

Federal Point Historic Preservation Society

P.O. Box 623, Carolina Beach, North Carolina 28428

Newsletter

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Darlene Bright, editor

April Meeting

The Federal Point Historic Preservation Society will pay tribute to the Ocean Plaza at its regular monthly meeting on Monday, April 17, 2006, 7:30 PM, at the Federal Point History Center, 1121-A North Lake Park Blvd., adjacent to Carolina Beach Town Hall.

A brief history of the Ocean Plaza building will be followed by oral reports on the building structure and entertainment events at the Ocean Plaza through the years by actual participants.

The program will include some music and a shag dance demonstration.

Members and the general public are invited to attend. Refreshments will be served following the meeting.

Last Month

Journalist, Jean Nance, spoke on her book, "Cinematic Wilmington, Making Movies on the Cape Fear Coast", to more than 36 members and guests at the History Center last month. Ms. Nance shared many "behind the scenes" stories of how the movie industry operates to make their movies in the Wilmington area.

Everyone attending enjoyed her presentation and many participated with their own stories as "extras" on movie sets.

Ms. Nance's book is still available at the History Center Gift Shop. Get your copy while it lasts.

The Ocean Plaza

By Leslie Bright

Eugene and Marie Reynolds, known as Mom and Pop, knew better days were coming as World War II ended in 1945 and the soldiers were coming home. Big bands were the rave of the day and they knew money could be made on the north end of the Boardwalk at Carolina Beach with the building of a large enough facility to house big bands and large crowds.

The Reynolds had purchased four and one-half lots and a bowling alley on the northeast corner of Harper Avenue and Carolina Beach Avenue, North, in August 1942, from L. M. Massey. They decided to remove the bowling alley and make this the footprint for their new Ocean Plaza building. The building would contain a bathhouse and café on the first floor; a large cabaret or ballroom with bandstand area on the second floor; and a small apartment on the third floor.

Work began to build the Ocean Plaza after the beach season of 1945 and continued through the winter and spring of 1946 under the direction of Mr. Shirley, a local contractor.

The heavy foundation was pre-formed and in some areas extended as much as five feet above ground level. Three large piers were incorporated in both sides of the foundation to support floor sills for the second

floor and continued to the roof supporting large quansit style steel trusses for supporting the roof rafters. Two rows of 6" wide cup type cement blocks, made by local blockmaker, Ira Hines, were laid throughout the outer walls. The cement blocks had three concave cups on their top side and three convex cups on their bottom side. Wet portland cement was poured in each cup allowing the next course to literally fall into place or "lay themselves." The art-deco style building contained 5,000 square feet on the first two floors and 1,000 square feet on the third floor on the front. Glass block window lights were incorporated strategically along a rounded front corner of each story and the entrance to the second story ballroom. A four and one-half foot framed awning was constructed between the first and second floor across the front of the building and around to a balcony of the same width on the south side to allow dancers to partake of the ocean breezes.

The quansit style roof was rounded with 2" x 8" rough cut rafters running longways between the iron trusses with tongue and groove pine sheathing covered with built-up felt and tar. A very fine dance floor of clear tongue and groove oak was installed on the ballroom second floor. Interior walls were finished with stucco polished as "slick as glass."

Once completed, the Ocean Plaza was a sight to behold. It became the new "Crown Jewel" of Carolina Beach.

Ocean Plaza was opened for business on May 31, 1946, Memorial Day Weekend. Bill Grassick and his orchestra, featuring lovely singer, Betty McHugh, performed to an audience who paid \$2.00 per person to attend. Even though the big band era was waning, Ocean Plaza remained the center of activity as new trends changed musical entertainment.

The Reynolds sold Ocean Plaza around 1950 and it changed hands several times before May 1961 when E. F. Courie, Sr. and wife, Rosabelle, purchased the property. Through the years, many notable entertainers performed to large crowds at Ocean Plaza. Jerry Lee Lewis, Chubby Checker, Fats Domino, Bo Diddly, and The Embers, to mention a few, attracted audiences from all over. The Jitterbug, bop, shag, rock & roll, twist and every variety of dance imaginable occurred at Ocean Plaza through the years.

With growth and development of better lodging facilities, the need for bathhouses up and down the seaboard diminished. The bathhouse at Ocean Plaza was converted into a night club. During the 80's and 90's, the entire Boardwalk business fell into decline causing neglect to many of the structures. In spite of the decline, Ocean Plaza remained open struggling at times to do so.

The Courie family, including sons, Eli, Jr. and Louis, continued ownership until April, 1993, when Ocean Plaza was sold to Leslie and Darlene Bright, and son, Sam Bright.

The second floor ballroom was renovated and opened again after several years of inactivity as the private club, Wranglers Dance Hall and Saloon, and later as a Shag Club.

The Brights sold Ocean Plaza to Robert Russo on January 31, 2000, and his Club Tropics was installed on the second floor. Mr. Russo operated Ocean Plaza until April 5, 2006, when he sold to Russ Maynard.

Russ Maynard has applied to the Town of Carolina Beach for a demolition permit to make way for a large hotel.

Ocean Plaza has played an important role during the past 60 years, providing a wide variety of entertainment and fond memories. In beach resort terms, it has been a "big draw" in bringing tourists with money to spend.

Ocean Plaza has achieved statewide historical significance through its function as well as its unique architecture, occurring at a period after World War II when all commodities for such structures were scarce.

Some say the Ocean Plaza was the rightful birthplace of the shag!

Support our Business Members!

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Austin & Son Garage, Inc.
BB&T
Bank of America
Britt's Donut Shop
Friends of Brunswick Town
Fort Fisher Restoration Committee
Got-Em-On-Live Bait Club
Hanover Iron Works, Inc.
Historical Society of Topsail Island
Laney Real Estate Company
Dr. Vincent Smith, DDS
Taylor's Heating & Air, Inc.
Tucker Bros. Realty Company

Society Notes

- **Membership Information:** Renewal notices are being sent on the anniversary of your joining the Society. If you have been receiving a newsletter, and we have not heard from you within 90 days of the billing date, your name will be placed in the inactive file and no newsletter will be sent. Thanks to all who have responded promptly! Your support, through membership and participation, is the lifeblood of our organization!

The Membership Committee is looking for a volunteer to help with greeting members and guests at our regular monthly meetings. If you attend our meetings on a semi-regular basis and would be willing to step in for Jeannie when she is not present, please give her a call, 458-7880, or leave a message on the History Center phone, 458-0502.

We welcome new member **Christin Deener** of Carolina Beach.

- **History Center News!** The History Center is open every Friday and Saturday, 10:00 am – 4:00 pm, or other times by appointment. Visitation at the Center was up this month keeping our staff busy answering the many questions, helping with research, and receiving lots of compliments on our fine facility. We should all be so proud of what we have to offer the Federal Point community. Thanks so much to our faithful volunteers and staff: Jeannie Gordon-9 hours; Darlene Bright-18 hours; Leslie Bright-6 hours; DK Dempster-18 hours; Pat Bolander-12 hours; and, Cindy Clark-18 hours. We really need volunteers more than ever as one of our staff, Cindy Clark, has resigned due to a conflict. We really appreciate all the work she did on the files and keeping the doors open. Please let us know if you can spare an hour or two.

- **Saturday, May 6th, 3:30 pm, Fort Fisher State Historic Site –Confederate Memorial Day Services.** In observance of Confederate Memorial Day, there will be a wreath laying ceremony sponsored by Fort Fisher Chapter #2325, United Daughters of the Confederacy, to honor War Between the States heroes of the South. Free Admission. Located at the UDC monument, Hwy. 421, south of Fort Fisher State Historic Site, Battle Acre Road. For more information, contact Ray Flowers at 458-5538.

- **Historic Walking Tour and Picnic.** A walking tour discussion of Civil War entrenchments in Carolina Beach will be led by Leslie Bright and Ray Flowers on May 13th, 10 am – 12 noon. The walking tour will commence and end at the Federal Point History Center, followed by a covered dish luncheon on the grounds. Participants should bring a covered dish and be prepared to walk approximately one (1) mile. Free to all!

- **Cheap Stuff!** Thanks to donations and electronic equipment upgrades that have been made at the Center over the last half year, we find that we are carrying an inventory of extra office equipment that is no longer being used. If you would like any of our out-dated electronics (for parts or otherwise), stop by the History Center on Friday or Saturday, or call Darlene at 458-8684: a Minolta copier (floor model), 286 computer, keyboard, mouse, speakers, and monitor, a Lexmark printer, Brother personal fax machine, Sharp fax machine and an Ethernet router. There is no way to price this equipment; a tax-deductible donation would be appreciated.

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