdays. The Depression's haunting legacy perhaps is not only what happened but what might have been. Nat Dixon, valedictorian of New Bern High School, class of 1930, remembers the sad day his father told him he couldn't afford to send him to college.

White students in New Bern from first grade through high school attended school in buildings on the Academy grounds, an area bordered by Hancock, New, and Johnson Streets. Blondie Weatherington, who knew Mike Shapou and other members of his family, said that while the junior high school had its own cafeteria, high school students were on their own. Many of these walked about six blocks to Mike's for lunch. Mike would prepare a stack of hamburgers ahead of time, Mrs. Derda said, and be prepared for the rush. In the afternoon many of these students returned to play basketball overhead. She remembers the sounds of bouncing balls above. Her working hours were from 6:00 to 8:30 a. m. at which time she would leave for St. Paul's School, then in the Ernest C. Armstrong House on New Street. After school she worked until closing time. Mike's served three meals a day.

Hot dogs and hamburgers were the standard fare. In the early 1930's many items cost a nickel--hamburgers, hot dogs, Pepsis, and, one of Shapou's specials, lemonade. Morton claims the bread content of the hamburgers in some lunchrooms was as good a business index as any other, but what he remembers at Mike's is the aroma of chili slowly simmering on a back burner. Unlike other chili it was based on ketchup and mustard with plenty of onions, Mrs. Derda said. Hot dogs and sometimes hamburgers were smothered in it. Another smell was the sweet, strong aroma of coffee and fresh roast pork. Mike also served sausage, ham, and ham and cheese sandwiches.

Daily customers at Mike's included bank employees and employees of Owen G. Dunn, a nearby printing company. Other "regulars" worked for THE

SUN-JOURNAL, then next door to Mike's on Pollock Street. Kennedy and William Ward, Billy Benners, and Charlie Barker, all longtime New Bernians, were newsboys for THE SUN-JOURNAL and would eat at Mike's while waiting for the papers to come out. Ray Sumrell, who worked in the mailroom of the NEW BERN TRIBUNE (a morning newspaper) on Craven Street, was an afternoon "regular" in the late 1930's.

Looming over the cafe was Mike himself, a man for whom family was very important. Mrs. Derda remembers being wrapped in the unconditional love of her father. "You think you have wealth," she quotes her father telling his banking customers, "but I have something more important," and he would hug his daughters. "I have good children." Mrs. Derda's sister Laurice also worked in the cafe.

A devout Catholic and a regular reader of Kahlil Gibran, Mike never learned to write English. Cafes at the time paid a local tax based on their inventories, according to Ronald Antry, Craven County Tax Administrator. When the tax assessors came by, they were presented a set of books in Arabic. They would shrug and take Mike's word for the total, Mrs. Derda said.

In these post-Vietnam War days, it is hard to appreciate the patriotism of the 1930's and especially that of the willing travelers to America. Mike named his son Theodore Roosevelt Shapou. Teddy, as he was called, became a war hero with Chenault's Flying Tigers. A portrait of Teddy was auctioned for $10,000 in war bonds during the conflict according to an article in the Raleigh NEWS AND OBSERVER by J. Gaskill McDaniel of New Bern.

Mike was a baseball fan and would close the cafe to attend important games played by the Class D New Bern Bears at Kafer Park. The Bears were members of the Coastal Plains League. Aggie married Cletus (Red) Derda, one of the pitchers. Signed to the Cleveland Indians, Derda later played for the Triple A Atlanta Crackers. "Cletus said I took the hop out of his fastball," Mrs. Derda said

smiling.

Shapou moved around the corner, after his daughters married, into quarters which are now Fred & Claire's Restaurant. His son-in-law John Zaytoun, Sr., ran the cafe for a while after Mike's death.

All of the cafes in New Bern during the 1930's were segregated, and it would be hard to find many blacks, except employees, with memories of the cafes mentioned in this article. Black businesses and cafes were located in a commercial district on Broad Street west of Five Points. Segregation, the unmentioned fact in the Andy Hardy movies, was an accepted state, in cafes along with separate schools, seats at the rear of public transportation, and small, unkept waiting sections in bus stations.

Department stores were open to all, according to Earl Murphy, president of New Bern's Habitat for Humanity affiliate, but signs reading "White Only" and "Colored" marked public toilets, water fountains, and seating at the rear of buses and trolleys. The white metal signs used on doors were about two by eight inches with black letters and a black beaded edge. Having traveled with my parents in the South during the 1950's, I remember the signs. Like an American caste system they stamped some as inferior, Murphy said, "and to this day the effects linger". Murphy remembers demonstrations while a student between 1954 and 1958 in Greensboro at North Carolina A&T College, a school chartered in 1891 for the education of blacks. The demonstrations led to the famous sit-ins at Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro during February 1960. The signs were soon part of American history, a casualty of black assertion.

People who knew Mike Shapou miss him and the cafe he ran. His daughter Mrs. Idell Shapou Zaytoun remembers his lessons in honesty and fair dealings. Quiet himself, he taught his children to express themselves with as few words as possible, she said. Her favorite sandwich was fresh roast pork, thin tomatoes, and lettuce.

That chili which Jack Morton remembers, by the

way, contained more than onions, mustard, and ketchup. Mike's added ingredients made it special, Mrs. Zaytoun said. She knows the recipe. Mike's secret is safe with her.

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". . . A POLITICAL GENERAL"
The Defender of New Bern

Jim Gunn

On the eve of the battle of Antietam, Virginia, September 17, 1862, a small group of Confederate officers stood in the open on the battlefield at the conclusion of the Sharpsburg engagement. They either neglected or forgot to take the elementary precautions that young soldiers learn on the first day of training: keep your head down on the battlefield! As they surveyed Union positions through binoculars, a blue-clad sharpshooter drew the central figure into his rifle sights and carefully fired. In a split second Major General Lawrence O'Bryan Branch fell into the arms of his aide Major Joseph Adolphus Engelhard. A single unerring bullet had passed through the head of one of the South's most promising military and potential political leaders. Death was practically instantaneous. The brilliant promise he showed in so many ways would never be fulfilled.

The life so abruptly ended began in 1820 at Enfield, North Carolina. The Branch family with large land holdings had been firmly established in Halifax County prior to the War of Independence. Young Lawrence spent his early years in Tennessee, where his father and other immediate family moved after the death of his mother Susan O'Bryan Branch in 1822. After the death of his father Joseph, Lawrence was taken into the care of his uncle in 1827 and returned to Halifax County, North Carolina. John Branch, the wealthy plantation owner and politician, was quite willing and able to play foster father to the bright seven-year-old.

Uncle John was United States Senator in 1827 and residing in Washington when he assumed the care

of Lawrence. A law graduate of the University of North Carolina in 1801, John never entered practice. A contemporary biographer gave this somewhat amusing commentary on his lifestyle:

> Inheriting an ample estate, he lived for many years upon his plantations, and employed himself in superintending their culture. He was a man of respectable talents, good presence, and high social position.

A later biographer added, "A leader in society, his dinners and entertainments were famous". As a youngster Lawrence was able to make the acquaintance of prominent men among the politicians, plantation owners, and businessmen entertained in the nation's capital and Enfield plantations.

In 1829 John Branch accepted the call of President Andrew Jackson to take a Cabinet post as Secretary of the Navy. Continuing to live in Washington, the family saw that Lawrence studied under the best tutors. Later he was sent to study at Bingham Military Academy in North Carolina. In 1834 his uncle was appointed Governor of the Florida Territory. Lawrence briefly attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill until he entered Princeton, graduating with distinction in 1838.

The ambitious and hardworking young man began his business career as a newspaper editor in Tennessee and simultaneously undertook the study of law. After a short time he rejoined the Branch family in Florida, continuing to study law. In 1840 Lawrence gained admission to the Florida Bar by special act of the legislature; he had not yet reached the required age of 21 years.

A year later Florida was immersed in the Seminole Wars, and young Branch took the post of aide to General Robert R. Reid. He received two land warrants as a reward for a brief period of service and returned to his law career. He remained in Florida, however it seems his heart never left North Carolina, and in 1844 he married Nancy

Haywood Blount, daughter of General William Blount of Raleigh. In 1848 Lawrence, Nancy, and their young son came "home" to Raleigh. He continued to practice law and, with excellent connections through his own and his wife's families, easily moved into business, government, and political circles. In 1850 Governor Manly appointed him to the State Literary Board, his first "political" position.

Railroad fever ran high in the mid-nineteenth century, and those who sought lucrative franchises flocked to the offices of lawyers and government officials. Lawrence Branch, being well qualified in both respects, found many clients, and by 1852 he was President of the Raleigh and Gaston Railroad. Four years after returning to his native state the ambitious and capable young lawyer had extended his interests into the business world. From 1852, however, politics assumed increasing importance, and in 1855 Democrats of the Metropolitan [Raleigh] District nominated him to the U. S. Congress. Branch accepted with great reluctance, since it meant relinquishing business connections, including the railroad presidency.

Winning the election against severe opposition, he was a popular incumbent and agreed to be a candidate again, winning in 1857 and repeating in 1859. As a southern Democrat he continually advocated southern causes but always cautioned his fellow southerners, both inside and outside of Congress, against extreme positions. A principal issue, that of slavery, centered on the new states being carved from western territories. The debate attracted his attention, and he served on the House Committee on Territories. He urged Congress to allow each of the new states freedom to make their own choice on the question. In addition to speaking forcefully on the slavery question in the House, he also expressed his concern on other subjects, such as finances, lowering of tariffs, the acquisition of Cuba, and distribution of funds from the sale of public lands in the territories.

Branch gained admiration and respect among

MAJ. GEN. LAWRENCE O'BRYAN BRANCH (1820-1862)
Photo from Hughes.

members of Congress, and despite some differences he consistently supported the policies of President Buchanan. The President's high regard for Branch culminated in the offer of a Cabinet post, that of Postmaster-General in 1860. Declining this post, he received yet another offer, Secretary of the Treasury, and again declined.

The slavery issue was a constant source of north-south friction, and the United States Congress in which Branch played a part had, in the opinion of southern states, interfered in the matter. When no final resolution of the controversy seemed likely, talk of secession became the rage of Washington, and as time progressed a split in the country became inevitable. Dark clouds of war loomed on the horizon. In March of 1861 Branch returned to Raleigh and, once back in his native state, declared himself an advocate of North Carolina's seceding from the Union.

On April 12, 1861, Fort Sumter fell to Confederate forces, and the four-year conflict of incredible proportions began. Governor Ellis called the North Carolina legislature into session on May 1 and confiscated in the name of the state all Federal property. President Lincoln instituted a number of warlike actions. Among these was a decree blockading southern coastal ports in an attempt to put a noose around the lifelines of "the South". In an emotional response volunteers rushed to the flag both in the north and south. Regiments were quickly mustered, and Lawrence Branch joined the "Raleigh Rifles" as a private soldier.

Little could be accomplished by these volunteers; arms, uniforms, food, barracks, and a host of other items essential to a military machine were needed before either side could mount a fully effective fighting force. Competent men of Branch's stature and experience could not be wasted in service as private soldiers. Governor Ellis plucked him from the "Rifles", and he became State Quartermaster General on May 20. The conflict was just over a month old, and the following months saw a

frantic scramble for goods and services of every kind. Branch was in the thick of the rush to procure material, but once the wheels of the supply machine had been set in order, he declared himself ready for action in the field and resigned. In September 1861 he was commissioned Colonel of the 33rd North Carolina Regiment.

As the conflict progressed, Confederate forces suffered a shortage of general officers, and on January 17, 1862, the Governor made Branch a Brigadier General and gave him command of the Pamlico Military District. At the same time, Union forces under General Ambrose Burnside began their Carolina coastal campaign by sailing through Hatteras inlet into Pamlico Sound and capturing Roanoke Island. In March a large Union force embarked on a fleet of ships at Roanoke and made ready to proceed against the important port of New Bern.

Once he had arrived on site, Brigadier Branch could not have been pleased with the unfinished state of the hastily constructed earthworks east of New Bern along the Neuse River. Of equal concern had to be the inexperienced troops to man the forts, and that there were far too few of them! On the river inadequately armed patrol boats cruised to protect against Union vessels, but river defenses mainly relied on a limited number of underwater explosive charges to deter the invaders. Any major improvements to these arrangements were limited by a shortage of labor and equipment, leaving Branch and the defenders under his command in an almost sacrificial position. Time too was not on their side.

After a notable feat of amphibious transportation some 10,000 Union invaders landed on the banks of the Neuse a few miles east of New Bern on March 13, 1862. The battle for New Bern was joined on March 14. Branch and his 4000 defenders quickly became aware of their almost hopeless task. Early in the engagement Union troops broke through the lines at a lightly defended point along the New Bern to Beaufort rail line, near a brickyard. Once this

weak point had been breached, Burnside's men pressed their advantage, and the defenders fled rapidly. After the bulk of the Confederates retreated and crossed the Trent River into New Bern, the bridge was torched, and evacuation to Kinston began. There some 300 or more disorganized men, including their Brigadier, reassembled and lived to fight again at another time and place.

The Battle of New Bern was not a glorious day in the annals of Confederate arms, but given the inadequate resources at his command, Brigadier Branch had little chance for a victory. His performance received grudging appreciation from observers, who said that ". . . he did as well as could be expected from a political General".

Far from being relegated to the sidelines because of the poor results at New Bern, Branch was handed the command of a North Carolina brigade comprising five regiments. Once assembled they were ordered to join Stonewall Jackson, and the new brigade traveled by rail and foot to reach Jackson, then campaigning in the Shenandoah Valley. Assigned to General A. P. Hill's division, they saw action even before linking up with Hill. Engaged by a much larger Union force at the Slash Church, Hanover Court House, Virginia, they were victorious, chasing the enemy from the field. General Robert E. Lee was impressed with the action and wrote a glowing letter of commendation to Branch, and his reputation as a capable military leader was established.

During the six months of warm weather in 1862 Branch and his North Carolinians saw frequent action. Confederate arms seemed to be in the ascendant at places so well-known in Civil War annals: Cedar Run, Second Manassas, Fairfax Courthouse, and Harper's Ferry. Branch's brigade was in the thick of the action, and it is claimed that during this period, Branch and his men engaged in 15 pitched battles and numerous skirmishes. Reputedly they were in some type of engagement every 12 days. Most of them must have been on the point of

exhaustion, including the 42-year-old Brigadier. Could exhaustion explain in some small way the lack of prudence shown by Branch and his fellow officers that September day on the fatal field of Sharpsburg?

Undoubtedly Lawrence O'Bryan Branch had the attributes of a future leader in North Carolina, probably throughout the South, and even nationwide. His fate, like so many others in a war which no one wanted and yet fought so desperately, left gaps in the fulfillment of postwar return to one nation.

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A PALACE OF ENTERTAINMENT: NEW BERN'S ATHENS THEATRE

Mary Osborne Conover

On the evening of April 12, 1911, the Athens Theatre opened in New Bern.

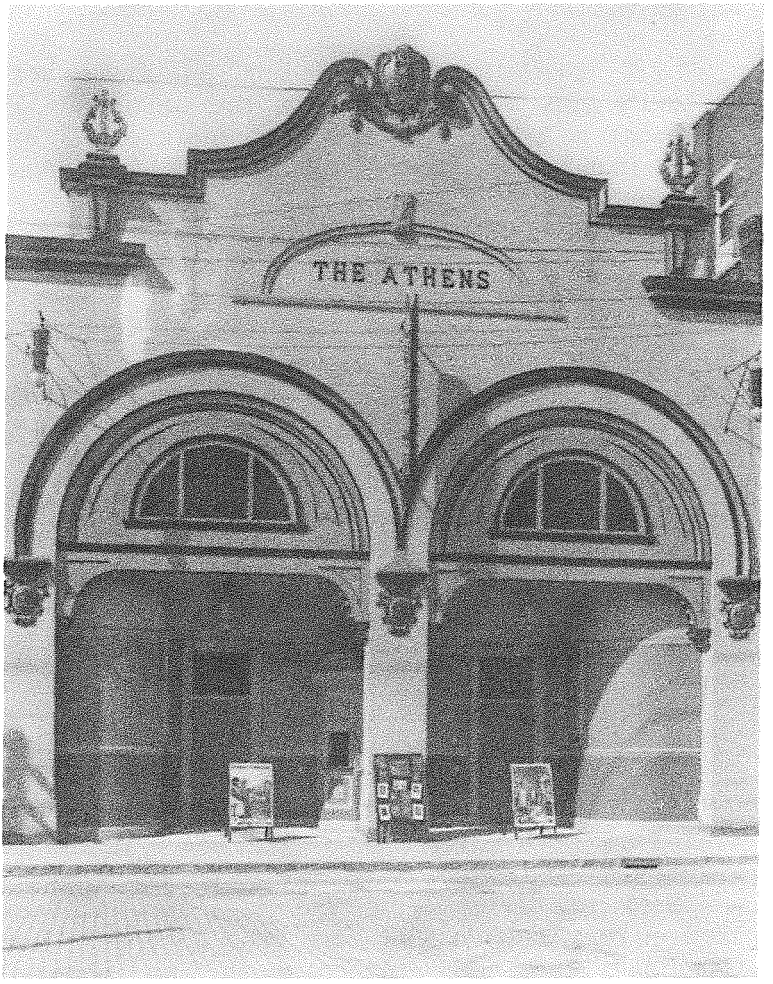
Termed "a magnificent palace of entertainment" by the NEW BERN WEEKLY JOURNAL, the theater designed by local architect Herbert Woodley Simpson was one of the finest in the South, finished "in the highest degree of beauty and perfection" both inside and out.

Lighted by two brilliant arc lamps of 4000 candlepower each, the facade was of yellow brick "with much decorative work", and on it an electric sign spelled out the name of the new playhouse in red lights.

In the arched foyer a multicolor crystal chandelier hung above a green mosaic tile floor with the masks of comedy and tragedy in its design. The attractive interior--"seen to have a skein of color in green" reported the Weekly Journal--boasted richly gilded boxes, plush velvet draperies, and leather and mahogany chairs.

Designed to accommodate traveling theater troupes, live local productions, vaudeville and minstrel shows, concerts and silent movies, the Athens could seat 700 people, 200 of them in the balcony. Its 41-foot by 26-foot stage had a brick extension at the rear in which were six dressing rooms and a property room.

A scene of the chariot race from BEN HUR graced the drop curtain furnished by a firm in Kansas City along with scenery described as "all very elaborate" by the Journal reporter who covered the theater's every technical aspect in considerable



THE ATHENS THEATRE, CIRCA 1915
N. C. Division of Archives and History photo.

detail.

"The ventilation has been especially attended to," he wrote,

> by 8 ventilators in the ceiling, and there are 9 exits plus a fire escape in the balcony. The house is heated by steam and there are 2 lines of fire hose ready for use, and gas as an auxiliary light.

He lauded the lighting, the "mammoth switchboard and latest improved dimmers" for the stage, the screen for moving picture shows "flanked by scenery aids to the realistic effects of the pictures" and the "2 Edison latest improved machines without side shutters, making the pictures flickerless and harmless to the eye".

After mentioning a daily matinee at 3:30, and 5¢-10¢-15¢ as the price of admission, the reporter concluded his rave preview with a promise that "opening night will attract a large audience anxious to be present on this occasion".

Unfortunately we have no review of the opening event, nor do we even know what it was. We do know that "New Bern's grand theatre of the early 20th century" housed one form of entertainment or another for several decades. Closed finally in 1979, the building was in a serious state of deterioration when New Bern Civic Theatre purchased it the following year and began to restore it.

Said to derive from the fact an anonymous admirer once dubbed New Bern "The Athens of North Carolina", the name Athens was apt when the theater opened, and NBCT members are hopeful it will be again.

Meanwhile, much has happened to dim its luster, commencing with the demise of vaudeville and the replacement of silent movies by talkies.

NBCT revived one such silent in February 1990 as a Valentine program to benefit the non-profit community theater group's continuing labor of love. Billed an "unmasking" to help restore the facade, the

SAAX BRADBURY PLAYHOUSE, 1981
NBCT photo.

silent PHANTOM OF THE OPERA (1925) starring Lon Chaney, Sr., and Mary Philbin was accompanied by live organ music as it was originally and supplemented by performance of hits from the current Andrew Lloyd Webber score.

PHANTOM and THE FOUR HORSEMEN and other of the popular silents came not with music but with cues indicating how many minutes to play slow, fast, loud, soft, dramatic, or romantic music. Some pieces the local accompanist selected; others he or she improvised according to the image on-screen.

In 1929 the Athens underwent major renovation to accommodate talking pictures and new laws by which they were governed and to attract a public suffering from the depression and in need of escape.

The ornate boxes were removed; the balcony staircase was relocated; a metal-lined projection booth was constructed; the crystal chandeliers were sold and replaced by modern electric light fixtures. Eventually a cinema-style marquee was added, and the theater's graceful brick arches were disguised by a stucco Art Deco facade.

Remodeled several times through the years, the Athens has undergone name changes too. It was the Show Shop, the Kehoe Theatre, the Tryon Theatre, and it is now known as Saax Bradbury Playhouse for reasons made known below.

In 1979 a shopping mall opened on the outskirts of New Bern, siphoning attention and activity from a languishing downtown. Even before then the Tryon Theatre had switched from family entertainment to mostly adult movies, and lessees who owned the equipment took it with them when they moved out.

Vacant and deserted, the building remained so until Sara Bradbury bought an option to purchase and offered to donate that sum towards its purchase by NBCT.

Should the offer be accepted? Could the group raise $30,000 to buy the building, equip it with seating, heating and air conditioning, install proper lighting, rebuild the stage, paint, clean, and make necessary repairs?

SAAX BRADBURY PLAYHOUSE, 1992
Photo by Conway.

On February 28, 1980, NBCT did purchase the building with monies from a fund drive and grants from the Kellenberger and Weyerhaeuser Foundations and named it Saax Bradbury Playhouse in honor of Mrs. Bradbury's daughter, a former NBCT member and professional actress who had died in a plane crash in 1976.

NBCT members and U. S. Marine Corps volunteers spent many arduous hours cleaning and painting the interior, repairing and installing seats financed by another fund drive. The stage was rebuilt. Restrooms were remodeled, walls patched, and other improvements made to comply with sundry codes.

In September 1980 NBCT presented its first live production in the organization's new home: The patriotic comedy by Neil Simon, STAR SPANGLED GIRL.

Since then NBCT has presented live productions one after another, as many as a half-dozen a year, among them THE SOUND OF MUSIC, ONCE UPON A MATTRESS, SHOWBOAT, ANNIE, JOSEPH AND THE AMAZING TECHNICOLOR DREAMCOAT, SWEET CHARITY, STEEL MAGNOLIAS, A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM, BABES IN TOYLAND, and this year CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF.

Much time and money has been spent in the past decade to repair and restore the Athens Theatre: to replace a major support beam, to open the flyloft, to put in new heating and air conditioning systems, to reinstall upstairs windows which had been boarded up, and to remove the stucco obscuring the facade. The Athens Cafe building next door was purchased to be used as dressing rooms and rehearsal and storage space.

Much work remains to be done, and it is the plan of the present NBCT Board of Directors to apply for grant monies to remodel the lobby, improve restroom facilities, install comfortable seating, restore the exterior, and otherwise make the Athens once again the "gem of a play house" it was.

As we lack programs of early Athens Theatre attractions, we also lack menus from its neighbor the Athens Cafe. Entries in CITY OF NEW BERN (1914) merely hint at the bill of fare of both playhouse and cafe.

> THE ATHENS CAFE.--Raftelis Brothers, Proprietors. This cafe occupies a most central location, convenient for the local as well as for the traveling public, at 80 Pollock Street, next to the Elks Temple and Athens Theater. The office has Phone No. 453. Mr. Theo G. Johnson is the manager of the place and is a gentleman of large experience. The Athens Cafe is beautifully fitted up throughout and enjoys the reputation of being one of the finest places of its kind in Eastern North Carolina. The bill of fare contains everything in season and all foods are delightfully prepared and served. This establishment is high class in every sense of the word, and the Raftelis Brothers deserve credit for giving to the city such an ideal and modern place of the kind. While the foods are the purest and best and service strictly high class, the prices are altogether reasonable. This is a good place at which to make your headquarters when in the city. A specialty is made of the family trade.
>
> THE ATHENS THEATER [82 Pollock Street].--Moving pictures and Vaudeville, H. J. Lovick and L. J. Taylor, Proprietors and Managers. Both in the matter of instruction and amusement, the modern theater is one of the most popular institutions in the world, and this is true of the Athens Theater. New Bern has one of the best appointed play houses in the Carolinas, and ever since it was opened, three years ago, it has been the resort of the best class of pleasure-loving

people of the city. The place is conducted along the most progressive lines. In the building, furnishing, decorating and equipment, no expense was spared; the sole idea of the builder was in view of giving to New Bern a theater that would compare favorably with any play house in the country, no matter where located. Others might be larger, but none better. The Athens is a perfect gem of a play house, cooled in summer by breezes from a score of electric fans. It is an ideal place to spend an hour or so of rest and recreation. Messrs. Lovick and Taylor are also lessees and managers of the New Masonic Opera House, booking legitimate attractions.

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HISTORICAL PROFILE: JOHN LAWSON

Charlotte and Jack Breytspraak

Editor's note: The following article was originally published in the NEWSLETTER of the New Bern Historical Society, July-August 1987.

We were driving along Trent Boulevard on the way into town and had just crossed over Route 70 when, on a whim and exercising our curiosity about places we had never seen, we turned into Lawson Creek Park. The day was pleasant, warm and sunny. As we drove through the lush growth of the park on this quiet afternoon, we were taken with the beauty and tranquillity of the place. After a while the scenery changed from trees, bushes, and marsh grass to a sweeping view of the Trent River sparkling in the afternoon sun. This view was marred by bridges, piers, and other contributions of our modern society whose irreverent appearance on the scene led us to speculate about what this area might have looked like before these questionable improvements and, more interestingly, about the man who had originally selected the site which now bears his name.

John Lawson was one of the earliest Europeans to inhabit the area. There is little more than speculation about his birth date and origins. It is known that he was a well educated English gentleman, wealthy enough to travel and see the world. In 1700 he was in Rome attending the Pope's Jubilee. While there, in Lawson's own words, he "met a Gentleman" who talked of adventure in the New World and "fired" his imagination. "He assured me that Carolina was the best country I could go to."

In May of 1700 Lawson left England for Charles Town (present Charleston, S. C.). While there the

Lords Proprietors commissioned him to survey the interior of Carolina. Lawson undertook this commission, leaving Charles Town on December 28, 1700, with another Englishman and three Indian guides, one of whom was accompanied by his wife. By February 1, 1701, his trip had taken him to the "Pamlicough" River near what is now Washington, N. C. Lawson spent the next eight years surveying as deputy to the Surveyor General.

It is unclear when he actually settled in the area of the Neuse and Trent Rivers, however in 1705 there are colonial records to the effect that there was a white settler at the confluence of the two rivers. In Lawson's own words

> On 640 acres of land . . . I built a house where I dwelt by myself excepting a young Indian Fellow and a Bull-Dog that I had along with me."

His cabin "stood on pretty high land and by a Creekside". At this time about 20 families of Neusioc Indians (a tribe within the Tuscarora Nation) lived at the point where the Neuse and Trent Rivers join. Their village was named Chattooka.

In January of 1709 John Lawson left North Carolina for London to publish the journal he had kept during his years in the colony. This work, entitled LAWSON'S HISTORY OF NORTH CAROLINA, is the first published history of North Carolina and covers not only Lawson's experiences in the area but also much information on the Indians, their customs and way of life as well as substantial information on the flora and fauna of the area.

While in London Lawson was asked by the Lords Proprietors to assist a "Swiss Adventurer" (Baron deGraffenried) in settling a group of Palatines in North Carolina. It was through this connection that Lawson became part of the founding of New Bern.

Lawson returned to North Carolina early in 1710; deGraffenried arrived in September of that year. Through Lawson the deGraffenried group

acquired 1250 acres "on the fork of the Neuse". In his responsibility as surveyor, Lawson laid out the town along lines dictated by deGraffenried.

In 1711 Lawson and deGraffenried set out on a voyage of exploration aimed at locating a route to Virginia. In his chronicle deGraffenried writes that Lawson believed there was no danger in this expedition. This was assuredly not the case as their departure came only a few days before the beginning of one of the worst Indian wars of the period, the Tuscarora War. The group was taken prisoner in the Indian town of Catechna (site now located in Pitt County). There ensued lengthy negotiations between captives and captors resulting in the release of Baron deGraffenried and the execution of Lawson. How this result obtained is mysterious, as Lawson was on good terms with the Indians. Any account Lawson may have kept disappeared with him; and we are left only with deGraffenried's account of the episode, which may have been self-serving.

And so ended the short but adventurous life of one of New Bern's architects, North Carolina's first historian, and the first owner of the area now known as Lawson Creek Park.

NEW BERN IN THE LAND OF COTTON

Frederick L. Sloatman

The early morning sun reflected in my rearview mirror as I drove away from New Bern and headed west. It was the third week of September 1991, and the clear sky promised a good day for traveling. As I rode through the rural areas of Craven and Lenoir Counties, a heartwarming sight greeted my eyes. Field after field of white upland cotton, glistening like wet sticky snow, was announcing that it was time for harvest. At last, after an absence of almost 10 years, cotton had returned to eastern North Carolina. This ever important crop had been destroyed by the boll weevil in the 1970's. Then, thanks to science and the efforts of the U. S. Department of Agriculture, new insecticides and the synthesized pheromones were introduced. A program was set up with the cooperation of the farmers, and today the boll weevil has been practically eliminated.

I was driving alone, and the sight of this beautiful landscape prompted me to sing aloud Daniel Emmett's "Dixie".

I wish I was in de land ob cotton,
Old times dar am not forgotten,
Look away! Look away! Look away!
Dixie Land.

During colonial times cotton was not considered a profitable crop. The little cotton that was grown on the plantations around New Bern was used for domestic requirements. Growing cotton was hard work, from the planting, cultivating, harvesting, to the tedious task of removing the cotton fibers from the seeds. Cotton was much too time consuming to

bother with. Then in 1793 entered Eli Whitney and his cotton gin. The country's annual production, up to that date, had been around 6,000 bales. With this simple invention which could comb the fibers from the seeds, one man could do what it had taken 50 men to do before. Seven years later at the turn of the century production rose to 100,000 bales a year. The invention literally revolutionized agriculture in the South.

Cotton likes a hot climate, fertile, well-drained soil, and about 180 growing days. New Bern and eastern North Carolina fall within the region known as the Cotton Belt.

The commodity had certain advantages in those early days to qualify as a money crop. It took very little skill to grow; it did not require extensive equipment, and it was suitable for cultivation by slave labor. Other advantages were that the product is nonperishable, suffers little from abuse in handling, and is great in value by weight. The advantages were equal to both large and small growers. Most important, there was a ready market.

Production in North Carolina, in comparison with the other cotton states, lagged until about 1840, then leaped up until 1860. How important the crop was in the immediate New Bern area is difficult to ascertain. We know that the lumber industry and its by-products thrived as well as the fishing industry. For the South in toto, cotton was "King". It is no doubt best that this prospering inland port did not depend on a sole commodity. Cotton growing has always been dependent on hand labor, and the abolition of slavery took away much of the work force. Up until 1930 a farmer worked 270 hours to produce one bale of cotton. Today, thanks to mechanization, from the planting of the seed, fertilization of the soil, cultivation of the crop, to the picking of the cotton, the time has been reduced to 23 man-hours.

We know of the important role the tobacco industry played in putting North Carolina back on its financial feet after the Civil War. In the New Bern area tobacco was the big money crop. Cotton, on

the other hand, should not be belittled. During the era of the steamships, from 1875 up to about 1905, New Bern flourished with commerce. Established steamship lines served this busy inland port, moving freight as well as passengers. The Old Dominion Line made direct trips between New Bern and Norfolk. Ships like the SHENANDOAH, the MANTEO, and the NEW BERN, frequented its docks, laden with goods. In A NEW BERN ALBUM, prepared by John B. Green, III, the steamboat HOWARD is shown at dock at the foot of Craven Street in the year 1900. The deck is loaded with bales of cotton. In another photograph we see the steamer NEUSE, also in port around the year 1910. On the dock one can see over 100 bales of cotton. We do not know if this cotton came from Craven County, but we know it was an important trade commodity for New Bern.

Like all agricultural crops, cotton can be risky to grow. A crop failure can affect the welfare of an entire community. Today we can thank the U. S. Department of Agriculture for its efforts to stabilize falling prices, control overproduction, assist the farmer with loans, and provide him with help to fight blight and plant disease. The cotton grown in the vicinity of New Bern in the future will be equally as important to the welfare of our population as were the cotton crops of the past. For folks like myself who prefer the feel of cotton underwear and shirts, these natural fabrics are now available with a durable press finish. There is a definite trend that cotton will rival synthetics in the future.

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The author wishes to thank Shelba Witherington of the Craven County Agricultural Extension Service for sharing information about cotton growing in this area and the government's assistance program to the local growers.

BOOK REVIEW

BURNSIDE, by William Marvel. (Chapel Hill, N. C., and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991. Endnotes, illustrations, and index. 493 pp. $29.95.)

Over the past 125 years the lives of Civil War generals have been examined, re-examined, dissected, interpreted, condemned, praised, and have not yet been put to rest. The surfeit of books, pamphlets, films, television programs, battlefield displays, museum exhibits, and lectures have provided reviewers like me with a great number of opportunities to outguess authors, curators, and producers. When this biography, yet another, appeared in the Tryon Palace Museum Shop, I had to have a copy. (I too had done a little research and writing about Burnside.)

William Marvel's version of Burnside's life focuses on his military career and gives precious little space to events prior to or after the Civil War. If this concentration was intended, then Marvel has succeeded, but we are given little insight into Burnside's motivations and what ties to friends and family helped shape his personality. His term at West Point was unspectacular, except for the fact that he studied with many of the men who later became leaders on both sides in the Civil War. There were no great honors bestowed at his graduation in 1847. After a brief period of service in the Mexican War, in which he saw no actual combat, and later in combat against Indian tribes in the West Burnside showed no particular military talents. Questions were raised by army auditors concerning his accounts, and in frustration he left the army in 1853 with the rank of first lieutenant.

For the next eight years Burnside pursued a business career without a great deal of success. In fact, he fell deeply into debt after a failed attempt to interest the army in a semiautomatic rifle of his invention. A helping hand was extended by West Point classmate George McClellan, who took him into the railroad business. He then managed to restore his reputation and reestablish his good credit. During this period he dabbled in the local militia units from time to time wherever he was living. He was called by the Governor of Rhode Island, his wife's home state, on the outbreak of the Civil War and was given command of the 1st R. I. Regiment. He moved the regiment to Washington for defense of the capital within a few days and impressed the War Department with his skill in answering the call of duty so efficiently.

From this point on for the next four horrible years Marvel examines in painstaking detail the triumphs and defeats of a much discussed Union Army general. He does not condemn or condone the actions of Burnside at such controversial battles as Fredericksburg or Petersburg, but attempts to put a realistic perspective on his actions. Nor does the author give unstinting praise to victories which Burnside achieved, such as the amphibious operation to capture New Bern and the victory at Frederick, Maryland. Burnside could, and did, win on the battlefield. The point is made, however, that the mine fields of political Washington were frequently a greater danger than the Southern armies. The author leaves the impression that other more strident and colorful Union generals with greater political clout received more and better equipment, greater quantities of supplies, and more competent subcommanders than Burnside.

Plainly the author is sympathetic to this much maligned general, but his judgments on Burnside's proper place in history are fair. After all he held important commands for almost the entire period of the war and seemed to be called on to rescue failing enterprises on many occasions. By 1865 when the

debacle of the crater at Petersburg placed him in disfavor, he must have been weary of war and lacking in the enthusiasm so vital to a field commander. He never again had the opportunity to redeem himself and was never called upon to do so.

Even though his resignation from the army just before the end of the war came when he was under a cloud of criticism, Burnside was elected Governor of Rhode Island less than a year later. From that time until his death in 1881 he was involved in the politics of that state, serving two terms in Washington as senator. He was still attracted to business and invested in various speculative schemes; none seem to have been outstanding successes. Only 57 years old at his death, he had survived in an era of great challenge and change. He had achieved a greater degree of success than many of his more celebrated military colleagues, despite many attacks on his character and competence. In that sense Ambrose Everett Burnside had the last laugh.

Jim Gunn