

Natural History is Second Nature at the N.C. Maritime Museum

BEAUFORT – The N.C. Maritime Museum logo depicts a beautiful old spritsail under full sail, a symbol of the museum's renowned work preserving, restoring and replicating the wonderful wooden boats of bygone days.

It also shows waves slapping the spritsail hull, a subtle reminder that the vessel was designed for the shallow waters it navigated; that in many and profound ways, the coastal environment shaped daily life along these shores.

"You can't talk about the fishermen without talking about the boat he uses and what he fishes for. It's all so intertwined," says public information officer Jane Wolff. Hence, the museum's mission to document, collect, preserve and research the maritime history - and its corollary natural history - of



coastal North Carolina.

The popular state-owned attraction in downtown Beaufort itself was formed by its watery surroundings, and human fascination with them. Officially established in 1975, it got its start a century ago

with some marine bird skins and fishing gear, part of an exhibit for an international fishing exposition.

In about 1904, the items went on display at the federal marine laboratory on Pivers Island, now under the National Atmospheric and Oceanic Administration. Preserved marine specimens used for scientific study were added, as well as fish and plant mounts and models. This nucleus of today's museum was

housed on Pivers Island until the state took custody of the collection in the 1950s.

As they had throughout its history, the marine science community, state and federal agencies and dedicated individuals who wanted a museum in the county kept the collection viable through several moves and administrative changes over the next two decades.

Charles McNeill became the first curator and director in 1975, a defining development for what was then known as the Hampton Marine Museum. A graduate of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, a World War II veteran and a former operations manager for the N.C.

State Port Authority, McNeill broadened the museum's scope to include maritime history.

In 1984, the name was changed to the N.C. Maritime Museum, and the museum was given its own designation under the N.C. Dept. of Agriculture, apart from the N.C. Museum of Natural Sciences, which had overseen it since 1959. A year later, it moved from

rented storefronts in Beaufort to its current 18,000 square-foot, cedar-shingled Front Street quarters. The adjacent Harvey W. Smith Watercraft Center opened in 1992.

The N.C. Maritime Museum, now a division of State History Museums under the N.C. Dept. of Cultural Resources, has expanded to include facilities in Manteo and Southport, and it is growing again. The museum is embarking on two projects that will greatly increase its Beaufort presence - the completion of the watercraft center site, and the development of 36 acres of waterfront property.

Owned by the Friends of the N.C. Maritime Museum, the property known as the Gallants Channel Site is about a mile from the Front Street facilities.

A World of Wonder

While much has changed and more change is on the horizon, the museum remains committed to raising awareness of the nature of the coast.

Visitors, which number 180,000 to 200,000 per year, learn much just by strolling through. Marine life models and exhibits are intermingled with maritime artifacts. The jaws of a great white shark jut above a doorway, surrounded by red drum, cobia, wahoo and other game fish.

A dolphin and a dolphin skeleton are suspended overhead, above other eye-catchers such as a model of a sea turtle carapace. "Discovery Carts," staffed by museum volunteers that are vital to many programs, feature changing assortments of such things as fossils and flotsam. A 5000-piece sea shell collection lines the auditorium walls.

A display of plastic litter found on a barrier island was meant to be temporary. The somber scenario includes photos of seabirds entangled

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JoAnne Powell



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Established: 1975; roots go back to about 1900.

Staff: 21; approximately 125 volunteers.

Visitation: 180,000-200,000 annually.

Mission: The N.C. Maritime Museum documents, collects, preserves and researches the maritime history - and its corollary natural history - of coastal North Carolina for the purpose of interpreting this history through educational services and exhibits for our contemporary society, and passing intact its material culture to future generations.

Accreditation: The N.C. Maritime Museum is accredited by the American Association of Museums, and is a member of the Council of American Maritime Museums.

Departmental Affiliation: The N.C. Maritime Museum is a division of the State History Museums, N.C. Dept. of Cultural Resources.



in plastic soda bottle rings.

"It's been up for years because it generates so much reaction from visitors," Wolff says. "I like to think it's helpful."

Those who want to go further have more than 300 chances a year – collecting cruises, marsh treks, fossil hunts, plant identification hikes, bird watching, shelling, canoeing and kayaking, crabbing and clamming and even foreign ecotours. The museum also hosts 10,000 school children annually on-site and on cruises and field trips, and offers week-long children's summer science schools. It recruits internationally known scientists from the wealth of marine laboratories in the county to speak to groups and help with exhibits.

The Cape Lookout Studies program uses a former Coast Guard station on Cape Lookout National Seashore as a field station. The facilities enable overnight sessions on dolphin and sea turtle behavior and biology, barrier island ecology and photography. Cape Lookout

Studies has since 1985 monitored dolphins that live in the area or migrate through via a photo-ID system, the longest running study of its kind.

The museum was a pioneer in environmental excursions, now common along the nation's coasts. The first education staff members were local science teachers. They had developed marine science and conservation curriculums for their students, rare in that era.

"In the 1970s, that was a new concept," says Wolff, who has been with the museum since 1975. The small staff began leading grown-ups into the marshy domain of periwinkles, mud snails, egrets and fiddler crabs, just as they had students.



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Jane Wolff

"They were being subtly introduced to the fact that these things were important." Wolff says. The trips also included other habitats such as ocean beaches and mud flats.

Education curator JoAnne Powell was one of those former science teachers who joined the museum in its early days. Her

philosophy has always been that the value of the environment is a vital curriculum, and nature is an effective instructor.

"We feel we need to teach people natural history," she says. "And not just open the door, but get people involved in what this area is all about."

Despite its heavy load of educational enterprises, the museum has to date never had a classroom.

"A marsh, a tidal flat, a barrier island - those are our classrooms," Powell says.

The Past and the Future

Classroom space is planned in the completion of

the Harvey W. Smith Watercraft Center site across Front Street from the main building, along with a deck, more docks and boat slips, a museum store and more area for marine life displays. The late Evelyn Chadwick Smith donated the land on which the current 6,000 square-foot boatshop sits, as well as the land for the main building. Named for her husband, the watercraft center houses wooden boatbuilding, boat restoration and model-making programs.

At the Gallants Channel property, the Friends of the N.C. Maritime Museum have invested \$500,000 on site design, land improvement, development and construction of docks and buildings. Currently the museum sponsors public programs, adult and junior sailing programs and rowing programs at the property.

Future plans for the Gallants Channel site include a welcome center, a conference center and lodge, a shipwreck exhibition hall, a museum of recreational and working boating in North Carolina, a turn-of-the-century maritime village, a marine railway and boat workshop with a working foundry and sawmill, and a performance amphitheater.

An environmental learning center, a wildlife preserve and trail system, marsh and wetland habitat exhibits, a marina, docks and boardwalks will highlight natural history. Water taxis and ground shuttles will ferry visitors between Gallants

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David Nateman

Channel and Beaufort, Morehead City and Bogue Banks.

A coming cultural, social and economic boon to the region has accelerated the progress of some development. In two years, the museum will host a gathering of tall ships– the Pepsi Americas' Sail 2006. Trophies for the Americas' Sail competition along the coast of South America will be awarded in Beaufort in July, 2006.



Museum Director David Nateman expects the grand and elegant vessels and related events to attract many visitors.

"We really believe there is something for everyone at the North Carolina Maritime Museum system," he says.

Now in the business of environmental education for almost 30 years, museum staff members are seeing that their programs do have a lasting impact. Children and grandchildren of early participants are walking the same beaches and wading in the same marsh tidal pools on museum field trips, learning the same lessons of conservation.

The museum's guest book reflects its status as a state, national and international attraction. But it also has a legion of local enthusiasts who sign up repeatedly for outdoor adventures. Sara Page and her husband of Smyrna have forayed among the spartina and sea oats on many museum trips.

"We've seen some amazing things," Page says. "We are so much more aware of what's around us."

