

Museum Around the Corner

The Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Skinner Harbor Pilots ©

In an article in the Georgetown Times (date unknown) Ethlyn Missroon filed a story about harbor pilots on Winyah Bay in the early to mid 20th Century. Here are excerpts of that story.

“The several branches of Georgetown’s Skinner family, aside from their harbor piloting relationship with Winyah Bay, have been inextricably involved with its many productive possibilities, having delved into perhaps more of its recreational, sports, and livelihood-making pursuits than almost any other family in Georgetown County. Or in simpler terms, the Skinners have stuck by Winyah Bay. And it has stuck by them; its waters have provided broad areas of activities and employment, valuable hotlines leading directly to their financial well-being over the years, or into areas of personal satisfaction.

And in result, these boatskilled water people have been involved in the pioneering of some areas of Winyah Bay’s development and saluting progress already set.

In addition, they have joined in supporting emergency programs such as assisting the U.S Coast Guard during World War II in building installations along the Georgetown coast.

The Skinners have witnessed the continuing development of Georgetown harbor and its surrounding waters, serving as harbor pilots here as the port emerged from its lumber schooners era into modern-day intercommerce and transportation.

This is undeniable, but it goes further than that; together, the various members of the Skinners, Georgetown County natives since their English forebears who came to Charleston in the 1600s, became Georgetown residents in the 1700s, have harvested the fruits of this most generous body of water...the broad Winyah Bay and its tributaries.

The first Skinner to become proficient in guiding ships into Georgetown, wild weather or not, was the last “Capt. Bill” Skinner, Sr. He began his career with the sea when he found that rice cultivation at the old home place, “True Blue Plantation” on Black River did not suit him and he came into Georgetown. He began by towing sailing schooners for the Atlantic Coast Lumber Company.

Capt. Bill began his piloting enterprise when he was employed by the Waterman Steam Ship Company. He made his trips out to the ships for many years aboard his craft which was the “Lillian Skinner”, named for his wife, the former Miss Lillian Brockington.

His real love and his deepest responsibility was to the ships that trusted him to bring them safely in.

Capt. Wright S. Skinner, Sr. was an apprentice with Capt. Bill and he recalls that once, as he and his Uncle Bill were enroute to guide a ship in...as they approached, Capt. Bill saw that the ship was underway and heading across the jetty...which would have stripped its stomach out. He became so excited that he mounted the pilot house and jumped up and down, frantically waving his jacket until the ship’s captain realized something was wrong.

He hove to and when Capt. Bill got on board, he had to back into open ocean and reenter the channel. It was a close call and Capt. Bill called it a few choice things before he was finished.

Another time, a hurricane had blown the ranges (identification buoys) out of the south jetties over to the other side. Normally they would have indicated a straight channel through which the ship would have to run. Capt. Bill brought a ship in one night, but as he got off, he told Capt. Wright that he'd come in on the wrong side of the buoys...something that puzzled him. Capt. Wright told him that...no, the storm had moved the buoys over to the wrong side...whereupon Capt. Bill, with excellent command of meaningful words averred that...deleted...deleted...deleted...that's the first ...deleted...time I ever did anything wrong that turned out right.

Capt. Wright served out his apprenticeship with such a man, one who knew the bay and channel like the back of his hand, and he was a good instructor.

After World War II, Wright S. Skinner, Jr. joined the Skinner operation and worked with both his dad and uncle for a number of years until the death of the latter. Capt Wright retired in 1972, one of the foremost harbor men of the Georgetown area. He and his wife resided at their home on Winyah Bay.

Capt. Wright, Jr. now works alongside Ingell H. Doyle, Port Customs Officer for Georgetown, also a pilot and it is a most satisfactory life.

A pilot's life is not without its hazards. High seas crash over the 47-foot pilot boat in great rolling combers, and it takes both luck and skill to place the little vessel close enough to see the pilot safely on his way up a dangling "Jacob's ladder", the seas nipping at his heels all the way. On one occasion a call came for someone to come out to remove Wright, Jr. from a ship...the weather was bad and no one was in port to do the job. Capt. Wright, Sr. took old skills out of wraps and with his wife and his sister-in-law, Mrs. Dozier Skinner, put out into the stormy seas. "We couldn't believe our eyes...when we looked over the side and saw my father, my mother and my aunt, all of them over 70, out in that weather, flags still tossing and bobbing lie a cork", a wide-eyed Wright, Jr. confessed.

It must be said that just like old soldiers, old pilots never die...they answer the call "with flags still flying."