

CHAPTER ONE

Rising Tide, 1739–1840

Sunlight glints playfully on the water. A modern tourist standing at the foot of Market Street and gazing out over the Cape Fear River can be forgiven for thinking Wilmington a peaceful, placid place. Time seems to stand still here. The black water flows silently, its surface almost unmoving. Yet deep currents and dangerous eddies lie below, as do snags, sandbars, and other submerged obstacles. In this respect, the river becomes a visual metaphor for the passing of centuries and the city's transformation from colonial seaport to modern metropolis. Filmmaker Ken Burns has made especially good use of such imagery. In the opening sequence to *The Civil War*, the camera flies over a shining band of water, offering a bird's-eye view of a river's path through the landscape, a symbol of the nation's wartime journey of self-discovery. It is an old trope, one that recurs through songs like "Oh, Shenandoah" and novels like *Huckleberry Finn*. And so I apply it to Wilmington's public history: on the surface, the city possesses a tranquil appearance and a timeless quality, but these traits have, in fact, been carefully constructed to hide deeper truths.

A visitor need not walk far along the river park to find evidence of a recent urban renaissance. Signs point one way to Chandler's Wharf and another to the Cotton Exchange, each an assemblage of high-end shops. One vendor offers horse-drawn carriage rides, while another sells riverboat tours. A restaurant called the Pilot House hawks oysters on the half-shell, and Tanyard Parish provides upscale condominiums. The names of these and other current businesses deliberately evoke the city's particular maritime past. You must resist the urge to sentimentalize this place, however. It was as callous as it was picturesque.

Old Wilmington's prosperity rested on chattel slavery and the regular use of brute force. Just a few steps from the modern river walk stood the Market, where white humans bought and sold their manacled brethren of color. Blacks who resisted enslavement experienced beatings, brandings, and physical mutilations that left scars both visible and invisible. Racist violence marked the

landscape, too, in place names, physical monuments, representational architecture, and community rituals that memorialized traumatic events in a triumphant, didactic way. The atmosphere today seems considerably different. But a closer look reveals important continuities: water and blood, commerce and violence. Then as now, the river generates a distinctive way of life.

To understand race, place, and memory in modern Wilmington, we must travel back to the city's beginning. Four of the community's defining characteristics emerged in the colonial period and had coalesced by 1840 to produce a collectively constructed sense of place. Among them are: a kind of geographical, river-based boosterism; deference to a group of elite, founding families; and pride in a localized "Revolutionary" heritage. Flowing beneath, through, over, and around these three qualities was a repressive system of race relations. This fourth trait has never been adequately acknowledged. Even now, the city's long history of white-directed violence against blacks is still too often suppressed, considered aberrant, or blamed on deviants and outsiders. In fact, racist violence was a way of life, a tradition essential to the creation and maintenance of white supremacy. And whiteness, more than anything else, determined whether and how a resident belonged to the civic body.

The historic experiences of black Wilmingtonians, like the violence they endured, also deserve fuller treatment. From the moment African-born men and women arrived here with their white masters, enslaved and free blacks resisted their oppression and asserted their own place-based claims to be members of the community. Their collective efforts to weave race, place, and memory into a positive sense of black civic identity are just as central to the port city's past as white efforts. Though challenged at every turn by their white neighbors, people of color took heart from the river they, too, loved—some called it Pocomoke, an Algonquian name meaning black water. Dark-colored, silently moving day in and day out, black bodies glided through the landscape, working and laughing, fighting and weeping and marking the passage of time.

Establishing "a Province within a Province"

Wilmingtonians have long recognized the centrality of the Cape Fear River to their collective identity. Schoolchildren learn that it originates in the east central portion of the state; that the north and south branches flow down through the piedmont to a juncture called the Forks; and that there is where colonial entrepreneurs platted the future port city. Yet Wilmington was not the first settlement in the region. That distinction goes to Charles Town, occupied from 1664 to 1667 and now an archaeological site. Both communities

had to be built well upstream from the estuary, which was so shallow and had so many shifting channels as to preclude development near the ocean until after the Revolution. In fact, it was the treacherous nature of the headland, littered with shipwrecks as early as 1611, that prompted the sobriquet “Cape of Fear” in the first place.

Human behavior also made the region a fearsome place. A farmers’ uprising called Cary’s Rebellion raged from 1708 to 1711, for example, and a bloody war between settlers and Tuscarora Indians lasted from 1711 to 1713. Along the coast, Blackbeard’s pirates terrorized passing ships from a base near Ocracoke Inlet, and they regularly raided nearby communities on land. Even the region’s “founding fathers” seemed prone to “passion and violence.” Consider planter Maurice Moore: Acclaimed in period accounts as a bloodthirsty “Indian killer,” he gained additional notoriety for a vigilante-style attack on Crown officials. Apparently, Moore suspected Governor Charles Eden and others of collusion with the outlaw Blackbeard, so he led a party of armed men to the home of the colony’s secretary, where official records were kept, threatened the secretary’s family and staff, and seized incriminating evidence. Though Eden escaped charges, several men were convicted and Moore became an instant hero, one later valorized as an early defender of local liberties against tyranny. Eden’s successor, George Burrington, also had a formidable reputation. In one frequently cited case, he tried to kill the colony’s chief justice: “[The Governor] broke the windows & swore he would burn the house; he [said he] would have the dogg her husband by the throat & threatened to fetch a barrel of gunpowder & blow up the house.” Widely circulated, such stories not only functioned as cautionary tales for would-be challengers to local authorities, but they sanctioned the everyday use of violence to assert elite rule.¹

Power in Cape Fear country adhered to a close circle of planters who came from Goose Creek, a rice-growing area just north of Charleston, and established a “province within a province.” Known as the Family, they revolved around Maurice Moore and his brothers, Roger, Nathaniel, and John, whose descent from Sir John Yeamans, one of the original Carolina landgraves, gave them an aristocratic advantage over their neighbors. Initially, the Moores and their in-laws, the Drys, Howes, Rices, and Allens, struggled like everyone else to adapt their slave-based culture to their new environment. The coast was a harsh, windswept place characterized by salt marshes and grasslands. Moving upriver, would-be planters found cypress swamps and vast coniferous forests underlain by sandy, nutrient-poor soils. The semitropical climate also hindered development. At least twenty major hurricanes occurred in the eighteenth century alone. Because of these conditions, most early settlers did not engage in

staple crop agriculture at all. Instead, they directed their enslaved workers to manufacture forest products and naval stores, commodities that distinguished this region from the Carolinas' two other population centers, Albemarle and the Low Country.²

The production of tar, the area's chief export, required a concomitant expansion of slavery. Hundreds of hands scavenged dead branches, roots, and billets cut from fallen trees scattered across miles of terrain. Additional slaves constructed and manned the region's distinctive tar kilns, domed, earthen structures designed to capture molten resin from lightwood smoldering inside. It was dangerous work: to regulate the temperature, the tender had to climb onto the superheated dome to break open and reseal air holes, and he did this multiple times a day for at least a week. These early tar heels, almost exclusively enslaved men living in crude, isolated camps, also boxed pines for turpentine, felled trees for timber, and cut shingles. They comprised the vast majority of the region's black population by the 1730s.³

A much smaller but still significant number of enslaved people produced rice, the region's second major commodity. Until fairly recently, historians of the Carolinas considered rice slaves ignorant field hands who contributed little to colonial prosperity. Yet former tribesmen clearly provided brains as well as brawn. Often taken purposefully from rice-growing areas in West Africa, they designed sophisticated systems of dykes and gates, monitored the cycles of flooding and draining needed to grow the plants, and tended the grains from paddy to plate.⁴ We get a good sense of their daily lot from "An Account of the Cape Fear Country," published in 1731:

These Rice Swamps are flat, low Grounds, by the Sides of Rivers or Runs, generally well cloathed with tall Timber and Canes underneath; some with Trees only, others all Cane; . . . they are hardly ever quite dry, nor ever so wet as to hurt the Rice, unless it be a very wet Time indeed. In clearing these Swamps, they first cut down the Cane, and all the small Underbrush, and gather it in Heaps; then fall the Saplings and great Trees; the Branches of the Trees they generally lop off and burn with the Saplings, but let their Bodies lie and rot, the Logs being little minded because Rice is chiefly managed with the Hoe. They are most of them of a deep black Mould and are something Boggy.⁵

This passage is a telling one. Its author was printer Hugh Meredith, Benjamin Franklin's former business partner, who had relocated to the Cape Fear in 1730. Note how Meredith's use of language shifts: his subject at the outset is clearly "these rice swamps," and he properly switches to the plural pronoun when

noting, “they are hardly ever quite dry.” In the next sentence, “they” references (obliquely) African slaves, those who “cut the Cane,” cleared the swamps, and “managed” the crop with hoes. In the final instance, however, his subject is grammatically ambiguous, reflecting his conflation of the dark, wet men and their black, boggy world. Made by a man for whom words were his stock-in-trade, this slip of the pen not only reveals the slow destruction of the natural landscape, but the humanity of those forced to destroy it.

As historians Marvin L. Michael Kay and Lorin Lee Cary noted, North Carolina masters’ desire for “legal, political, and military dominance over their human chattels,” coupled with their aggressive commercial orientation, led to the regular use of “forceful, coercive, and direct methods of labor management, both co-optative and terroristic, the emphasis varying with time and circumstance.” Whether clearing rice paddies or boxing pine trees, enslaved people suffered cruel punishments when they failed to perform adequately, and they often received a second task as soon as the first one ended. After their daily labor ended, they typically hunted, fished, and gardened in an attempt to raise their meager corn-based diet to subsistence level. A favored slave might receive a pass to take game and produce to market. Yet this favor brought personal risk. The slave code of 1715 gave whites complete authority to “apprehend all such Servants & Slaves as they conceive to be runaways or travel without a Tickett” and offered a reward for each runaway caught. Thus, enslaved people who labored under the task system not only worked in their “free” time, but often ended up captured, tried, and flogged for the privilege.⁶

Water and blood, violence and commerce: from these regional traits emerged yet another important category of black labor, the watermen. Because freeholds were widely dispersed along the creeks and inlets and rivers of the lower Cape Fear region, white settlers relied on these highly skilled slaves to move commodities to and from Brunswick, the port established and controlled by the Moores. Sent downstream with instructions to transact business on their master’s behalf, the black men disposed of whatever they transported and then acquired manufactured goods and supplies in exchange. Such persons greatly facilitated the region’s prosperity, but many black watermen deployed their specialized skills to their own ends. A few managed to become free, wage-earning fishermen or sailors or pilots. Others escaped into the swamps, established hidden “maroon” communities, aided runaways, and consorted with pirates and other maritime outcasts. By the 1730s, white society both revered and feared black watermen, any one of whom might become the instrument of a slave insurrection.⁷