

A Home Transformed:

Narratives of Home, Loss, Longing and the Miniature from Portsmouth Island, North Carolina

Stephen Jesse Taylor

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Folklore Program,
Department of American Studies.

Chapel Hill

2009

Approved by:

Bernard L. Herman

Glenn Hinson

Karen Willis Amspacher

Copyright 2009

Stephen Jesse Taylor

All rights reserved

Abstract

Stephen Jesse Taylor, “A Home Transformed: Narratives of Home, Loss, Longing and the Miniature from Portsmouth Island, North Carolina.”

(Under the direction of Bernard L. Herman, Glenn Hinson, and Karen Willis Amspacher.)

A Home Transformed addresses experiential oral narratives of homecoming, loss and longing on Portsmouth, a formerly-inhabited island on the Outer Banks of North Carolina now part of Cape Lookout National Seashore. By comparing such narratives to objects from material culture embodying a desire for the past, the exotic, and the beloved – including the hand-drawn miniature and the photograph – this thesis links material metaphors and spatial understanding with speech. I explore the intersection of memory and present experience in stories embodied in objects and landscapes, drawing on a repertory of examples from gravestones to wooden boats to land itself. Portsmouth (only superficially abandoned) I define as a “home ground,” symbolically cultivated, ornamented and maintained via story. *A Home Transformed* incorporates interviews with several former residents of Portsmouth Island, National Park Service volunteers, and others who have participated in the literal and figurative event of “homecoming.”

Acknowledgements

Too many eloquent men and women have passed under the scythe forever for me to understand completely the ways in which Portsmouth has been reborn over the last few decades. I thank first of all the generations of people who lived on Portsmouth Island, whose presence even I – a stranger to North Carolina – sense somewhere in the blue of distance whenever I sight the island on the horizon.

Throughout the different stages and incarnations of this project, many individuals shared their memories of Portsmouth and gave me their unflagging support. Thanks go first and foremost to the citizens of Carteret County and Ocracoke Island for their boundless hospitality and for repeatedly showing me that the “standoffishness” for which these fishing communities are renowned is a colossal myth. They routinely shared their homes and thoughts with me, at length and on a moment’s notice.

Over the course of several years’ worth of knocking around “Down East” and the Outer Banks, I was virtually adopted by a few individuals, above all by Karen Willis Amspacher in the small town of Marshallberg. Karen graciously agreed to serve on my thesis committee and continually took me under her wing in many moments of academic and culinary distress. She kept the “*spirit* of Portsmouth” alive in this thesis when my academic ramblings threatened to quash it, and was pleased with the final product: for her, it was “the right balance of truth and mystery, kindness and objectivity, folk and lore.” Karen nearly lost her life in a car accident in the course of my writing. In bringing her back into touch with the island way of life she loves so deeply and that she has worked so tirelessly so protect, I hope I have done what I can to sustain her own spirit during her painful

convalescence. In thanks for her support, I can only really do her the honor of quoting a recent e-mail of hers to me: that I love her in ways I cannot explain.

On the coast, thanks go also to many others whose indispensable conversation and encouragement have contributed to this thesis in countless ways. Among them are Pam Morris, Connie Mason, Jimmy Amspacher, Sonny and Jenny Williamson, Chester Lynn, Julian M. Brown, Barbara Garrity-Blake, Ernie and Lynne Foster, Lionel Gilgo, Hazel Gilgo Arthur and Hedrick Arthur, Richard Meissner, Frances Eubanks, and Rudy Austin. The Core Sound Waterfowl Museum & Heritage Center on Harkers Island allowed me liberal use of their archives and fed me on numerous occasions. At UNC-Chapel Hill, thanks go to Bernie Herman, Glenn Hinson, Katherine Roberts, and Bill Ferris for many productive conversations about the nature of the “aesthetics of home.”

Double thanks go to David Cecelski in Durham, North Carolina, for first introducing me to the coast in his American studies seminar at UNC and for branding me “The Englishman from Indiana,” a misunderstanding that led to no small measure of hospitality and humor.

Table of Contents

Preface: <i>A Portsmouth Chapbook</i>	1
Chapter One: <i>Theoretical Background</i>	4
Chapter Two: <i>The Place and the Narratives</i> .	
Portsmouth: A Brief History to the Civil War.....	18
Elastic time: Narratives of Portsmouth from the Civil War to the Great Hurricanes of 1933.....	22
Narratives about Henry and Lizzie Pigott.....	38
Signs of presence and absence: A silhouette in a box.....	49
Bringing back the <i>Annabelle</i>	53
Conclusion: <i>At Home in the Placetime</i>	65
Appendix: Photographs.....	70
Works cited.....	98

Preface: A Portsmouth Chapbook

Light at the blue end of the spectrum does not travel the whole distance from the sun to us. It disperses among the molecules of the air, it scatters in water. Water is colorless, shallow water appears to be the color of whatever lies underneath it, but deep water is full of this scattered light, the purer the water the deeper the blue. The sky is blue for the same reason, but the blue at the horizon, the blue of land that seems to be dissolving into the sky, is a deeper, dreamier, melancholy blue, the blue at the farthest reaches of the places where you see for miles, the blue of distance. This light that does not touch us, does not travel the whole distance, the light that gets lost, gives us the beauty of the world, so much of which is in the color blue.

For many years, I have been moved by the blue at the far edge of what can be seen, that color of horizons, of remote mountain ranges, of anything far away. The color of that distance is the color of an emotion, the color of solitude and of desire, the color of there seen from here, the color of where you are not. And the color of where you can never go. For the blue is not in the place those miles away at the horizon, but in the atmospheric distance between you and the mountains. . .

– Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (2005)

It seemed to me that mama liked going back there. It seemed to me that when she was living on Portsmouth, she wanted to get *here*. Then, after most people were moving away, she wanted to go back. My daddy, oh, he hated it. There was *nothing* on Portsmouth Island that my daddy liked. And from what I understand, from his own saying so, it was the hard life he hated. He was the oldest boy. At fourteen years old, his daddy died. And it was up to him and my uncle Lionel to make a living for the family.

– Hazel Gilgo Arthur, Bettie, N.C. (2009)

Nostalgia is a longing to go back – to homeland, hometown, house, hearth, family. In short, to wax nostalgic is to yearn to return to that faraway, long-ago placetime that is home. For me the curiosity is not that some soldiers, refugees, nursing-home residents and first-year college students suffer from the insomnia, absent-mindedness, loss of appetite, and general wasting away associated with extreme homesickness or home-withdrawal, but that some do not.

– Lisa Knopp, *The Nature of Home: A Lexicon & Essays* (2002)

One thing about 'The Promise' Land. I can see this so clearly, and I think everybody else can, too, but just to verbalize it. When the actual exodus took place, which was spread out over many years, 'The Promise' Land was the places they were moving to. But now all those descendents of those people, when *they* say 'The Promise' Land, they're not thinking about

where they are now. They're thinking about Shackleford. That has become their Promise' Land. There's been a switch of thinking. . . Perceptions of place have flipped. Those places out there have been romanticized a bit. It was *hard living* out there on the islands. But they're always on your mind because you can see them.

– Connie Mason, Harkers Island, N.C. (2009)

I've wandered far away from God / Now I'm coming home;
The paths of sin too long I've trod / Lord I'm coming home;
My soul is sick, my heart is sore / Now I'm coming home;
My strength renew, my hope restore / Lord I'm coming home.
Coming home, coming home / Never more to roam;
Open wide thine arms of love, Lord / I'm coming home.

– Hymn 237, Methodist Hymnal

Chapter One: Theoretical Background

“Only with the help of a magnifying glass will I see my house.”

Christina Marsden Gillis, *Writing on Stone: Scenes from a Maine Island Life*

This thesis examines the transformation of place. Physically, the place can be found on any map of North Carolina, but its physical reality is only one aspect of its existence in the world. That place is Portsmouth Island on the Outer Banks: above all, it is the old lightering port that was built there in the eighteenth century, prospered for a hundred years, then faded into obscurity. In the years since the 1940s, when most of its former inhabitants who are still living left, this site has given rise, in turn, to another place, far more elusive and scattered, not discernible on any topographical map of the earth, yet alive and infinite like mirrors looking into mirrors: the imaginary Portsmouth so central to the hearts and minds of a handful of generations bound together by one physical spot, sometimes by ties of kith and kin, but also by fortuitous personal encounter.

In its broadest scope, *A Home Transformed* examines how perceptions of Portsmouth evolved and continue to change in the decades since the last islanders who called it home moved away in the 1970s. Specifically, I focus on how this perceptual change has occurred in the personal experience of a few individuals, primarily through the inscription of identity onto material objects and the land itself. This thesis is framed around one metaphor – the

miniature – and four aspects of inquiry: homecoming, experience, tourism, and motivation.

The idea of “homecoming” sits at the core of the thesis. I use this term to designate a cultural and intellectual process, *not* the church-based and community gathering called “Portsmouth Homecoming,” although this event is mentioned in passing here. I define “homecoming” as a multi-faceted event, more a way of seeing and experiencing a place thought of as home over a long period of time than as a specific social gathering: in this more abstract homecoming, a physical return to the island is a helpful *aide-memoire* but not necessary. My primary interest is in the verbal and visual imagery created in this larger framework within which the Portsmouth Homecoming itself operates. A sermon delivered by the Reverend Jimmy Creech of Ocracoke at the 1980 Portsmouth Homecoming hints at the significance of this bedrock imagery of *home*, contained in narratives and material objects, that inform and guide the true magnitude of Homecoming as an event. It is imagery that spans such notions as loss and reacquisition: “We have not been lost, but we have returned home,” he said. “The place that we call home is more than just the location of our birth. It gives us the images by which we understand ourselves and our world. An island is not just sand that sits in a body of water. It is a land in union with the seas around it.”¹

Experience has been the most infrequently and poorly described aspect of “coming home,” whether defined as a process of thinking about place through memories or as an actual physical return to the island. I ask “*What is it like to come home?*” Whereas narrative histories and impressionistic accounts by journalists have re-hashed the story of Portsmouth’s rise and fall repeatedly, with little fresh insight, the experience of specific individuals there has gone largely unnoticed and unwritten. Though I bring history into play,

¹ H. Robert Morrison and Christine Eckstrom Lee, *America’s Atlantic Isles*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 1981.

this is not another historical account. A description and understanding of a few individuals' personal experience with Portsmouth *in the present* is the primary goal of this thesis.

Regarding the realm of experience, I depart from the standard approach to personal narratives in studies of cultural and individual memory by emphasizing that *physical* experience in the present (though not a requirement) is key to these narratives, involving a direct encounter with the materiality of objects and the land. Unlike many "destinations" of memory, as geographer David Lowenthal expressed it via his metaphor of the past as "the world's most popular tourist destination," Portsmouth is routinely visited in the flesh by those in whose memory it holds a place.² While the island is no longer permanently inhabited, one can still travel to Portsmouth. Likewise, as Lowenthal asserts, though the past is gone, it is not completely unattainable. It has, rather, been shaped *post-mortem* to suit the needs of those who seek it today.

The reality of history may perhaps always be beyond our reach, but our understanding and perceptions of history are "largely an artifact of the present."³ The inaccessibility of historical truth and the malleability of the past before the onslaught of the present explain exactly why places like Portsmouth are so often sought out as an antidote to today's problems. A site of loss and absence itself, the "ghost town" becomes the ideal place in which to discuss dislocation and perceived decline *in the present*. It is a dramatic backdrop preserved in time, a theater for literally re-enacting community life in nearby towns that, like Portsmouth, once thrived but have declined over the course of the twentieth century. "The past's difference," Lowenthal writes, "is, indeed, one of its charms: no one would yearn for

² See David Lowenthal, *The Past Is A Foreign Country*. Cambridge University Press, 1985.

³ *Ibid.*, xvi.

it if it merely replicated the present.”⁴ Ultimately, as he reiterates, “the past is a foreign country whose features are shaped by today’s predilections, its strangeness domesticated by our own preservation of its vestiges.”⁵

Here, I reiterate that the physical encounter – a bodily connection – with Portsmouth *as object and landscape* shapes memory and experience in intriguing ways, not able to be replicated by those who “can never go home again,” in novelist Thomas Wolfe’s expression of the opposite dilemma, homelessness.

This experience of place as a tactile object which we can both inscribe ourselves upon and utilize as a portal through which to “see” what is past and therefore distant has been written about by several critics, among them Susan Stewart and the historian of daguerreotypy John Wood.⁶ Because hers is both an eloquent and more accessible rendering of Stewart’s *On Longing* and because it draws its imagery from an island very much like Portsmouth, Christina Marsden Gillis’ *Writing on Stone: Scenes from a Maine Island Life* (2008) has been a more illuminating work in conceptualizing this thesis, as have several writings by the San Francisco-based essayist Rebecca Solnit.⁷

Gillis’ book is a remarkable memoir of Gotts Island, Maine – like Portsmouth, mostly depopulated by the 1930s. *Writing on Stone* is largely a narrative of her personal

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., xvii.

⁶ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984. John Wood, *America and the Daguerreotype*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1991. See also an article by the landscape historian John Stilgoe, “Disjunction, Disunion, Daguerreotype,” *Harvard Library Bulletin*, Spring 2003 (Vol. 14, No. 1), pp. 47-56.

⁷ See especially the essay “The Blue of Distance” in Solnit’s *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, New York: Viking, 2005. The meandering geographic wanderlust of Solnit’s essays, involving long discussions of California in a book about Ireland, for example, and her awareness of how often distant things are connected on a spectrum, sets her apart from the average writer.

experience of the island's landscape as influenced by the loss of her son in a plane crash in Kenya in 1991. In the chapter entitled "Docking," Gillis mentions the Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, who also died young and whose work contributed to Gillis titling her own book *Writing on Stone*. Mendieta's art is emblematic of the process of self-inscription onto landscapes that Gillis sees as being part of the experience of loss and absence in places like Gotts Island and Portsmouth, now only sporadically inhabited in physical reality but still very much lived in in the mind. Superimposing personal silhouettes of her own body over landscapes, Mendieta "creates a presence out of absence. . . In physical form and in remarkable images Mendieta accomplishes a powerful statement about our connection with land and with place. She transforms an ostensibly empty beach, a border, with a 'silhouette,' itself a signifier of absence."⁸ When Gillis and her husband John bury their son's ashes on Gotts Island under a piece of New England granite as old as the island itself, they are engaging (she asserts) in a postmodern act similar to Mendieta's. "We were leaving, not the 'thing itself,' but a trace that we could fill in, endow with whatever reality seemed appropriate."⁹

Such reflections by Gillis on loss and absence – experienced through stories and often inscribed by material objects into the land – lead her to share Susan Stewart's interest in the miniature and the souvenir as reminders of what is now distant, lost or exotic to the eye, though kept alive and close at hand in the realm of memory.

Writing of the relationship between the literally miniature world of children and the figuratively miniature realm of lost presences as remembered by adults, Gillis (like Stewart)

⁸ Christina Marsden Gillis, *Writing on Stone: Scenes from a Maine Island Life*. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2008. 20-21.

⁹ Ibid.

utilizes an object from material culture as a metaphor for experience of place. Referencing the role of the artistic miniature or locket in eighteenth-century sentimentality as an emotional stand-in for a dead or otherwise absent loved one, she writes:

Only for the adult does the small thing, whether a formation of land in a sea or a personal object like the miniature portrait of the loved one contained in the locket, contain within it a special capacity to generate the absent, the distant, the lost. An eighteenth-century miniature portraitist in Charleston, South Carolina, called the miniature a “striking resemblance, that will never fail to . . . divert the cares of absence, and to aid affection in dwelling on those features and that image which death has forever wrested from us.” The small is a presence that stands in for absence and expresses a relationship between the living and the dead.¹⁰

Benjamin Gillis’ gravestone – functioning as a miniature – leads the writer into a further series of astonishing comparisons between handmade objects and the land. For her, ultimately, Gotts Island itself is also a miniature, no different in function from the work of the eighteenth-century craftsman in South Carolina. Suitably small, tucked away in Blue Hill Bay, the island (like a locket) serves as a mental window into the past whose inhabitants have vanished into the distance. The breadth of time and space opened up does not have to be great. Speaking of an island “looming,” a mirage-like apparition of the land caused by fog, she writes:

Looking out from the small bounded island, we keep the past where it is. Had I . . . been able to move closer to the islands we saw looming in the distance they would have dissolved

¹⁰ Gillis, 116. When the daguerreotype arrived in America from France in 1839, it stepped directly into the role the miniature had performed in attempting to overcome loss and absence. The new art form so actively assumed this role, in fact, that locket and painted portraits of dead or distant loved ones were often included in family portraits made by daguerreotypists, standing in for the absent person as if he or she were actually present. Early daguerreotypes being not much larger than and as delicate as lockets, they easily assumed this pre-existing function of the small art form. Moreover, arriving in the U.S. only a few years before the California Gold Rush sent droves of young men to the American West, the daguerreotype allowed Americans to bridge the gap *home* in ways that letter-writing and drawings had not done before. There is an excellent literature on the daguerreotype’s relationship to “homecoming” and loss. See Peter Palmquist, “Silver Plates on a Golden Shore: ‘The Real Thing Itself’” for the relationship between daguerreotypy and homesickness during the Gold Rush, and David E. Stannard, “Sex, Death and Daguerreotypes: Toward an Understanding of Image as Elegy,” in John Wood, ed., *America and the Daguerreotype*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991.

into nothing. They belong to the distance. . . The stone framed island is a window, a lens through which we view a larger space and, just as important, a larger span of time. . . Even if the magnification of the binoculars brings everything closer, I am still mindful that in Rebecca Solnit's remarkable phrase, "Some things are not lost only so long as they are distant."¹¹

The metaphor of the miniature offering a window into a larger vista is a particularly apt one for understanding relationships to Portsmouth, as it is for countless other landscapes. As I stress below, the preserved village of Portsmouth is a window in time offering a space for expressing contested views of landscape and community change in a wider coastal North Carolina setting. Where Gillis, however, ends her consideration with objects and land as miniatures that offer a *rapprochement* with the deceased, I assert that images of and narratives about the dead are themselves analogous to miniatures and influence a wider experience of this landscape altered by time – in Portsmouth's case, the vanishing occupational landscape of fishing and seafaring. In the face of alterations that have been painful to those who cherish the old maritime landscape and want to bring it closer again, it is entirely fitting to discuss these narratives within the context of loss and remembrance that once gave (and still give) objects from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries like miniatures and daguerreotypes their emotional force.

Yet the experience of the past through narratives and material objects – call them shorthand, if you will – is replete with problems of representation. For example, as I discuss in the next chapter, African Americans in the abandoned rural places of the coastal South – Portsmouth's Henry Pigott in particular – have been treated as miniatures by whites, affectionately if somewhat blindly as far as racial realities are concerned. African Americans are part of the landscape of childhood now remembered by the old. Contained within that

¹¹ Gillis, 16.

precious “locket,” however, the realities of life and race have become simplified accordingly. Treated as exotic survivals from another era, old-time vestiges, African Americans like Henry Pigott quickly become relegated to the antiquarian’s cabinet of curiosities, the viewing gallery that allows the historical tourist to approach the past as a spectator but not as a real participant. Reduced to the level of the wagon wheels and donkey carts, the sleighs and oxen yokes, amassed by collectors to assert an identity or to vicariously fulfill a longing, as Susan Stewart suggests, blacks as “miniatures” express a dramatically simplified view of the world, one reinforced both by exoticism and by white longing for the past in the face of the black exodus from small communities like Portsmouth.¹²

As scholars such as David Lowenthal and Henry Glassie demonstrate, material objects often provide a sense of identity and constancy in the flux of movement *away* from home – and from established connections with history. As I show in *A Home Transformed*, this is the case on Portsmouth. In an example from wider American popular culture, Lowenthal observes that John Steinbeck’s uprooted Okies and other Dust Bowl refugees carry their souvenirs and bric-a-brac in overloaded cars en route to the strawberry fields and peach orchards of California (“letters and old hats and china dogs”), asking “How will we know it’s us without our past?”¹³ From here, it is only a few steps into French, where *souvenir* is the word for memory, where object and experience are linguistically consubstantiate. As I observe throughout this thesis, the past lives on in these objects that become narrative shorthand for that past itself, stand-ins to bring it closer.¹⁴ Lowenthal emphasizes that “The elderly especially need mementoes and memories to redeem their *loss*

¹² Stewart, p. 149.

¹³ Cited in Lowenthal, 43.

¹⁴ See the articles on daguerreotypy mentioned in footnote 10.

of familiar places they can no longer even revisit. Many an old person, reduced in status and resources, ‘makes frequent trips to the past’ to validate himself in his own eyes, saying in effect: ‘I was a strong, competent, beloved person once – therefore I am still a worthwhile person.’”¹⁵

In writing of the tiny crossroads village of Ballymenone in Northern Ireland (or of Kütahya in Turkey, Gillsville in Georgia, and Acoma in New Mexico), folklorist Henry Glassie invariably elaborates on the objects he finds there, the material creations that will form the architecture of memory for the old. These objects all contribute to the *feel* of the place, and the place resides in *them*, not in an abstract set of scrawls on a map, for *place* dies out even when spatial coordinates survive. Peat fires in the hearth and strong tea in the kettle, the delicate weave of a rug, the meticulous decoration of the name of Allah on a ceramic plate, adobe and thatch, hewn log and mortar, a kiln’s smoke and fire: *this* is place. Unlike the average art historian, Glassie is not interested in such objects disassociated from their makers and users. Objects forge a path forward into an understanding of identity and community, of faith and love, even. In describing *place*, Glassie provides not just a portrait of objects and their makers, but of communities themselves.

Mirroring my interest in the transformation of home and place through narratives about objects and land, Glassie’s interest in pottery is driven not so much by a desire to understand craftsmanship itself as the human mind. He seeks out the relationships that pottery creates once it comes into being through the womb of the hands, the wheel and the fire, relationships “between nature and culture, between the individual and society, between utility and beauty.” Like a sail skiff brought to Portsmouth, like a broken gravestone or a church building, these objects are not entirely inanimate. Brought to life through narrative,

¹⁵ Lowenthal, 43. Emphasis mine.

they “work in the world, displaying the complexity of the human condition,” bringing “the old and the new, the personal and the social, the mundane and the transcendent into presence and connection.”¹⁶

Just as he is skeptical of the useless distinction between “art” and “folk art,” Glassie questions the modernist boundaries of “utilitarian” and “aesthetic.” In Gillsville, Georgia, Chester Hewell makes face jugs that *could* be used to carry water or moonshine, but are not. In Raus, Sweden, Lars Andersson makes pots that *could* contain milk, but don’t. Instead, as Glassie emphasizes, the real value of the material work of these artists is that they draw on the cultural memory of place in order to validate their own and their customers’ relationship to the past *in the present* – and critically, to draw up an amenable relationship to the future. People who buy Andersson’s pots may not work the ancient soil of Sweden anymore, but they are conscious of their family background in that agricultural landscape, before the peasants moved to the factories and once-impoverished Scandinavia became affluent. The history of Andersson’s pots is thus very much tied to a history of changes in land use. The pots also become miniatures, offering a way to imaginatively experience and vicariously convene with the dead as though this pottery were a family daguerreotype or even a touch. Yet Andersson’s customers normally do not wish to return to the life of the fields: the emotional gap remains open, the imaginative absence is maintained. Pottery allows them to honor the beauty of the past while transcending it and moving into the future. Glassie, like most of the artists he writes of, is convinced that memory is most powerful when it projects the past into the possibilities of the future.¹⁷

In Georgia, likewise, Matthew Hewell makes a face jug depicting a Confederate

¹⁶ Henry Glassie, *The Potter’s Art*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 34-36.

soldier. “It is a generalized ancestor, a rebel, a symbol.” In a depiction reaching across more than a century, Glassie stresses, it is really two people, a mirror, an anonymous Southern hero and his creator, the potter. Suitable for an art form once meant to *contain*, it is small thing that holds something large:

The values in the pot are the values in the man. It is upright, direct, old-timey. In its austerity it carries, like soft overalls or a white country church, the plain style of the highland South. Like Matthew, the pot is committed to work and place and tradition. Like him, it is not grim. . . . Like the Mennonites and Amish he admires, he chooses to stand apart, to rebel against the modern. He is a country potter, wants no other life, and as the millennium ends in technological extravagance, in excesses of ego and greed, Matthew elects to work with his hands, shaping the earth of his place into the pots of his place. He chooses to grip to the old, interdependent values of work, family, and faith.¹⁸

Often expressed as stories about objects, narratives of home on Portsmouth are embodied in the wider landscape itself, not merely in the smallness of handmade material objects. The landscape, thus, cannot be properly read without knowledge of these stories, no more than the aerial photograph of Gotts Island that Gillis mentions can be read without what she terms “arrival.” “Only with the help of a magnifying glass will I see my house,” she says of this aerial photograph that makes the island seem coherent by portraying it as a whole.¹⁹ Storytelling and long scrutiny are these magnifying glasses. “We can know [these places] only with arrival, and repeated arrivals, at the island itself. We come back each year to traverse the rocks, follow the paths, read the stones, inhabit the space. We revisit, yet again, the island that belongs, yes, to itself, but also to us.”²⁰

Such “arrival,” as I see it, is a synonym for “homecoming.” Arriving *home* at Gotts

¹⁸ Ibid., 47.

¹⁹ Gillis, 3. Incidentally, hers is the house of the Maine poet and novelist Ruth Moore, who made the island’s depopulation a theme of her writing.

²⁰ Gillis, 13.

or Portsmouth, however, involves the crossing of a mythic boundary both in vision and memory. Traversing the waters to the harbor, one travels in imagination, as through the portal across time and space provided by a locket, from one world into another, seeking approach to the distance. Yet that distance is not, in the end, closed. As Solnit suggests in speaking of the “blue of distance,” separation’s emotional value lies in that this gap is preserved – even upon arrival. This “experience of arrival,” as Gillis calls it, is therefore one of the focuses of this thesis.²¹

Part of this experience of arrival – both metaphorically and physically often a real hardship – is the reminder it provides of the relationship between work, story, and landscape. Whereas land in the industrialized world used to be encountered largely through labor, it is now approached mostly through leisure. As environmental historian Richard White has observed in *The Organic Machine*, this relationship remains fundamentally overlooked by cultural critics. In writing of the Columbia River, White observed that

For much of human history, work and energy have linked humans and rivers, humans and nature. But today. . . there is little in our day-to-day life to preserve the connection. Machines do most of our work; we disparage physical labor and laborers. We no longer understand the world through labor. Early nineteenth-century accounts of the Columbia can be read in different ways, but they are certainly all accounts of work, sweat, exhaustion, and fear.²²

²¹ In his work on cemetery decoration on the North Shore of Fontana Lake in western North Carolina’s Smoky Mountains – the location of several communities driven out of existence by dam construction – folklorist Alan Jabbour cites the crucial experience of the boat journey required to reach these sites during spring homecomings. “There is something compelling about the experience of sitting in the boat crossing Fontana Lake. It provides people with a feeling of a journey from the workaday world into a timeless sacred domain. A few people who are devoted regulars at North Shore decorations do not look forward to construction of the road and prefer the special qualities of the present arrangement, while others who are eager to see the road acknowledge that they may miss the boat journeys if it is built.” Alan Jabbour, *North Shore Cemetery Decoration Project: Ethnohistorical and Ethnographic Investigations for the Proposed North Shore Road, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Swain County, North Carolina*. S.I.: s.n., 2005.

²² Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1996. p. 4. See also Dean MacCannell on the “museumization of work and work relations” and “ritual removal of culture from workaday activities” in the context of tourism. MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. pp. 34-36.

This thesis argues that the act of physical arrival on Portsmouth – the being present where the narratives of hardship are set – functions as a way to temper the decline of memory into pure armchair aesthetics involving a distant space. I suggest that the intriguing possibilities of *arrival* (as Gillis uses that term) constitute a subtle, indirect, perhaps unconscious way to contest changes in land use over time. Being present on Portsmouth, on a kind of “middle ground” (to completely recast another of White’s terms) in an existential situation somewhere in between the harshness of life when land was experienced by “work, sweat, exhaustion, and fear” and the much easier, more aestheticized experience of land in the new context of leisure tourism, those who narrate the old times on Portsmouth deftly bridge this gap, once again without closing it.²³

Behind experience lies motivation. Motivation informs the worldview – fed by a view of place and one’s role in place – expressed by those I have interviewed or whose experiences I reference. I ask why people *go* to Portsmouth. Dean MacCannell, a historian of tourism, has written that tourists (and all of those who come to Portsmouth are a type of tourist) express a range of “needs” that explain *why* they travel. Representations of cultural authenticity – stagings of the past included – are judged by tourists according to their own personal motivations for travel. These give answers as to why they come to one place rather than another.²⁴ What are the “needs” of those who come to Portsmouth? As Lowenthal suggests, I argue that “homecoming” is travel: armchair on some occasions, physical on others. Like travel, it involves the construction of place through imagination and distance

²³ Commercial and charter fisherman Ernie Foster, the subject of Tom Carlson’s memoir *Hatteras Blues* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005) mentioned to me in an interview that “Portsmouth is the closest I can get today to the Hatteras I knew when I was growing up here in the ‘50s. Now I have to go to Portsmouth to experience something of what it was like *here* in those days. My home has changed that much.” Personal interview with Ernie Foster, Hatteras, N.C., March 8, 2009.

²⁴ See chapter five, “Staged Authenticity,” in MacCannell, MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

rather than physical encounters alone, although in this case it is tempered and enriched by these encounters. I elucidate the “needs” of those who travel to Portsmouth in greater depth in this thesis.

A key term I use in discussing these needs and experiences is “home ground.” Its meanings are multiple. Briefly, “home ground” can be defined as the space where home is created in a place where it did not exist before, where connections are made to place via material objects, and whereby human perceptions of physical surroundings can be altered positively via material creations to create a sense of belonging *here*. As Grey Gundaker, a scholar of African American art, writes in a discussion of yard decoration, “The crucial investment that makes a place home ground is not investment of money but of connections, of roots; thus land becomes the place of happenings: births, deaths, labor, friendships, disputes, and goings and comings of the generations.”²⁵ A home must be created out of scattered material – be it story or tangible objects – in order to reacquire a sense of rootedness and grounding. In coming home, one small patch of land becomes “the place of happenings,” the place of connection to bloodlines and old friendships. In coming to a home ground, in *arrival*, as for the African American poet James Weldon Johnson, “landscapes become replete with a moral force and range of emotional temperatures.”²⁶ At its root, then, “home ground” refers to the “transformation of place into home.”²⁷

From mere empty space emerges place, first. Home, however, is still another stretch away.

²⁵ Grey Gundaker, ed., “Introduction: Home Ground.” In *Keep Your Head to the Sky: Interpreting African American Home Ground*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998. See pp. 14-15.

²⁶ Ibid., 4.

²⁷ Ibid., 14-15.

Chapter Two: The Place and the Narratives

Portsmouth: A Brief History to the Civil War

Once the only point-of-entry from the open Atlantic into the shallow, shoal-pocked waters of Pamlico and Albemarle sounds, Portsmouth village began its life on an eighteenth-century draftsman's table, conceived in the minds of merchants as a money-making venture. Its origins were not unique: like thousands of other American communities, including new ones being laid out today, the village existed as a profit-driven idea several years before any structures were built on the ground. That a utilitarian port would one day become a "sacred" space to many would perhaps have astonished its founders.²⁸

Situated at the northern tip of Portsmouth Island, the village of Portsmouth originally sat directly next to the deepwater channel through Ocracoke Inlet. In 1753, when the town was envisioned, this was the only inlet between Beaufort and all points north. After Hatteras Inlet shoaled up in 1746, a traveler could literally walk from the English pirate Blackbeard's former hideout in Ocracoke (not yet an island again, though it had just been one) all the way to Virginia. Not until two massive hurricanes struck in the summer and fall of 1846 did the other inlets to the north (Hatteras and Oregon inlets) re-open and offer

²⁸ Land use and heritage activist Karen Willis Amspacher is among the many who have used this term in reference to Portsmouth.

other passageways into the sounds.²⁹

Thus at the time of its birth, Portsmouth village was located at the sole access point by sea to the important inland coastal towns of New Bern, Bath, Edenton, Little Washington, Elizabeth City, and the plantations of the coastal plain north of the Cape Fear River. Its importance was tied to the constrictive geography that made North Carolina poor and introspected until recently, for the state's hundreds of miles of coastline were mostly too shallow and devoid of deep harbors to be navigated by large ships: neighboring Virginia and South Carolina, whose coasts provided greater accessibility to the interior, were concomitantly wealthier. The village itself was designed to serve as a "lightering port," where deep-draft, ocean-going vessels that freighted merchandise up and down the Atlantic coast or to and from Europe could transfer their cargo onto shallower-draft vessels capable of navigating the vast, treacherous inland expanse of the sounds. By the late eighteenth century, the new town of Portsmouth's significance was so great that only Wilmington rivaled it as a seaport in North Carolina and although much smaller, it ranked with Boston and New York as one of the most important ports of entry in North America.³⁰

The town had taverns, inns, a thriving street life, and rows of houses. In 1789, David Wallace and John Gray Blount bought a shoal offshore in Ocracoke Inlet not far from the village. With oyster shells and sand, the entrepreneurs expanded "Old Rock" (as it was then known) into a twenty-five-acre island, renamed it Shell Castle Island, and constructed a wharf, lumberyard, tavern, several warehouses, and a gristmill on it. A pyramid-shaped lighthouse sat here until destroyed by lightning in August 1818. Houses on

²⁹ See David Stick, *The Outer Banks of North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1957.

³⁰ See Ellen Fulcher Cloud, *Portsmouth: The Way It Was*. Havelock, N.C.: The Print Shop, 1996.

Shell Castle provided shelter for ship pilots and crews, many of whom were black – for while instigated by white entrepreneurship, the making of Shell Castle was of course accomplished overwhelmingly by slave labor. A large portion of the island’s antebellum population, in fact, was African American, and white islanders had a vested interest in the survival of slavery. The population included many enslaved Africans who were forced to work in the maritime trades, in which they became experts at their craft. Slaves were operating a dolphin fishery on Shell Castle by 1803. Other black watermen regularly sailed the ninety miles down to Cape Lookout to fish for mullet. One traveler described their fishing camps on Portsmouth and Ocracoke as “Robinson Crusoe looking structures,” a reference to their West African design. In 1810, the island had a population of 225 whites, 115 slaves, and one free black.³¹

Though its population peaked in the 1860 Federal census at 685,³² two natural, and multiple human, events combined to seal Portsmouth’s fate on the eve of the Civil War.

For years, the channel on the bottom of Ocracoke Inlet – the underwater passageway that allowed ships to sail close to the village – had been slowly shifting to the north, making Ocracoke village a more convenient site for ocean-going ships to dock. Additionally, the waters near Portsmouth had begun to shoal up with sand, making access to its wharfs by sailing ships dangerous. Then in the summer and fall of 1846, two back-to-back hurricanes of tremendous force blasted out Hatteras and Oregon inlets to the north, sculpting Hatteras and Ocracoke islands out of what for the past hundred years had been one large island and opening two rival, deep-water passageways into the interior sounds.

³¹ David Cecelski, *The Waterman’s Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. See p. 42.

³² Cloud, 52.

Not even a century old, Portsmouth had been eclipsed as a viable port of entry and began to decline sharply. Although the Federal government built a marine hospital in the village during the 1850's, the life of the town began to stagnate.³³

The coming of steam navigation and railroads during the same decades in which geological change was already sealing Portsmouth's doom finally made the cumbersome process of lightering obsolete. In the 1850s, Morehead City was established as a state port terminal, where ships could dock and transfer their cargo directly to rail lines, eliminating the need to traverse Pamlico Sound in order to reach the interior. The dangerous coastline of the Outer Banks was never attractive to mariners to begin with; when sailors could bypass it for safer ports like Morehead, they did so.³⁴

The Civil War was among the island's first death knells. The Confederate government had built a small fort on the island, but after the capture of Fort Hatteras by Federal troops in September 1862, Portsmouth's tiny defenses were quickly abandoned. When Union forces arrived, most of the island's population fled in panic. Facing grim economic realities in a destroyed South after the war, and with lightering now obsolete, few islanders returned. Portsmouth's economy collapsed. The majority of its African American population, formerly enslaved, moved to urban areas like Norfolk, Virginia, and large towns like Elizabeth City, North Carolina, although two black families – the Pigotts and Abbotts – stayed on. Henry and Lizzie Pigott would be among the village's last inhabitants in the 1960s.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

The Civil War and the decades that immediately followed it on Portsmouth are still within living memory – individuals born on the island or nearby within twenty years of the war were still alive as late as the 1970s and are certainly remembered first-hand by elderly residents of the coast today. As Rebecca Solnit suggests, one hundred and fifty years seems to be the earliest bedrock of living memory. “Time itself is elastic: the past is kept breathing by speech or kept buried in silences.”³⁵ The Civil War is really where memory begins to take shape among Portsmouth islanders today. Befitting an era still quite distant, however, whose realities are perhaps only tentatively comprehended, oral narratives describing the last half of the nineteenth century are delivered in suitably small form, grasping toward a truth rather than expressing it at length.

In the folklore of the island, two stories about Portsmouth at the time of the Civil War are still told. These resonate with the theme of coming and going, of flight and return. They accomplish more than an addition of color to local accounts of times gone by: they are tiny emblems of the realities of island life and history. A woman stays behind because she is unable to leave; a man leaves, but is so frightened by the outside world that he comes back

³⁵ These reflections emerge from a story Solnit heard on the west coast of Ireland in the mid-1990s, told by a man then nearly 100. In the years around World War I, an ancient beggar came to the man’s village each summer. The beggar, who walked with bowed legs, had acquired this handicap as an infant, when his starved young body was crushed into a tiny coffin and mistakenly buried alive during the Famine of the 1840s. “It was an appalling story, but for me it was also a marvelous story,” Solnit writes. “I had thought of the Famine as something irrecoverably distant, as far beyond the reach of living memory as the Inquisition or the sack of Rome, for my own history at that time had hardly included tales that stretched back before the Second World War. That there was a man living who remembered a survivor of the Famine – that the link to events of a century and a half ago was unbroken – was a discovery of astonishing delight. . . . About a hundred and fifty years seems to be about the farthest reach of living memory, the length of time encompassed by an old person who as a child encountered a survivor of some long-ago drama. The story of the beggar was my first intimation of how far back memory could reach.” See pp. 47-48 in Solnit, *A Book of Migrations: Some Passages in Ireland*, London: Verso, 1997.

and never leaves again. Their questionable veracity as historic events is less important than their role as stories.

The first narrative claims that the only resident to stay behind in the village at the time when Federal troops landed there in 1862 was an obese woman named Miss Rossie Gaskins who got stuck in her doorway during the act of running outside to hide in the woods. Like all folktales, variations of this tale occur. One holds that when Union troops helped dislodge her massive bodyweight from the exit of her house, Miss Rossie became fast friends with the soldiers and decided the Yankees were not so bad after all.³⁶ The story is more a comic gloss on Southern secession and war than a serious commentary on island life, though it implies that the common small-town distrust of outsiders is often unwarranted.³⁷ More potentially tragic stories about being unable to leave Portsmouth await.

The second narrative recounts the return of a local man named Sam Tolson after the Civil War. Sam Tolson was a real figure. Though he was white, folklorist Connie Mason cited one of her interviewees' belief that he was Henry Pigott's father.³⁸ The substance of what may well be a tall tale is engraved on Tolson's tombstone, erected many years after his death in 1929. Whether the tale's literal inscription in the land lends it any credibility is unclear, and its historic truth remains doubtful at best (*see image 6 in appendix*). Connie Mason, who recorded several versions of the story for Cape Lookout National Seashore in the 1980s, offers her own rendition:

Sam Tolson was a young man, good-looking, dark-headed, mustache. In my oral histories, it

³⁶ Dorothy Byrum Bedwell, *Portsmouth: Island With A Soul*. New Bern: IES Publications, 1984. p. 12.

³⁷ The anecdote may also hint at the Outer Banks' reluctance to follow the rest of the state into disunion.

³⁸ Henry Pigott, an African American, was the last man ever to live on Portsmouth permanently. He died in 1971. Personal interview with Connie Mason, Harkers Island, N.C., February 7, 2009.

said he went to New Bern for the first time. In Fred Mallinson's oral history it said he went to Elizabeth City for the first time. And he just happened to have a strange, weird resemblance to the John Wilkes Booth posters that were being hung up there, looking for the guy who killed Lincoln. And they arrested him and were going to hang him for doing that, and he begged them *not* to do it and "to get somebody from *Porch'mouth*" to identify him as *quick* as possible. They did that, and when he got home, he never left the island again. But he also became hooked on Bateman's Drops, which was an opiate, and we always theorized that he did that because he was so shook up from being almost killed.³⁹

In all likelihood, the story is a tall tale straight from the liar's bench, perhaps concocted by Tolson himself as an evidence of manhood in the post-bellum South. That the tale was later written in stone over his grave may serve only to extend the humor. It is Connie Mason's and others' "theorizing" about Tolson's addiction to Bateman's Drops that is the significant part of this version of the tale: in her telling, the opiate implies trauma, hence a distrust of outsiders and the need to return home.

Construction of a critical U.S. Lifesaving Service Station after the war was perhaps the only reason why Portsmouth village was not abandoned long before the last inhabitants left in 1971. Still in an age of sail, ships frequently wrecked (or "came ashore" as locals say) on the treacherous shoals and beaches off Portsmouth "anytime a wind blew out of the east," according to Gloucester, North Carolina, resident Julian M. Brown.⁴⁰ The life of hardship and endurance undergone by the crewmen of the U.S. Lifesaving Service between the 1870s and the 1920s is still the focus of a major body of stories among Portsmouth descendants and the remaining handful of those who grew up on the island. These stories are among the most powerful in their repertory. That they are replete with imagery of loss, absence, distance, death and implications of supernatural intervention by departed loved

³⁹ Personal interview with Connie Mason, Harkers Island, N.C., February 7, 2009.

⁴⁰ Brown's own family was shipwrecked on Cape Hatteras while emigrating from Norway to the American Midwest around the time of the Civil War. Personal interview with Julian M. Brown, Gloucester, N.C., October 2, 2007.

ones makes my approach to them as verbal “miniatures” fitting, again utilizing the metaphor from material culture and photography. Like the image contained in locket, these emotional stories allow travel within the gaps and possibilities provided by absence. In the space made available by loss – the “trace that we could fill in, endow with whatever reality seemed appropriate” (Gillis) – narrators may project and listeners conclude what they wish.⁴¹

Lionel Gilgo, Jr., and his cousin Hazel Gilgo Arthur, who were raised on Portsmouth as young children before they moved to the mainland, tell stories about their Irish-born great-great-grandfather William T. Daly and their grandfather Monroe Gilgo that are replete with a yearning for this landscape of shipwreck and loss, of connection with dead men they never knew personally but whose presence has filled their lives.

Hazel Gilgo Arthur, born in Morehead City in October 1936, was taken to Portsmouth to live with her grandmother Mattie Gilgo (Monroe’s widow) until she was three and a half years old. Hazel has continually visited Portsmouth since then, though she has lived most of her life in Bettie, a small town on the outskirts of Beaufort, with her husband Hedrick. She was seventy-three years old when I interviewed her.

The first story she told me about Portsmouth bears the marks of the fabulous, reaching back into corners of time and trans-Atlantic distances just prior to living memory. Though she had heard the story herself from her grandmother Mattie, Hazel’s version was more directly recalled from the transcript of an interview conducted by Ellen Fulcher Cloud before Mattie’s death at age ninety-one in 1976.⁴² As the introduction to the set of small oral narratives that Hazel shared with me about island life, this story is appropriately mythic, a tale of exotic Old World family origins whose details are somewhat dicey but are an insight

⁴¹ Gillis, 20.

⁴² The transcript is published in Cloud’s *Portsmouth: The Way It Was*.

into her imagination:

She [Mattie Gilgo] was in the hospital down at Sealevel when she told it. There was a woman from Davis there, right across the hall from her. We would be sitting and talking with my grandmother and my grandmother would tell us things that she had heard about the town of Dublin, Ireland. The woman across the hall thought that she was talking out of her head, that she didn't know what she was talking about at all. But she *very well* knew what she was talking about.

She told about her family, on her mother and father's side. Her grandfather, William T. Daly, was a stowaway from Dublin, Ireland. He was in school (a convent, she said) to be a Catholic priest. Yes, a priest. And he was not happy. And when he was seventeen years old, he stowed away on a ship and came to New York City. This was around the time of the Civil War, I believe. His family found out where he was and the ambassadors from the United States and Ireland worked together to send him back home.

His family was very wealthy. They owned a share of Killarney Castle.⁴³ They had maids and hairdressers and butlers for everything. And my great-grandfather fell in love with one of the maids. She was beneath their level, of course. Well, naturally he was not allowed to marry her. So he ran away again. And this time he didn't go back.

He met my great-grandmother, Claudia, in Norfolk, Virginia, and married. He went to school and joined the Army Signal Corps. He helped to lay the cable across Ocracoke Inlet. And supposedly it's still there, on the bottom of the sea. That was back in the 1800's.⁴⁴

Hazel's grandmother's stories alternate with suitably small narratives of Hazel's own girlhood on Portsmouth. I say "suitably small" because Hazel was only three-and-a-half years old when she left and the imagery in her short narrations is described almost as if in a dream, not elaborated upon at length. These narrations lead into recollections of her grandfather Monroe Gilgo and the Lifesaving Service, beginning with the backdrop of shipwreck that forms the stage for those memories. Shipwrecks, she noted, were part of the physical landscape of her youth and among her first memories. These are memories evoked and symbolized by landforms, the topography of childhood where things seem big that

⁴³ If this is true, it would cast doubt on the Daly family's Catholic faith. More likely, they were Anglo-Irish Protestants, the class that held most of the wealth in Victorian Ireland.

⁴⁴ Personal interview with Hazel Gilgo Arthur, Bettie, N.C., February 9, 2009.

would later seem small to adults. It is the connection to childhood that maintains their significance in memory when adulthood might have erased them from the map, glossing over them in the mind's reading of the land:

There was what we used to call Big Hill. I was little now, but I remember going upstairs. This is one of my memories. I would climb the stairs, and when you would get upstairs, right there was a window, and I could just see over it. But I could look out that window and see that Big Hill. What it was was where a ship had come ashore and the sand had piled around it.⁴⁵

These ships that wrecked here and often became land features were pilfered, their contents auctioned off in public *vendues* (ship sales), a strange economic windfall that provided many of the necessities of life to this relatively barren island, not merely its luxuries. Alongside more mundane cargo, however, came hand-crafted and mass-produced objects that would gradually become the foci of memory and identity.⁴⁶ Hazel reflected that Mattie Gilgo

told about how they were allowed to go on the boats that came ashore [i.e., wrecked], to unload them, to get the stuff. They could have it. The captains would give them anything they could get. There was one that came ashore that had an automobile on it. We never figured out who it belonged to or who kept it for a while when it was on Portsmouth. . . . She told how they would go down there and get whisky, too. Of course, the wives didn't want their men to go and drink the whisky, so they would hide it. I believe it was Black Henry [Henry Pigott], he took the floor up in his barn or outbuilding or something, and hid the whisky under there. At one time my grandmother said, "Lord, heny, I reckon there's still whisky under there." It would wash out when the water came in and washed the sand away. The water uncovered a lot of secrets.

These stories of shipwreck are merely a preface, however, to the more emotional narratives Hazel presents about her grandfather, Monroe Gilgo, a crewman in the Lifesaving Service who died of tuberculosis on Portsmouth in 1927 at the age of forty-four. Though

⁴⁵ Personal interview with Hazel Gilgo Arthur, Bettie, N.C., February 9, 2009.

⁴⁶ Julian M. Brown, mentioned above, the grandson of shipwrecked Norwegian immigrants, was born at Hatteras in 1937 in a house built out of shipwrecked lumber, on a bed salvaged from a captain's cabin. Brown's house in Gloucester was full of such artifacts before it was destroyed by fire. See interview.

his death occurred a decade before his grandchildren were born, the sad circumstances of his life haunt their narratives. In these, he becomes an emblem of distressing realities on Portsmouth Island. The Gilgo cousins are thus somewhat atypical in proffering this less than happy image of life in the village, which both assert has been heavily romanticized by people who have little if any family connection to it. “The ironic thing about Portsmouth is, ninety percent of the traditions and customs and way of life [there] *were* hard times,” Lionel stresses. “There were very few good times there.”

Monroe and Mattie Gilgo lived a few minutes’ walk from the Lifesaving Station, where Monroe would go on duty for twenty-four hour periods or longer.⁴⁷ Hazel describes the view from her grandparents’ bedroom window as if she was there herself. “One of those ships wrecked during early morning hours,” Hazel said.

They woke up to the sound of voices. Poppa, or Granddaddy Gilgo – I never knew him, but I always refer to my grandfather as Poppa – he turned to my grandmother and said, “Get up and see what all the commotion’s about.” So she went to the window and she says, “*Monroe.*” And she named the people that were out in the yard. And Poppa jumped up, put his pants on, went downstairs, came back, and said, “Mattie, there’s a ship come ashore.” So she went to the window where she could see down there, and there was the mast, the sails and everything.⁴⁸

Lionel Gilgo, who was seventy-one when I interviewed in his home in Beaufort, bears in on the details of his grandfather’s service in what became the U.S. Coast Guard in much more detail and with more concentration than his cousin Hazel.⁴⁹ His voice is deep

⁴⁷ The Lifesaving Service merged with the Revenue Cutter Service in 1915 to become the U.S. Coast Guard. The station on Portsmouth was decommissioned in 1937, once radio communication altered how the Coast Guard operated. The station’s dilapidated structure was then used as a hunting club into the 1950s.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ A retired commercial fisherman, Gilgo spent much of his career working in the menhaden industry out of Cameron, Louisiana. He was quick to remind me that it took years to rise out of the economic poverty that was the direct result of his family’s connection to Portsmouth. They moved to Atlantic on the mainland

and weathered; its tones slip into melancholy with great ease; five minutes of listening to him make it clear how gracefully his memories mark his speech. Whereas Hazel's narratives are delicate, mostly agreeable miniatures reflective of her "very pleasant journey" through life and Portsmouth's early role in it,⁵⁰ Lionel's narratives are darker and more disturbing. The contrast reflects the artistic transition from the hand-drawn, pre-photographic miniature to the more realistic if ironically murkier daguerreotype, stunning in its depth of detail and resolution but troubling to viewers because of the very accuracy of its revelations.⁵¹

Restrained emotion rides just under the surface of Gilgo's narrations, neither toppling into sentimentality nor unaware of the deep feelings that exist in his words. Gilgo does not close this gap; instead, he explores its tensions.

In his narratives, he speaks as if he knew Monroe Gilgo personally and has been merely seeking a continued connection with him through sustained reflection for years, accomplished by amassing details about his grandfather's life during the first quarter of the twentieth century. These details, from which the narratives have sprung, are what Christina Marsden Gillis calls "popplestones." She observes:

Maine writer and environmentalist Philip Conkling tells us that smooth round rocks called "popplestones" were collected by late eighteenth-century Maine islanders to ballast the holds of homemade sailing vessels. Later they were used to pave the streets of East Coast cities. Stories, reminiscences, old myths, and present meditations are my popplestones. They are my building materials. They enable me to give shape to [Gotts Island], to experience, to

across from Cedar Island in 1942 so that he could go to school. Gilgo later entered the Navy, came back to North Carolina in 1960, then entered the Merchant Marine in Louisiana.

⁵⁰ "It's strange to think it's almost over now, but it's been a very pleasant journey" – Hazel Arthur.

⁵¹ An 1853 article in *Knickerbocker* on daguerreotypists' studios claimed: "And if you observe closely the persons who depart with their portraits, you will perceive that, for the most part, they do not look pleased; the plain moral of which is, that the daguerreotype does not flatter, and it is hard to have to put up with the plain, wholesome, bitter, unadulterated Truth." *Knickerbocker*, August 1853, 137-142. See John Stilgoe on the disturbing emotions ignited by the daguerreotype among Transcendentalist writers in Emerson and Hawthorne's New England. "Disjunction, Disunion, Daguerreotype," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, Spring 2003 (Vol 14, No. 1), 37-44.

small incidents that are remembered in odd ways.⁵²

I first heard Lionel tell this first narrative about his grandfather during the April 2008 Portsmouth Homecoming, as we sat perhaps two minutes' walk from the family burial plot where Monroe Gilgo, William T. Daly, and other relatives of his lie at rest. Gilgo was recounting the story for a small crowd of perhaps thirty or forty people gathered in the yard of the Dixon-Salter House to listen to storytellers on the porch. In the course of his narration into a microphone that day, he carefully pointed out the locations in the near distance – at the other of the village, by the restored Lifesaving Station – in which the events of this narrative took place. That this landscape was directly visible during that occasion was surely significant to him, allowing him to fill in the invisible details of its history for the audience who could not have guessed what had gone on there nearly a hundred years ago. Since he recounted a much fuller version of this story during my interview with him at his home in Beaufort, however, I include that version here.

Lionel is a towering, robust man who has fought life's hardships well, but on this occasion, his eyes turned grey and were cast away from me, as if looking to the horizon on the other side of the wall, where the winter sky over the coast was grey and uninviting. He seemed much sadder than he had been up to that point. He did not volunteer the story. I asked him to tell it.

The narrative revolves around a young girl, his aunt Rita Gilgo, who died on Portsmouth on October 15, 1911, at the age of three. Her father Monroe was twenty-nine. One faded photograph of the baby Rita survives; it is cherished in the Gilgo family photo

⁵² Gillis, 7.

album and reproduced in at least one book about Portsmouth.⁵³ The story of Rita's death is a story of loss inflicted on a household, compacted thirty years later by the family's removal to the mainland. The gravestone erected in the village to mark her burial site became, of course, a place around which memories of her could naturally be expressed, yet the stone's most powerful significance in family story was based on an entirely fortuitous event that did not occur until the autumn of 1944, by which time Lionel and his parents had left. In Gilgo's narration of the remarkable sequel to this story of death and absence, a reestablishment of a ruptured identity with home takes place via an imaginative link offered by loss itself: as Solnit reminds us, "some things are not lost only so long as they remain distant."⁵⁴ As Richard White would observe, too, the death narrative and its counterpart of family survival – though told in a context of the landscape of leisure and cultural tourism – are emphatically silhouetted against a landscape of "work, sweat, exhaustion, and fear." This perhaps accounts for the tense quality of Gilgo's narration: a former commercial fisherman in the Gulf of Mexico, he knew this landscape of work and fear from close personal experience himself and could envision all too clearly the storms, exhaustion and demands of duty that wracked his grandfather. Lionel and Monroe Gilgo's experiences were the type of hard, personal, transformative encounters with land via labor that White stresses has become so uncommon since the nineteenth century.

Gilgo's narrative, in fact, begins with a commentary on this disassociation between knowledge and labor, a threat that stretched back even to the beginning of the twentieth century:

⁵³ Ellen Fulcher Cloud, *Portsmouth: The Way It Was*.

⁵⁴ Solnit, "The Blue of Distance," 23.

My grandfather Monroe was in the Lifesaving Service at Portsmouth. And I think grandmamma said he'd been in there twenty-four years. All of the people that were chosen for the Lifesaving Service were mostly local, experienced people, which was one thing that the Federal government did then that made sense. They didn't go off to the mainland to get a politician and give him a political job. They chose the people there because it was a *dangerous* job. They knew how to handle open boats, rowboats, and get back ashore without sinking. They were experienced in it.

Gilgo then launches into the heart of his narrative with a description of the physical setting involved, honing in on one material object – the black pennant – that would stand in for verbal communication so effectively, the object whose understatement of loss expressed it perhaps beyond the power of words even to approach:

Well, I'd say granddaddy and grandmamma's house was about a quarter of a mile from the station. ["In the house up there by the second grove of trees is where they lived," Lionel had added at this point in the version delivered during Portsmouth Homecoming. "The vegetation on Portsmouth then wasn't very thick. You could get up ten or twelve feet off the ground and see everything."]

And I don't know that *all* the homes had them, but some of the houses that were in sight of the Lifesaving Station then had long tall poles in their yard and the wives would heist little banners to send signals to their husbands. I know that granddaddy's house had a pole in the yard. It had certain colored pennants on it. Each pennant identified a certain message.

My aunt Rita was a baby, just a few years old. And she was real sick. She'd been sick for some time, but she got worse. And granddaddy had to go on duty at the station that morning. And he told grandmamma, he says, "If she gets worse, you can raise the red flag" or whatever color it was. And, "If she happens to die, just raise the black one."

Well, during the evening, grandmamma sent my uncle Cecil down to the station (he was about thirteen years old) to tell *his* daddy, my grandfather, that grandmamma thought Rita was dying.⁵⁵ Could he come home just a while? Well, those men went on twenty-four hour shifts. You weren't allowed to leave the station within twenty-four hours, regardless. If they went on duty at seven or seven-thirty Monday morning, *nothing* took them off until seven-thirty Tuesday morning. They just *did not* leave. You just didn't do that.

My grandfather sent word back. He said, "I can't come home, I'm on duty." Now, it was a *five-minute walk*. He stayed there.

⁵⁵ Cecil Gilgo was Hazel's father. "My daddy, oh, he hated [Portsmouth]," she said. "There was *nothing* on Portsmouth Island that my daddy liked. And from what I understand, from his own saying so, it was the hard life he hated." Personal interview with Hazel Gilgo Arthur, Bettie, N.C., February 9, 2009.

At daylight, grandmamma went up and raised the black pennant on the flagpole indicating that Rita was dead. And my grandfather knew from that that his daughter had died during the night. [Gilgo later added that his grandfather “had to find someone to stand his watch while he was at the funeral, otherwise they weren’t going to let him go.”]

Gilgo then returns to a reflection on the qualities of work that he admires in his grandfather, ultimately concluding that the landscape and way of life was “cruel,” its isolation as potentially destructive to human life in the 1920s as it is now a source of spirituality. Yet Portsmouth, as harsh as it was, was a place where a personal work ethic and philosophy of life that Gilgo admires once prevailed:

But he wouldn’t leave that station. He probably would have if it had been his choice, but he knew he weren’t allowed to leave. They just didn’t do it. They were that dedicated of people. The people back then were so committed to their jobs that one minute made a big difference. That was the rule of the game. There were *different men* back in those days than there are now. The generations have changed so much. There was the type of man that when he shook your hand, that was just as good as a contract that any lawyer could write up. Anything you had in your boat, you *left* it in your boat, because you knew nobody was going to take it. When you gave a man your word, it was your word. And when you went on duty, you stayed on duty. That was the commitment that those people had to their jobs. And as dangerous a job as it was, it was a job and there weren’t that many jobs around then, especially one where you could stay home.

Granddaddy didn’t serve his full twenty-some years on Portsmouth. He was in other stations up and down the Banks. He died at forty-four years old of tuberculosis. He died at home. They didn’t know no doctors. And you know that was an *awful* death. [Monroe Gilgo died in 1927, sixteen years after his daughter Rita.]

But that was part of the way of life on Portsmouth. It was harsh, it was cruel. The picture that some people like to paint, you know, of everybody helping everybody and you all get together and have a party and have fun: it weren’t like that.

It was mostly hardships, I’m telling you. It was mostly hardships on Portsmouth.

The heart-rending story of Monroe and Rita Gilgo’s deaths, however, has an astonishingly beautiful sequel, one that offers the possibility of overcoming the disruption of home caused by death and separation.

The event described in the second narrative took place in the autumn of 1944, a few years after the Gilgos moved off Portsmouth and settled in the nearby mainland fishing town of Atlantic, where Core Sound meets Pamlico Sound at the far eastern tip of Carteret County. As Richard White would stress, this narrative, too, is one of labor: it is a long-hauler's story told to Gilgo by his father, as much an elegy to the beauties and vicissitudes of the now almost extinct practice of long-haul fishing as it is a story about a lost sister and aunt. The narrative is very much a record of one family's literally providential experience and encounter with land.

Lionel told me this final story as we were flipping through a family photo album in his kitchen; it was almost an hour after he had first spoken of Rita's death and he had not immediately segued into it. Yet this narrative, of course, is the powerful conclusion of the earlier one. In the album, we came across two photographs of two separate gravestones, identical to each other except for a carved baby lamb missing from the top of the older one. This stone was the older of the two only because it had been replaced: the second was a replica of the original. The inscription on each was the same: "Rita Johnson Gilgo. Born August 18, 1908. Died October 15, 1911. Rita will sleep but not for ever, There will be a glorious dawn. We shall meet to part no never, On that Resurrection morn." The space of earth on which it stands had become a quintessential "home ground," the spot where a figurative home was created and maintained, the axis around which (with the help of narrative) connections were made to place via a material object. As Grey Gundaker writes and as the story will show, the event described caused an affective root to be set down at this sacred spot; in a manner suggesting supernatural intervention to the narrator, this small patch of land became the literal site of the "comings and goings of the generations," the place where a baby vanished into the earth but another family member was saved from

death. This was “the place of happenings” where earth was transformed definitively into home.⁵⁶

“There’s a lot of stories in that album that you would never know unless I told them to you,” Lionel began:

You see that little lamb? Over in *this* picture you see *two* lambs.

What happened was that in 1944, my daddy was a commercial fisherman. They called it long-hauling. It’s two thirty-six-foot boats with two skiffs full of net, and you tie ‘em together and go out and haul the nets to shore. They were down at Portsmouth in ‘44. Little radio communication whatsoever.

And there was this place called Sheep Island where they went in at night to harbor, to anchor. [Sheep Island is very close to the village.] Suddenly, there was an airplane come in from Cherry Point and dropped them some leaflets. It just said “*STORM COMING.*”

Well, long-haulers. . . it was four, four-and-a-half hours to Atlantic, and they didn’t know what kind of storm it was, and they didn’t want to disrupt their work. So they put some extra anchors out. To make a long story short, the storm came in that night, increased to hurricane force, and went on north before daylight. Daddy said that they had a four-cylinder Buddha diesel, and they run her right wide-open and she *still* drug those anchors right on together until they tripped, and they started dragging.

Well, when the storm passed, they didn’t know where they were. It was still dark. There was more water *over* them than under them. Then just before daylight, she hit something and sank. But it was only about three or four feet of water when she sank. So they held onto the boat. The daylight came and the storm passed, the wind shifted and the tide went down.

They were right in the middle of this cemetery. His sister’s tombstone is what they hit, and knocked the lamb off of it. And that’s what saved their lives, because the boat would have drug. They only had a mile to drag before she went out of Ocracoke Inlet and gone to sea in that hurricane. And they *all* would have drowned. That little girl’s stone is what saved their lives.

Baby Rita had kept her brother safe at home.

Hazel, too, expressed her experience of this cemetery during each individual arrival that she makes to the island. “When I go back there,” she said, “I feel like I’ve come to visit

⁵⁶ Grey Gundaker, ed., “Introduction: Home Ground.” In *Keep Your Head to the Sky: Interpreting African American Home Ground*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998. See pp. 14-15.

my ancestors. There's a feeling, when you step onto that dock and everything is so quiet, that all the cities and towns and noises and everything – that's all gone. [At the last Homecoming], when we came off that dock and came on up by the post office and the cemetery that's right there – where my people are – I felt like they were sitting there waiting for me to come and visit, you know.”

The Gilgo family's continued vicarious experience of time and distance by means of material stand-ins for the past – miniatures, I call them – was further heightened for Hazel at the 2008 Portsmouth Homecoming by one specific event. This Homecoming was the occasion of the official re-opening of the Portsmouth Lifesaving Station as a historic site. In commemoration, historic re-enactor and Coast Guard historian James Charlet, the lead historical interpreter at the Chicamacomico Lifesaving Station in Rodanthe, North Carolina, was present to demonstrate the “breeches buoy” operation, by which early lifesavers lifted passengers of shipwrecks over the breakers to the beach with a rope and pulley. For Hazel, already under the powerful influence of being *home*, Charlet's presence instantly reminded her of her grandfather Monroe. “I never got to see my grandfather, my daddy's daddy. Daddy was only fourteen years old when he died. But all my life, I've heard stories about him being in the Coast Guard there. And there's a couple of pictures that I have seen, but I never got to see him. When they honored the Coast Guard at the Homecoming last year, the re-enactor who was there from Chicamacomico was just about the size that I've always heard my granddaddy was. When he came out with that uniform on, it was like I had finally seen my granddaddy. It just went all over me.” Charlet, too, then, was a miniature who allowed travel and connections to be made through time.

Faced by an already diminishing livelihood in the surrounding waters and the village's complete death as a lightering port, by the 1930s the majority of the island's population had moved elsewhere. The sea both isolated and connected Portsmouth. In the 1910s and 1920s, ships still occasionally anchored nearby, providing a paltry source of livelihood, as Arthur noted:

What my grandmother did was take in sewing, washing. I've heard her tell stories about the big sailing ships that would come in. People lived on those ships. Whole families. And they would bring a month of dirty clothes. She would wash them, on her hands. The women would wear all these petticoats and would have to have them starched. The irons my grandmother had were the irons she would have to heat on the stove and press with. She did it for twenty-five cents.⁵⁷

By the 1920s, the island population was well in decline. The two savage hurricanes of August and September 1933 ("the granddaddys of all storms," in local parlance) convinced many who remained to leave for good.⁵⁸ A decade later, in 1943, only around ten children still lived in the village. Due to medical emergencies and the lack of a doctor on Portsmouth, most of these children had been born in Beaufort or Atlantic, where their mothers were taken before or during the onset of labor. (Lionel Gilgo told me of his mother's harrowing trip by boat over the sound to Beaufort while going into a painful and dangerous labor in 1937. The reason for this emergency was that this man who even today

⁵⁷ Personal interview with Hazel Gilgo Arthur, Bettie, N.C., February 9, 2009.

⁵⁸ Known as the Chesapeake-Potomac Storm and the Outer Banks Hurricane of 1933, these were the same storms that depopulated the barrier islands of Virginia's Eastern Shore. However, in both Virginia and North Carolina, 1933 was simply a benchmark date. The exodus from the islands had been going on for years. The storms' genuine ferocity aside, the significance of the '33 hurricanes is that they provide a suitable symbolic focal point in a long history of decline, functioning as a dramatic narrative crux in a much larger tale of loss. For analogous histories, see Brook Miles Barnes and Barry R. Truitt, eds., *Seashore Chronicles: Three Centuries of the Virginia Barrier Islands*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997.

is a towering figure by any standards already weighed almost fourteen pounds when he was born. “*And I’ve been growing ever since.*”⁵⁹) The island’s last school teacher, a Kentucky native named Miss Dixon who had married a local, left in 1942 with her husband. Thereafter, the State of North Carolina officially closed the island school. The school’s closure was, in effect, the resounding death knell for the village. By state law, parents were effectively forced to move to the mainland so their children could receive an education through the eleventh grade.⁶⁰

Narratives about Henry and Lizzie Pigott

By the 1950s, the only residents still living on Portsmouth year-round were Marian Gray Babb and four unmarried siblings: these were two African Americans, Henry Pigott and his sister Lizzie; and two elderly white sisters, Norma and Elma Dixon. Jessie Lee Babb (later Dominique), the last child born on the island, would come to the island occasionally to care for her aunts, Elma and Nora, alongside her sister Marian, but Jessie Lee had moved off permanently and lived in Beaufort.

With the sole exception of Henry and Lizzie, Connie Mason knew all of these last inhabitants of Portsmouth personally. She offered one comic detail from her encounter with them as a folklorist working for the National Park Service:

Miss Elma Dixon (they called her Aunt Addy), she was deafer than a conch, as we like to say. She was a wonderful musician, though, and she would play the piano by ear. [*Loud*

⁵⁹ Personal interview with Lionel Gilgo, Beaufort, N.C., February 8, 2009.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

laughter.] How ironic! She played a tune called the “Portsmouth Wedding March.” I’m supposed to be looking up if that came from anywhere else, but they say it was completely unique to Portsmouth. I recorded her playing it. She was in Beaufort at the time. On Jessie Lee’s old piano. “*Pianer.*” [*Laughs at her own pronunciation.*]⁶¹

In the corpus of stories still told about the island, Henry and Lizzie Pigott are singled out for particular affection. As African Americans, their role in the mythmaking that constitutes “homecoming” as a thought-process is both fascinating and disturbing.

As Christina Marsden Gillis and Susan Stewart hint in many related contexts, these two African Americans – remembered by whites who are now old but who were very young when the memories in question take place – now function essentially as “miniatures.” This is true both in the sense that white narratives have transformed Henry and Lizzie into poignant embodiments of a lost world and in the sense that they are characters out of the more literally “miniature” world of children, whose actions were performed when the world still seemed small. Yet they are not remembered only within this context of childhood. Henry, in particular, has to a great extent come to be treated as Portsmouth incarnate, a human symbol epitomizing a place, just as the 1933 hurricanes lingered on for decades in storytelling as the dramatic focal point of loss. However, the reasons why Henry Pigott has taken on this role as an object (I would suggest even a victim) of nostalgia bring forward a less attractive side of memory on Portsmouth, one pervaded by seldom explored racial ramifications mostly hidden in the uncomplicated portrayals of life on this island that prevail. In spite of the deep local affection in which their memory has been held by whites, the ways in which Henry and Lizzie figure into “homecoming” and the construction of “home ground” is more complex and potentially more disturbing than a surface reading of my interviews suggests.

⁶¹ Personal interview with Connie Mason, Harkers Island, N.C., February 7, 2009.

That Down Easters today hold black islanders in great esteem is evident. In places like Portsmouth now devoid of their permanent presence, African Americans ironically represent for many rural whites a connection to an irrecoverable past, an object of longing and desire in what is perceived as a lamentable present.⁶² As Stewart would suggest, surviving traces of African American history – including individuals – often fulfill the role of artistic miniatures, providing a ready image of departed loved ones (in this case, too, of a departed past in which life was thought to be more exotic, just, and beautiful.) That whites *always* held blacks in such esteem – in spite of attestations that Henry and Lizzie were treated just like white folk – is not as clear. One must approach carefully the type of white nostalgia that creates vivid narrative images of supposedly happy black caretakers inhabiting a small, rural Southern space in a past imagined to be simple and innocent. Rebecca Solnit’s comment about the perceptual transformations of place created by the “blue of distance” also applies, frighteningly so, to race.⁶³

With no alternative narratives available directly from Henry and Lizzie Pigott, nor from the hundreds of other blacks who lived on Portsmouth over a century and a half (none

⁶² This is also true on Ocracoke Island, whose last African American resident, Muzel Bryant, granddaughter of slaves, died in March 2008 at the age of 103. When I met her in 2007, a few months before her death, she was living in the home of Kenny Ballance, brother of the writer Alton Ballance. As Ms. Bryant was almost deaf and barely able to communicate, the experience of being brought to see her suddenly made me feel uncomfortable, as if I was a spectator in a cabinet of curiosities, particularly since Mr. Ballance had just brought out other objects from his house, whose stories he narrated to us on the front porch. In the course of twenty minutes, Ms. Bryant shared with us no stories of her own, and the only object she shared with us was a battery-powered toy that sang “God Bless America.” It was a painful and awkward situation to witness. I do not question Ms. Bryant’s ability to share valuable stories from her life if she had been better able to communicate – I had been eager to hear them. I do question why I was brought to *look* at her, because that is virtually all we did. In fairness, I sensed that Alton Ballance immediately regretted the awkwardness of this situation, yet the group of tradition-minded white Ocracokers who were hosting us were displaying something from their past prominently that made me feel (in Susan Stewart’s words) very much like “a tourist of their parents’ way of life.” The realities of African American history were further brought home to me by the fact that I was visiting Ms. Bryant alongside a very elegant and cosmopolitan young African American undergraduate from Duke, who was the polar opposite of this elderly black woman from the rural South in so many ways and had little more in common with her than I did.

⁶³ See quotation from *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* at the beginning of this thesis.

of their voices were ever recorded), it is important to recall the potentially troubling similarities between *remembering* and *imagining* – and of how often remembering borders on wishing. Although Down Easters (like other individuals around the world) admire past generations for folksy characteristics of earthiness and an almost organic know-how acquired far from the school room, when whites profess to admire blacks explicitly for their lack of a formal education, for qualities of naïve intelligence rather than the cultivated achievements that a good education might have provided to them, it is not the same as when whites admire men and women of their own race for these same qualities. Memory simplifies history all too easily. Yet not all white Down Easters, even those who simplify history in their narratives, are unaware of how often the images they create border on the quaint and racially insensitive.

Because of their race, both Pigott siblings had been indirectly barred by the state from receiving an education. For according to the dominant narrative (told of course by whites), there were no resources to open a separate school for blacks in Portsmouth village and segregation was mandated by North Carolina law.⁶⁴ More likely, locals simply assumed that blacks in this isolated town did not need an education and no attempt need be made to accommodate them: their fate was to be fishermen, clammers, and housewives and no education was necessary for those occupations. It is intriguing how routinely blame is deflected to outsiders for disrupting the idyll of island life.

The state's very real cold-shouldering of Henry and Lizzie aside, all accounts by whites that I have read or recorded testify that these siblings were treated no differently than other members of the Portsmouth community. Lionel Gilgo, who knew them both,

⁶⁴ Photographs of Henry seem to bear out Lionel Gilgo's belief that he (like Gilgo himself) had Native American ancestry, being descended from the Coree Indians who lived on the southern Outer Banks until the last of them amalgamated with Africans and Europeans in the early 1800's.

recalled: “I don’t think anybody on Portsmouth ever thought of them as being different because they were black. . . Education? That wasn’t Portsmouth’s population that did that.”⁶⁵ Ben Salter, in a short memoir of Portsmouth written in 1972, wrote “I always go back to see Henry when I go to Portsmouth, a finer man I never knew.” Salter recalled that Henry spoke with the “Old English Brogue” (“hoi toide”) common to his white neighbors.⁶⁶ Here, however, Salter obviously appreciates Henry because he spoke like white folk, and it is easy to see how this detail can appeal to those in search of “local color.” Tacit admiration for the details of Pigott’s and other islanders’ technologically primitive lifestyle was also widespread as early as the 1970s. “Wind blowing across a pan of water kept Mr. Pigott’s perishable foods cool,” attests an article in the *Carteret County News-Times* just after his death in 1971. “Mr. Pigott had a miniature screened out-building in which he housed foods requiring refrigeration. Cool air was produced when the wind blew across the pan of water.”⁶⁷ The article never once broaches the question of whether Henry Pigott was satisfied with the primitive circumstances in which he lived: it automatically assumes that he was content with them. In any but this picturesque seaside setting, such a lifestyle would clearly have been identified as marked by the poverty that it was. But because Henry Pigott was a black man who became a local folk hero, because he was thought to live organically and resourcefully, his deprivation has been reconstructed as an encouragement to savviness, an example worthy of admiration.

So organic a part of this island landscape did Pigott become that for some who

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ben B. Salter and Doris S. Willis, *Portsmouth Island: Short Stories and History*. Privately published, 1972. See pp. 18-20. That Pigott died a year before Salter penned these words suggests that he may have gone back to visit his gravesite, as well.

⁶⁷ *Carteret County News-Times*, reprinted in *The Mailboat*, Spring 1992. p. 13.

remember him, he was its most prominent physical feature. One of the most recurring images of Henry, in fact, is of him poling his skiff out to meet boats from Ocracoke once the mail (and hence the freight) service to Portsmouth was discontinued in 1949. (Prior to that, he had been contracted by the government to carry the mail for a pittance.) Chester Lynn, today a florist and antique dealer on Ocracoke, recalled espying Henry's figure as Lynn traveled to the island with his grandfather George O'Neal as a young child in the early 1960s. Although no more than a few years old when Lizzie died, Lynn's memories of Henry were most often linked to the sighting of Portsmouth in the distance as the skiff approached the island:

I remember granddaddy carried me to Portsmouth *a lot*. Sometimes the last man that was living over there, him and his sister, they were clamming out there on the shore. They'd be almost the first thing we'd see. And granddaddy would go up and help them with something, or he'd carry some food and stuff to the people over there.⁶⁸

Lionel Gilgo, who left Portsmouth when he was six but who has been going back regularly to visit ever since then, suggests that Henry's figure was analogous to a built feature in the landscape: "Now, when you take the ferry to Ocracoke, you look for the lighthouse. Back then in those days, when we took the mailboat to Portsmouth, you watched for Henry poling his boat out to meet you halfway."⁶⁹

Beset with similar admiration for the details of old-fashioned island life, selective memories about Henry and Lizzie that figure into conversations today are not deliberately intended to demean them as individuals. In a larger sense, however, narratives about these black islanders preserve simplistic notions about historical change. These narratives emerge

⁶⁸ Personal interview with Chester Lynn, Ocracoke, N.C., April 20, 2008.

⁶⁹ Personal interview with Lionel Gilgo, Beaufort, N.C, February 8, 2009.

from visual images: a few examples from my interviews illustrate the attitudes I refer to.

Hazel Gilgo Arthur recalled:

I very well remember Henry Pigott. Momma used to tell me he changed my diaper many a time. [One wonders why Henry, a middle-aged black man, was changing a white infant's diaper when there were people in the Gilgo family capable of doing it.]

When Lizzie, his sister, got sick the last time, she was at Morehead, in the old hospital. She was down in the basement because she was black. But all the white people from Down East went to see Lizzie. Those other black people didn't understand why. I really, truly don't believe that anybody ever saw the color of her skin, or Henry's either. It was just a man and woman that was Lizzie and Henry.⁷⁰

Morehead City, of course, while not technically Down East, is bound by profound occupational and cultural ties with the eastern half of Carteret County and is not radically different in outlook, in spite of the wishful distinctions that Down Easterns often construct between city folk and country folk when race comes into play. These attitudes about rural virtue versus urban corruption should not be accepted uncritically. Morehead City was no more racist than most Southern towns during segregation. Many blacks, in fact, were eager to leave small coastal communities to find work there.

Evoking images replete with the landscape of childhood that so often figure into portrayals of "old-time" life on the Outer Banks (e.g., old fishermen and "young'uns" hanging around in barbershops⁷¹), Lionel Gilgo remembered:

Lizzie, Henry's sister, I can see her just as good as if she were sitting there in that chair right there with her old apron on, that little toothbrush there inside of her mouth made out of sweet gum or black gum, and just as neat as a pin. She always had her hair kind of up, it weren't slicked back, it was kindly up, pulled back. And she was the barber there. I

⁷⁰ Personal interview Hazel Gilgo Arthur, Bettie, N.C., February 9, 2009.

⁷¹ Sol Libsohn, a Brooklyn-based photographer sent to Hatteras by Standard Oil in 1945 to document the uses of petroleum, presciently forecasted later generations' fixation on barbershops as symbols of local authenticity when he included several images of old-timers and children getting their hair cut as part of his portrayal of island life.

remember her cutting my hair many, many times. Nothing but a comb and scissors, that was all she had, there weren't no clippers. And I remember that if it was five cent, it was all right, and if you didn't have it, it was still all right. . .⁷² [One wonders whether Lizzie really thought so.]

Sonny Williamson recalled that Henry, who was illiterate, would “take a pencil and draw a picture of peaches, or whatever it was he wanted, and send it to Ocracoke when the mailboat came, and they'd bring him peaches.”⁷³ That Williamson remembered this fact more as a sign of Henry's resilience than of the state's (and the community's) neglect to provide him with an education is telling. Richard Meissner, in discussing Lizzie's ability to read, offered a slightly different version of this narrative, adding that Henry could send written requests for canned goods, but “only because he knew what was in [each] can and he would copy the letters” from the label.⁷⁴

While Henry and Lizzie were never employed as servants to whites, the images conjured by memory all too often border closely upon a scenario very similar to servitude, one in which antebellum slavery was merely subsumed into later race relations and survived long after emancipation. Though Henry's 1971 obituary says that “Mr. Pigott was considered the patriarch of the island”⁷⁵ and the memorial plaque hanging behind the altar in the Methodist church testifies that he was “the last male resident of the island. . . He was a friend to all”, these statements effectively divert attention from the sad neglect in which the memory of African Americans on Portsmouth is held today. Fundamentally, the story of

⁷² Personal interview with Lionel Gilgo, Beaufort, N.C., February 8, 2009.

⁷³ Personal interview with Sonny Williamson, Marshallberg, N.C., March 3, 2008.

⁷⁴ “The reason Lizzie could read was that when the kids would come home from school, they would play school and Lizzie was their student. They would share with her what they had learned. . . Henry didn't do that because he was working.” Personal interview with Richard Meissner, Harkers Island, N.C., February 7, 2009.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Salter, 20.

Henry Pigott and his relationship to the dwindling white population of the island that he called home is frustratingly emblematic of the fate of Portsmouth's African Americans as a whole.

After Lizzie died in 1960, Henry became the caretaker of the two Dixon sisters, though he was approximately their own age. The sight of an aging black man doing handiwork for two equally aging white ladies was, of course, an extremely common feature of life in the South well into the era of desegregation. One can hardly imagine the situation being reversed even on Portsmouth, where race relations were supposedly so benign. Yet those who remember life Down East in the mid-20th century tend to conveniently forget this fact.⁷⁶ The racial ramifications of Henry Pigott's role as island handyman are expediently disguised by the overarching narrative of survival, which runs thus: Henry was eventually the only man left on the island and the only person capable of handling a boat, therefore he was the Dixon sisters' only link to the outside world, the village's savior and benefactor. As Kenneth Burke expressed it, Portsmouth's existence as a living community gradually became "intimately connected to the continued beating of his heart."⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Details of the history of uncomfortable race relations on Portsmouth are frequently narrated as "rumors," not as facts. There are often good reasons for this, but the qualitative distinction is important. Richard Meissner, volunteer coordinator for Cape Lookout National Seashore, cited one of these rumors to me in an interview. While visiting Portsmouth with Jessie Lee Babb Dominique once, the two stopped at the community cemetery next to the post office. Jessie Lee placed flowers on the grave of a two- or three-day old child whom she identified as her "baby brother." Meissner then cites the "rumor" that this child was "born black." "Mr. Babb apparently came in and found Mrs. Babb with Henry Pigott." The child, Meissner asserted, may have been killed because of this sexual transgression. (The identity of Henry and Lizzie's own father is unknown, though the man was almost certainly white. Both siblings were illegitimate. That Henry's own illegitimate child may have been murdered – potentially by the child's own mother – is of course never mentioned in the adoring journalistic accounts of island life that abound.) Meissner believes the rumored love affair between Jessie Lee's mother and Henry might be one reason why Lizzie was buried in the Babb Cemetery behind the Methodist Church (i.e., so that Henry, too, would later be buried there), though the "official" answer given by Marian Babb (Jessie Lee's older sister) was always that when Lizzie died in the 1960s, the Keeler Cemetery where the Pigott family was buried was too overgrown to get to. Personal interview with Richard Meissner, Harkers Island, N.C., February 7, 2009.

⁷⁷ Burke's Bachelor's thesis at the University of Richmond in 1958 was a history of Portsmouth to the Civil War. "The History of Portsmouth, North Carolina, from its founding in 1753 to its evacuation in the face of Federal forces in 1861." Washington, D.C.: Insta-Print, 1976.

Yet this versatile survival narrative further deepens the seldom addressed racial overtones of the saga of Henry and Lizzie. The dominant narrative implies that brother and sister chose to stay behind to the end, faithful servants who would not abandon Portsmouth in its final years. The hard realities hiding behind this fact are not immediately borne out until one realizes how little has ever been said in honor of the countless other blacks who contributed to Portsmouth's life over two centuries, most of whom were kept in slavery. Black islanders who had the initiative to leave the site of their captivity at slavery's end in order to seek prosperity elsewhere are rarely honored today. The ones who stayed behind, above all these last two African Americans who never had children of their own, who clung to a dying town and a dying way of life, and who cared for the white folks here until their own bodies gave out, are the ones who are admired and memorialized today. It is an image disturbingly close to that of the "faithful negro" who remained on the plantation after the Civil War, the white man's favorite black man who was too loyal, too scared, or just too crippled by slavery to succeed in the wider world. Today, the slaves who built Portsmouth are not honored with a single plaque in the Methodist Church, the island's most sacred space. Yet the name of Henry Pigott, transformed by nostalgia and desire even before his death into a simple, faithful survivor and heroic black handyman who resembled his white neighbors in almost everything but the color of his skin, is etched in bronze behind the altar, a few feet from the image of Christ.

In conveying an image of the village and the subconscious need to populate it with extraordinary people, there has been a tendency to romanticize Henry Pigott after his death. Contrary to the heroic, almost cinematic, image some may wish to construct of a valiant African American denied an education who found himself the trustworthy caretaker of a few old white ladies living in a ghost town by the sea, Pigott – as Lionel Gilgo stresses – "was

never outstanding at anything.”⁷⁸ What disturbs both Gilgo and myself is that this islander has become a local hero not because of any extraordinary accomplishments or unusual intelligence of his own, but because he was a quintessentially ordinary man who was made so largely by the difficult circumstances of his youth. With no education at all, he likely would have failed if he had left Portsmouth. So illiterate that he had to draw pictures of food to acquire whatever he could not catch or raise, he was ultimately crippled by his island upbringing, not merely by the effects of the segregation laws that must have influenced his decision to stay there for life. Nostalgia for bygone days of heroic glory continues to make claims to the contrary, but such men (white and black) were not rare on the Outer Banks before the roads came in. Gilgo recalled:

From my memory of him, [Henry] was just a humble man. I would say, from a natural disposition carefree, took life as it dealt with him. If he were worried, he kept it to himself.

When I get a picture of Henry, he’s either sitting down on his steps that went up to the same porch where Lizzie cut hair, or he’s doing something with his hands with making decoys, or he’s in his boat poling in where he’s been clamming. . . And I won’t say anything to give or take credit [from] Henry in any way when I make this statement, but the last historians in the last few years have built him up to where maybe he was the greatest thing that ever was. . .

As I remember Henry, he was just one of the other group of men that lived on Portsmouth. I don’t know of any outstanding, great things that he did and I don’t know anything he ever did to anyone that would discredit him.

He was just an individual who minded his own business, worked as hard as he had to to get something to eat and make a few dollars, and was never outstanding at anything that I know of. You *couldn’t* be on Portsmouth. You were very restricted on Portsmouth.⁷⁹

Succumbing to pneumonia after a declining period of health, Pigott was nursed briefly by Junius Austin on Ocracoke but died in Elizabeth City in January 1971.

⁷⁸ Personal interview with Lionel Gilgo, Beaufort, N.C., February 8, 2009.

⁷⁹ Personal interview with Lionel Gilgo, Beaufort, N.C., February 8, 2009.

(“Seventeen men and four women braved a blowing gale of wind to see he was given a fitting funeral on his native island,” said a newspaper account of Pigott’s final homecoming.⁸⁰) After his passing, a few individuals from Ocracoke did their best to support Marian Gray Babb and her aunt Elma Dixon (Nora had passed away), but the women finally decided to move off the island later that year. Connie Mason reiterated the survival narrative when she spoke of these women’s predicament after Henry died: “They depended on somebody with a boat to help them live out there. And so they could no longer function out there.”⁸¹ After the National Park Service mistakenly poisoned their water supply (collected in open cisterns) by applying asbestos shingles to their roofs, Babb and Dixon decided to relocate to Beaufort, where they lived with Jessie Lee Dominique, Babb’s younger sister, and her husband.⁸² Elma Dixon died in 1990, Marian Gray Babb in 1993. Jessie Lee Dominique, the last child ever born on Portsmouth, was killed in a car accident in Beaufort in August 2005 at the age of 78. As the next section of this chapter details, these ladies, too – especially Jessie Lee Dominique – figure profoundly into narratives of loss, longing, and home on Portsmouth.

Signs of Presence and Absence: A Silhouette in a Box

Richard Meissner, a volunteer coordinator for Cape Lookout National Seashore – of which Portsmouth Island became a part in the 1970s – developed close personal ties to the

⁸⁰ *Carteret County News-Times*, as reprinted in *The Mailboat*, Spring 1992, p. 13.

⁸¹ Personal interview with Connie Mason, Harkers Island, N.C., February 7, 2009.

⁸² Marian, Jessie Lee, and a cousin, Mildred Dixon, soon formed a gospel trio, the Carolina Sweethearts, and sang on radio station WMBL out of Morehead City. See obituary for Marian Babb, *Carteret County News-Times*, June 18, 1993, and my interview with Connie Mason cited above.

village over the course of his service there as a historic interpreter. Meissner, however, is a retired high school drama teacher from Asheboro who has no family connections to the island at all. His experience bears home how strongly Portsmouth has captured the imaginations of those who come here purely as tourists, eventually granting them a means to set down an affective root here and consider the place a home.

In his house on Harkers Island, Richard meticulously preserves a few objects that bring him closer to the last handful of islanders who lived on Portsmouth. Before Jessie Lee Dominique's tragic death in 2005, she had given Richard several objects that she herself brought back from the village: for Jessie Lee and Richard, these served as a way to bridge the gap in time between past and present; for Richard, they helped bridge the gap between him and Jessie Lee, whose untimely death devastated him.

During an interview I conducted with Richard at his home one late winter evening in 2009, we had been sitting on his living room floor sifting through old church service programs from twenty years or so of Portsmouth Homecomings, minutes from meetings of the non-profit group Friends of Portsmouth Island (the organization that revived the Homecoming in the early 1990s), and newspaper articles dating back to the 1960s, many of which called Portsmouth a "ghost town" – an offensive term to those who love it and insist that it has "never truly been abandoned."⁸³ Though I had wanted to know more about *homecoming* as a process, Richard had misunderstood me and generously brought out all the information he had about *Homecoming* as a public event. I politely sifted through the papers he put in front of me before asking him more pointedly about his own relationship to Portsmouth.

⁸³ Marian Gray Babb was aware of these newspaper articles. Connie Mason said that "you get really Marian's hackles up in a heartbeat by calling Portsmouth a ghost town. She would say, '*Ghost town implies death and ain't dead yet!*'" Personal interview with Connie Mason, Harkers Island, N.C., February 7, 2009.

It was not long before he mentioned the loss of Jessie Lee Dominique as central to his experience of the island. She was the woman who had first told him its history, talking affectionately about the village for two hours during a ferry crossing to Ocracoke from Cedar Island. Portsmouth, of course, was in the distance. Once Richard became a lead volunteer interpreter in the historic village, living practically alone in one of the old village houses for months, the two developed a fast friendship because of their shared love of the place. When he missed her birthday celebration in August 2005, held in her honor in the 1915 Methodist church in Portsmouth village, “she brought me some white irises back from the island,” Richard said. “We’d both seen them. Someone had planted them next to the old post office there and they were right pretty. In exchange, I brought her some new folklore books about Portsmouth for her birthday. We met and had lunch – and she was killed in a car accident that night.”

Richard then brought out a small cardboard box that he had carefully preserved in his house. At first, I thought he just wanted to show me the box. “I think the box, which Lee just had to keep this in, is as important as anything,” Richard said. Yellow and faded, the address label on it – from a pharmacist’s in Beaufort – still bore the following words in typescript: “Parcel Post, Henry Pigott, Portsmouth, N.C.” The box and label dated probably from the 1960s. He asked me to photograph it. Only later did my mind run back to the small miniature silhouettes and daguerreotypes kept in enameled cases almost two centuries ago.

Richard then took something out of the box. “Now this right here, the Park took a picture of this when Lee had it and it’s part of their display.” Pointing to another photograph that was also contained in the box – an image of Elma and Nora Dixon sitting on the steps of their home (*see image 7 in appendix*) – he then pointed at the object in question.

“These ladies made that,” he said. “You tell me what it is.”

To me, the white object made of netting looked like a small fishing net, particularly since the women in the photograph seemed to be weaving one.

“It is not a net,” Richard said. “Well, rather, it *is* a net, but it’s not used for what you think it is.”

“I have no idea, then,” I said, though in retrospect the answer should have been obvious.

“I understand there was a net-making place in Beaufort, and the Dixon sisters would be what we call sub-contractors,” Richard told me. “They weren’t the only ones. Ladies all around the county made these things, and other things that the net company had them make, to bring in a little extra money, you know. This is probably in the ‘40s or ‘50s. I *will* tell you that it is finished, but you have to do one more thing to it for it to be useful. And that’s to cut it open at the bottom. . .”

I still could not guess.

“It is a basketball net.” Meissner then became somewhat breathless when he added: “Can you imagine some young Michael Jordan in Iowa throwing a basketball through a net that two little old ladies on Portsmouth made? Doesn’t that just blow your mind?”

Perhaps thousands of these nets woven by Elma and Nora Dixon forty years ago still adorn barns and yards across the United States. Meissner’s breathlessness was born of his realization of how much space – geographic, chronological – and how much emotional force could so easily be contained within an object as simple as a basketball net, once this object was endowed with personal narrative meaning. That he kept it in the box alongside an authentic nineteenth-century net-mending kit made of wood and iron did not diminish its emotional value for him. The net both cast and was the recipient of a silhouette of its own

not overshadowed by the much older kit. As Mendieta and Gillis affirm, though the silhouette is a marker of absence, it is no less powerful for that fact. The silhouette's ability both to haunt and to succor our emotions lies in its capacity to evoke the sense that what is gone has returned. Far from home, in Iowa perhaps, Meissner could glimpse these nets hanging in barnyards and his thoughts would turn again to the horizon where Portsmouth lies, and his reflections would bring his friend Jessie Lee closer to him again.

Bringing back the Annabelle

What is carved into stone, captured by a lens, or woven by hand are not the only objects capable of refracting memory within the mind and making it tangible again to the eye. Things built in wood, too, bring the mind closer to the past and project it into the visible future.

Jimmy Amspacher is one of the last wooden boat builders in eastern North Carolina and indeed in the entire American South. Though he does not come from a family of boat builders, he is the direct inheritor – and almost the only current practitioner – of the impressive Core Sound boat building tradition, a tradition that has crafted boats so finely attuned to the waters and winds of this particular place that many still consider them the best craft for sailing here. In an area where fifty years ago most fishermen built their own craft in their own backyards, Jimmy is now almost unique. Yet his commitment to boatbuilding is more than elegy to the past: it is a determination to carry this craft into the future.

Though Jimmy was born and raised in Atlantic, his father Merle had come to North Carolina from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where the family had Amish roots. Jimmy

keeps an old eighteenth-century German family Bible, written in *Fraktur* script, in his house and spent summer vacations with the Amish side of the family in southeastern Pennsylvania as a teenager.⁸⁴ Though he commiserated with his father, who left the Amish (Jimmy said) because “he got tired of looking up a horse’s ass every morning,” Jimmy spoke well of his Amish ancestors during a conversation I had with him at Great Marsh Boatworks, a boatbuilding shop he co-owns and operates in Marshallberg in eastern Carteret County. As he spoke, he labored over a sixteen-foot wooden sail skiff called the *Annabelle* and I could not help thinking that his respect for the down-to-earth lifestyle of his father’s family influenced at some level his devotion to careful craftsmanship.

Jimmy admires the past. After all, he builds wooden boats for a living that are emblematic of the place he calls home. He has memorized the dimensions of countless historic small sailing craft and can construct them almost without a diagram. Later on, he asks me to send him photographs of *this* boat – the *Annabelle* – in action on Pamlico Sound so he could “see how it was turning.” Though a superlative boat builder, he is not really a sailor, nor has he ever been a fisherman. His house is full of miniature boats that he has made over the years; alongside countless paintings, memorabilia, and books about local history, they bring the largeness of this coastal setting into the intimacy of his living room. Great Marsh Boatworks, a one-minute walk from his house, is new. Sometimes he teaches classes there. His wife Karen says he lives there.

Suddenly picking up a piece of scrap wood from a pile of sawdust under the half-built skiff *Annabelle*, he sketches me an impromptu map of eastern North Carolina, its

⁸⁴ Like the Amish, though, Jimmy was always a bit of a rebel. As a teenager in the 1960s, he performed in a Beaufort rock band called the Huckleberry Mud Flaps, a short-lived but moderately successful spin-off of The Beatles and The Velvet Underground, with some influence from beach music. The band released LPs and went on a North American tour, opening in casinos and other establishments as far away as Las Vegas and Winnipeg, Manitoba. He then worked for a few decades as an engineer at Cherry Point Naval Air Station in nearby Havelock, N.C.

sounds and rivers and islands delineated in freehand in fair detail, narrating bits of its history as he does so – though the subject of one of his wilder narrations with the map was of how the Federal government sought to buy up Down East during World War II and use it to test the atomic bomb. Like his son Casey, a mathematics student in New York, his skill with numbers is not inconsiderable. One winter solstice a few years ago, he saw a beam of sunlight cast on the cement floor of the boatworks through a crack in the door high up toward the rafters. He took a black Sharpie marker in his hand and a wristwatch, then began to measure the light’s slow movement across the workshop floor. The marks are still there, full of big numbers and trigonometric diagrams, perfectly legible beneath where the *Annabelle* lies hoisted up on wooden jacks. They are a calculation of the Earth’s speed around the Sun and of Marshallberg’s distance to the center of the solar system on the shortest day of the year.

Where boats used to lay shaded by overgrowth and live oaks, most of the foliage in these small coastal North Carolina towns has been cleared away to provide views and room for beach houses. Since the 1970s, land values have skyrocketed and the fishing industry has collapsed. This new boat, however, was an emblem of that older time and itself was replete with history. Though it would not be finished until April, it had ironically been sailed a few generations before, for the boat Jimmy was at work on was merely a replica of an older craft. Bits and pieces of that first boat were built into it. Though it shared the exact dimensions of the original *Annabelle*, functionally the boat before my eyes was a miniature of the earlier skiff.

I was vaguely aware of the history of that original boat. To my surprise, however, Jimmy took me outside and showed it to me, lying on the ground on the far side of the workshop, a few steps away. The “irrecoverable” distances I thought history was so made

up of suddenly seemed laughably small.

“This boat here was built probably sometime between 1890 and 1915,” he said. “It was owned by Chester Lynn’s grandfather on Ocracoke, who used it as a workboat. He sailed it over to Portsmouth many a time. He took food to the last people living on Portsmouth in this boat right here. Chester sailed in it with his granddaddy when he was a kid. He wants me to rebuild it using as much of the old boat as possible.”

The old boat, in fact, looked rather pilfered (*see image 17 in appendix*). Much of it had rotted and it would have sunk in a swimming pool, let alone Pamlico Sound. There were a couple of large holes punched in its side; the red, white and blue paint had flaked away; and the keel and gunwales were all dented and chipped. Anybody but its owner Chester Lynn, whom I had met briefly on a few occasions, would probably have sawn it in half and turned it into a flower bed in the front yard. Yet Chester, who ironically enough was a florist, would never think of dishonoring his grandfather’s boat in such a way.

I spoke with Chester in Ocracoke the day before the Portsmouth Homecoming in April 2008. He runs a flower shop out of his home and also deals in antiques, stored in his house on a quiet back street away from the harbor and the tourist crowds, near the Pentecostal Church that he attends. He is about fifty years old and is an avid aficionado of Ocracoke and Portsmouth’s history and of coastal history in general. He has worked closely with archaeologists, historical researchers, and others to document the past of these two closely-entwined islands, and is known unofficially as the “mayor of Portsmouth” for his efforts to revive the Homecoming and preserve the island’s heritage. Many of his family came from Portsmouth originally. He speaks with a strong Outer Banks “brogue” and was a major help to linguist Walt Wolfram in documenting the Ocracoke’s historic (and imperiled)

speech characteristics for the book *Hoi Toide on the Outer Banks*.⁸⁵ “Portsmouth” he pronounces *Porch’mouth*, the way it has been spoken here since Irishmen, Philadelphians and English sailors first influenced the local speech in the 1800s.

His house is full of local memorabilia, including one of the original lights from the Cape Lookout lighthouse. Family memorabilia, too, is everywhere. “In the past twenty or twenty-five years or so, I have been collecting family things. I have set out to collect everything that I know of that belonged to somebody in the family. I have either tried to get some of it back, or I’ve tried to at least get pictures or become aware of the history of my family and who they are.”⁸⁶

I ask Chester about the boat. It was once owned by his grandfather, George O’Neal, a well-known and influential man on Ocracoke during and after World War II, as he was the owner and operator of the mailboat *Aleta*, which except for the freight boat was the only way to get to the island before the establishment of the ferry system. O’Neal died before Chester was even a teenager, but his grandson preserves strong, fond memories of him. The boat was his way of reconnecting with his grandfather and the island in the distance they used to visit together.

Chester spoke at length with little prompting:

The boat. As a small boy, I was with granddaddy a lot. At the time when granddaddy died – he died in ‘68 – he had a bunch of brothers and sisters. The brothers all fished, but for some reason none of them came and got me and carried me fishing or carried me out in the boat. But I remember, even as a little boy, fishing with granddaddy or painting his boat. I probably got more paint on me than I got on his boat, but I *thought* I done good, you know! And I remember going out clamming and going to Portsmouth in the boat with him, a lot of things like that. I just loved it to death and enjoyed being over there in it.

⁸⁵ Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes, *Hoi Toide on the Outer Banks: The Story of the Ocracoke Brogue*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

⁸⁶ Personal interview with Chester Lynn, Ocracoke, N.C., April 20, 2008. All quotations from Chester Lynn that follow are from this interview.

He suggested that the boat was “part” of his grandfather, a detail he stressed by repeating it. “I knew the boat was a real part of granddaddy, you know. I had lots of things that were part of grandmamma, but the boat was different for granddaddy. It was *part of him*.”⁸⁷ I began to see the connections in Chester’s mind between reacquiring and rebuilding the boat and reviving a lost connection to his deceased grandfather and the landscape they enjoyed together in it. Bringing back the *Annabelle* was analogous at some level to bringing back George O’Neal. The boat and the man were rough contemporaries. “Granddaddy was born in 1890, about the time that boat was made, according to Jimmy.”

Chester suggested how the history of the boat encapsulated the changes in land use and changes in ways of experiencing land through work that have had such a real effect on coastal life. Though he did not express his opinions in academic terminology, he was chafing against the distinctions made by modernist art critics that divided the realms of the “aesthetic” from the “utilitarian.” The aesthetic and the utilitarian were never separate in his mind. Chester was aware that for George O’Neal, a workboat was also a sailboat and vice versa – pleasure could readily be found in labor; labor *was* pleasure. As his occupational history demonstrates, O’Neal was, of course, perfectly aware of the distinctions between leisure and working landscapes, but he melded them together:

He’d been a captain and a sea person all his life, a water person. In the ‘20s and ‘30s he worked up in Maryland on the DuPont’s yacht. The boat was originally a sailboat, but later it became a workboat. Granddaddy put a little motor on it and used it in fishing and clamming and oystering and whatever. Sailboat, workboat. . . you see, in his day, as far as pleasure was concerned, pleasure was being able to know that you took care of your family. And granddaddy did that good. Granddaddy took care of everybody.

They used to have a lot of races in it, in the late ‘40s and early part of the ‘50s. And my aunt, my mamma’s sister, said that granddaddy won many and many an award and many a race

⁸⁷ Emphasis is his.

with that boat. Because it's narrow and the style of the boat, it would *move*.

The *Annabelle* was also directly tied to the lost landscape of childhood that Chester encountered with his grandfather in the waters off Portsmouth in the 1950s and early 1960s. That landscape was enjoyed in the process of working in it as much as it is now enjoyed within the realm of memory.

I remember us as kids going out with him in the boat. Me and my younger sister, we were tiny and small. But I remember the grass on the bottom of the water, the seaweed, I knew there was crabs in that grass. And so as a kid, when granddaddy went out clamming, we didn't want to get in that grass. So we fussed. But the centerboard, that was still there in that boat [when Chester found it forty years later], we would get on each side of that and hide and play. And when granddaddy threw clams in the boat, we would line them up and he was happy because we were occupying ourselves in the boat.

I remember granddaddy carried me to Portsmouth *a lot*. Sometimes the last man that was living over there, him and his sister [Henry and Lizzie Pigott], they were clamming out there on the shore. They'd be almost the first thing we'd see. And granddaddy would go up and help them with something, or he'd carry some food and stuff to the people over there.

Chester's narrative and his interest in the recreating the boat is more than an elegy for the lost, more than a striving for direct connection with the dead. Embodied in it was a past capable of revivifying the living. Chester's friend Fowler O'Neal, an Ocracoke native who worked in shipyards in Philadelphia for years after his return from World War II and who then came back to the island, contributed to the life story of the *Annabelle* by adding his own narratives. He did not allow me to record these, but stressed that it was a link back to his wild youth (he was then 89.) Chester asserted that talking with him about the boat while Jimmy was building it gave him strength during the illness he suffered from in his final years (he passed away early in 2009):

Fowler and Conch and Morris [the O'Neal brothers], they used the boat when they were growing up. And they were the last people to sail it. And so I know that they will enjoy it. And if nothing else comes out of it... Fowler, *he has enjoyed it*. Just the idea, the

talking about it, has brought back *life* in him. He's been sick, he's not doing good. But it's made him happy talking to Jimmy over it, and so that's made *me* happy. To share that little bit.

Once Chester found the original, dilapidated boat in the back yard of a fisherman named John Gaskins, he purchased it from him. The boat was not in good shape, but in a sort of laying-on-of-hands across of time, he asked Jimmy to take as many material bits from the *Annabelle* as possible in constructing the new skiff. It was thus a direct rebirth of the old:

I know he basically made a new boat, but he used every little thing he could out of the old boat. He used nails and some pieces from the old boat. The pieces on the front, where you pull it, where you put a rope on to pull it out of the water, that was off the original. And I know he straightened up a lot of old nails and used them. All he could, you know. But he made it identical to what was there before.

I knew that Portsmouth homecoming was also a significant factor in why Chester had decided to rebuild O'Neal's skiff. We had, in fact, sighted Portsmouth together earlier that afternoon in the waters off Ocracoke, as the *Annabelle* sailed toward the harbor.

Before sunrise that morning, Jimmy Amspacher loaded the *Annabelle* onto a trailer and drove it the roughly forty miles from Marshallberg to Cedar Island, the jumping off point for the two-hour-long ferry crossing to Ocracoke. Rather than take the ferry, of course, Jimmy sailed the boat himself. It was an unheralded but minor historic event: as far as Jimmy and Chester were aware, no boat of this type had sat in Ocracoke harbor since the 1960s. "We have photographs of my granddaddy's boat sitting in the harbor in the 1950s," Chester emphasized. "They aren't family photographs. Somebody else took them, and we think he did so because it was rare to see a boat of this type in the harbor even in those days." When Jimmy set out that morning, he was making history on two different levels: not only would the boat be the first of its kind to sail into Ocracoke in at least forty years, in all likelihood this would be the first long-distance crossing of Pamlico Sound by such a boat

in a much longer period of time, possibly not since the 1920s.

Though its waters are comparatively shallow, Pamlico Sound is immense and far lonelier than many waterways of similar size. Few boats are capable of sailing it and you will never run across a freighter or a large yacht here. For a short period, Jimmy would be sailing into near-complete isolation. Although the distance from Cedar Island to Ocracoke is only twenty-six miles, even the motorized ferry crossing is a two-hour journey and one can barely make out land even from the observation deck, for the barrier islands lie low on the horizon. Normally, a small rise in mainland Hyde County on the far western edge of the sound is all that can be made out unless visibility is particularly good. Low on the water in a sail skiff, once Cedar Island fell away, Jimmy was out of sight of land for a long stretch. Cell phone connection here is non-existent. If anything went wrong, he would be entering that same world of “work, sweat, exhaustion, and fear” that Richard White wrote was the quintessential experience of land throughout most of human history. It would thus be a direct experiential encounter with labor, but also constitute an aesthetic enjoyment of the past; Jimmy would (in Susan Stewart’s words) “a tourist of our parent’s way of life.” A fair breeze at first helped him make good time, but just off Portsmouth, the wind fell out completely and he had to paddle for four or five miles.

Finally, Jimmy got within sight of Ocracoke harbor. Portsmouth village lay to his right. Captain Rudy Austin, a retired ferryman who runs boat tours to Portsmouth, took Chester, a historian and Portsmouth descendent named Jim White, and myself on a motor boat to meet Jimmy as he approached Ocracoke. As we drew nearer, I got a small sense of what it must have been like for the crews of two ships to meet each other in a distant sea after weeks of isolation, for Chester, Rudy and Jimmy joked at length as if they had not seen each other in years. They exchanged witty, sexualized banter as Rudy helped Chester – a

man of considerable girth – step into the *Annabelle*. Once in the boat, Chester was given control of it, with Jimmy guiding him, and Jimmy shouted at me to take a few photographs of Chester sailing alone as the boatbuilder ducked low and hid in the keel (“We’ll send it to Fowler!” he shouted. “He’ll get a good laugh out of seeing Chester sailing all by himself!”) Chester had longed to be in the boat as it sailed into Ocracoke harbor, as it soon did, slipping into “Silver Lake” among a gaggle of kayaks gathered nearby, to the admiration of many onlookers who turned and stared, just as the unknown photographer who took pictures of the *Annabelle* fifty years ago must have stared at George O’Neal’s craft.

“It was quite an experience,” said Jimmy, who said nothing else but said this twice. “It was *quite* an experience.”

The next day, April 21, early in the morning, Jimmy took Chester to the Portsmouth Homecoming aboard the *Annabelle*. Chester’s family had lived in Portsmouth village since its founding in 1753. I asked him about the significance of this place in his life. In an anecdote that he often tells and would tell again that day in a “porch-sitting event” during the Homecoming, sitting next to Lionel Gilgo, he noted that his grandmother Annabelle Dixon’s connection with Portsmouth Island began even before she was born, for her parents were married in Portsmouth one winter night before embarking on a remarkable boat journey back to Ocracoke. The anecdote suggests the almost mythic significance of Chester’s own boat journey “home” during Homecoming, for in a skiff named for the child who may have been conceived that night – Annabelle Dixon became Annabelle O’Neal – he was retracing the journey his great-grandparents had made after their wedding. On the steps of their house, Chester said to the crowd:

The first Federal census records the Dixons as being on Portsmouth. That was in 1790, but we know they were there long before that. My grandmother Annabelle O’Neal was originally a Dixon from Portsmouth. My *great*-grandmother was married in the village.

Here's the family Bible right here. And the recording in this Bible tells about a certain thing that went on there at the wedding. The wedding took place after dark on December 23, 1889, and then after that they tied the boats together and sailed them back to Ocracoke. *At night.*⁸⁸

In his home on Ocracoke the day before Homecoming, Chester had elaborated at length on what Portsmouth meant to him:

Everybody that knows me knows how much I love Portsmouth Island. It is so simple and so quiet. I often get over to Portsmouth and get down to what we call the Middle Community hunting for old house sites or old graves or trees or bushes. I pay attention to all that.

I was out there last week, and two archaeologists said, "Chester, we can tell you're in your glory." I was. The tide was knee-deep. We were in the marsh. I hardly had boots on. And I fell down in it. I think I had a mop-handle or a shovel-handle to walk with, something to secure my legs a little bit, but I loved every piece of it. And I could point and say "such and such is right over there," and the archaeologists went there and it was just as I said. And *every single thing* I said was where it was at except for one thing, and then I realized what I'd done wrong.

Like Richard Meissner, Portsmouth was both a source of great joy and pain to him, for he remembered the individuals who once lived there but are now deceased. Jessie Lee

Dominique was one of them:

Last year I got into the hymn-singing a little bit late, and one of the last living people that was born on Portsmouth came in. And I said this out loud (I didn't mean to say it out loud). I said, "*The Queen has arrived.*" And that's how I felt. I *meant* to think it in my mind. But I said it so the whole congregation could hear it. I didn't realize I said it, but it didn't matter. It's how I felt, you know.

She was Jessie Lee Dominique. Me and Rudy went there to her birthday party, and I carried her a cake made of flowers, and they took pictures of her with her cake in her hand, and we had a surprise dinner in the Lifesaving Station. And two days later she was killed. Her death announcement in the newspaper was her holding that birthday cake. That got me.

Like a locket, for Chester the mere *sight* of Portsmouth was enough to close up some

⁸⁸ That morning, I had been given the honor of carrying the Bible in which this "recording" was made, in a boat alongside Karen Amspacher, to the Homecoming.

of the gaps in time and space that kept him from the place and people he loved:

My cousin said he hadn't been to Portsmouth in three years. If I hadn't been to Portsmouth in three years, they'd know to check me. Because I couldn't do it. After a while, I go a period of time and I haven't been, then I'll call and say, "Rudy, when are you going to Portsmouth?" And it don't matter if I don't do a thing but get in the boat and ride with him and come back and never get off that boat. At least I *see* it.

He then concluded with a direct and telling experiential narrative of Portsmouth's power to affect him, both body and soul:

One of the best memories I have is years ago, it's been now maybe eight years, Rudy and another guy were out sticking net stakes in their pound nets, and I said "I'll go with you." I just went and got out and held the boat, so it wouldn't float away, you know. We were on the far end of Portsmouth, the water was warm, it was in the latter part of August or early September, it was perfect weather. I could see the island in the distance and it made me feel good. I felt like I was in a hot bathtub. Then, when I came in that evening, I found out that my mother had had a stroke. It paralyzed her on one side for the rest of her life. But what I remember the most, all these years, is that I remember that day was so perfect. That felt so good in that water, and Portsmouth was in the distance – like it was my home, which is what it was. I live on Ocracoke, but I just love that place to pieces.

I'm a religious person, so I don't mind going over there and talking to the Lord.

I didn't want to push myself, but when Jimmy helped me into the boat [this afternoon], I was one happy mortal. I feel guilty, by telling him I want him to sail me to Portsmouth tomorrow, but I think he understands, you know. I think they understand, because everybody knows how I feel about Portsmouth. There will be five or six hundred people. Homecoming will be *mine* in the morning. When I say "mine," I mean it'll be *my thing*, I'll be happy. I won't sleep five minutes tonight. I never do, it doesn't matter. I've many a homecoming turned and twisted all night long.

The history is just so stacked up everywhere now.

Conclusion: At Home in the Placetime

“Home’s the place we head for in our sleep. . .

The rails, old lacerations that we love,
shoot parallel across the face and break
just under the Turtle Mountains. Riding scars
you can’t get lost. Home is the place they cross.”

– Louise Erdrich, *Jacklight: Poems*

In her remarkable meditation on homecoming in the American Midwest, *The Nature of Home: A Lexicon and Essays* (2002), Nebraska writer Lisa Knopp describes the genesis of her own longing for the places she calls home. Having undergone a painful divorce in her mid-thirties, separation from two children, her parents’ relocation to Cleveland, Ohio, and an unfulfilling academic job in the Southeast, Knopp began to latch onto images and material traces of the Great Plains landscape she identified as her spiritual home: the sand hills and tallgrass prairies of Nebraska, the loess hills of western Iowa, “the braided Platte. . . the buttes of the Panhandle . . . the sites of old or vanished settlements, of battles, of sacred encounters.”⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Lisa Knopp, “Homecoming,” pp. 3-14 in *The Nature of Home: A Lexicon & Essays*. Lincoln: University

An astonishing passage about personal ceremony in Knopp's essay "Homecoming" suggests the overwhelming significance of both landscape and material objects for her in her "place of estrangement" in the Southeast. Far from home, landscape traces and small *things* sustained her, even "kept me alive." Knopp clearly perceives the intersection between specific objects and the larger vistas of space and memory that we identify as our "belonging-place."

Her teaching job was in a landscape "so unprairielike that I found it uninhabitable." Though she never identifies it by name, Knopp's "estranging-place" was one of tupelo swamps and bald cypresses, of cascading moss and bright songbirds, of skylines closed to the eye by the sheer overgrowth of trees: intimate, beloved details of home for many Southerners, but not for her. The Nebraska native began to suffer from nausea, caused, she claims, by her longing for open space. The asthma that plagued her during her childhood suddenly returned, yet this ailment was more than physical. "All I knew at the time was that I was suffocating, turned inside out, sleepless with grief and estrangement." Her negative impressions of the dense, economically-depressed forest landscape so heavily influenced her relationships with its human inhabitants that she began to take her walks at night "so that I would not have to see the place in which I lived." Yet even in the darkness, glimpses into brightly-lit living rooms – carefully-tended Southern home grounds – caused her stomach to churn. "How could anyone like this place enough," she asked, "to go to the trouble of arranging her living room in a homey manner?" Though Knopp's distaste may appear to be bigotry, its emotive underpinnings are legitimate, as anyone who has suffered from gut-wrenching homesickness must surely understand the maddening emotions induced by frustrated desire for home and belonging.

of Nebraska Press, 2002.

After months of yearning, Knopp breaks down emotionally and performs a makeshift ritual to induce the latent spiritual power of this alienating landscape to propel her back to Nebraska and her children. Seeking to move herself “from a place of lack and loss to a place of wholeness. . . in a ceremony to take me home” she collects the physical traces of forest and swamp and lays them on the floor of her apartment, next to which she arranges physical remnants of the prairie. Knopp, who is not a Native American, nevertheless appropriates their deep affiliation and affection for specific places and the living “energy” of land invoked by Native spirituality. “I doubted that in my sick and weakened condition that I alone had the physical and psychic energy to create and sustain a ceremony,” she wrote. “Nonetheless I would try.”

I brought my tangible lifelines to the middle of my living room floor. I spread out deer antlers, hawk and meadowlark feathers, stalks of prairie grasses, a cluster of dried cottonwood leaves, my pictures of Standing Bear and the *Sower*, the ceiling-high paper birch boughs that grew near the Niobrara, and all the broken and worn-out things I had brought from Nebraska: a jammed electric pencil-sharpener, an air purifier that shot sparks. . . I thanked the objects for helping to keep me alive and beseeched them to pull me home. . .

Next I spread out acorns, a raccoon skull and ribs, songbird feathers, a turtle carapace, a few knobby feet of bald cypress root, the beaked, woody, grenadelike fruits of the sweet gum. . . all gathered in the dark, damp forest. . . I told these forest mementos that I did not blame them or their belonging-place for my condition and appealed to them to push me home. These foreign objects, charged as they were with the energy of someone else’s home, would also stir the ether, move the Spirit to compassionate action, and kindle my faith in my own power. In the powerful presence of these objects and energies, I prayed until my skull tingled.⁹⁰

An intense dream then presaged her imminent return home, a dream whose prophecy soon came into fruition.

“To wax nostalgic is to yearn to return to that faraway, long-ago placetime that is home,” Knopp remarks in her “lexicon” of homecoming’s terminology: terms that include

⁹⁰ Ibid., 10.

such words as *creative, body, beauty, faith, adaptation, niche, settle, hearth, relic, metaphor, quintessence*, and *heaven*. Though she speaks of “Everyplacetime” (“the solacing conviction that a particular intersection of time and place has been there all along and is always available”), “Placetime” itself is not in Knopp’s lexicon. I will therefore suggest a definition. Placetime: neither a real place nor a real time, nor entirely imaginary, but a creative fusion of these, achieved and communicated through meditation on object and image, belonging and alienation, loss and lack, emptiness and fulfillment, presence and absence, myth and fact. Placetime is the space occupied by the silhouette, not the missing thing itself but a creative substitute that can be filled in according to the needs of the present. It is a projection and a recreation that satisfies *some* of the heart’s longings.

Placetime is full of what Knopp calls “movable shrines.” It honors tangible relics for the connections they provide to distant presences – and it is a reliquary full of these objects. The relic, of course, has historically been intimately tied to ideas about death and resurrection, of the supernatural intervention of the deceased into the realm of the present, of the supplication of the past by the present. It is a crossing of temporal as well as spatial boundaries. Writing of her Iowa grandmother’s wooden recipe box, given to her on an occasion of displacement (“after she broke up housekeeping and entered a nursing home – the only time I ever saw her cry”), Knopp recognizes this religious connection when she observes in her entry on *relics* that “Pilgrims know that the part is equivalent to the whole, that through a *relic* (*reliquiae* is Latin for ‘remains’) the saint, prophet, martyr, hero, or loved one lives. A single recipe card, say, for Ironworker Bean Soup, evokes a kitchen where my grandfather is sitting at the table reorganizing his tackle box, a lost reliquary, and my grandmother is at the counter, chopping onions. . .”⁹¹

⁹¹ Ibid., 178.

Propelled by story and fed by ceremony, objects intervene in our favor. Like icons, they facilitate our prayers, assist us in our “pilgrimage” home, push us along the road to our desired destination. As Glassie says, they bring the cosmos into focus. They clarify and concentrate the mind, but they are the recipients of the mind’s shadow, too. In both objects and landscape, the gap between generations can be bridged, un-reconciled experiences of place brought to the foreground, where speech searches for a center.

Focus: this is the ultimate homecoming, a place where *dis*-placement can be made sense of. For in the storytelling about *near* and *far*, *alien* and *native*, in the weaving of narratives of separation without which homecoming could not occur, these *things* provide an axis, a way of speaking about the wider world that brings the far into conjunction with the near. In this search for a spiritual center, a home ground, as the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes, “‘Home’ is a meaningless word apart from ‘journey’ and ‘foreign country.’”⁹² Full awareness perhaps requires this wandering; *full* inhabitation is born only by a separation. “Each day I become more inhabitory,” Knopp concludes. “Each day the distinction between where I live and who I am becomes more blurred.”⁹³

⁹² Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1974.

⁹³ Knopp, 13.

Appendix: Photographs



Image 1.

Grave of Rita Johnson Gilgo, Portsmouth Island, North Carolina, March 2009. (Photo by the author)



Image 2. Moving from the Cape, 1917. (Core Sound Waterfowl Museum & Heritage Center)



Image 3. "Only with the help of a magnifying glass will I see my house."

Aerial photograph of Cape Lookout and Shackleford Banks. (CSWMHC)



Image 4. Methodist Church, Portsmouth, N.C., circa 1920. (CSWMHC)

[illegible]

By ED EDWARDS
Associated Press Wire
PORTSMOUTH, N.C.
One of the most isolated
islands in the Atlantic
is becoming a ghost
after a 200-year history
of pillaging pirates and
rogue seafaring traders.
North Carolina's "Dunk
Isle" is now featureless,
the frayed remains of the
last two halves of a
small island well known
last, under Phoenician
leg's existence as a cen
tury.

Glenn Dixon dwells to
tell most of the year
small green house on
Outer Banks island that
has long rise from any
land. Now he lives her a
Marion Kable.

A FEW other people on the island now and mostly for fishing and logging, and there are some 12,000 residents in houses. Before the Civil War the island had more than 20,000 residents and was one of the main ports in North America. Now, its permanent status is 1979.

A niece of Miss Dixon's Mrs. Lee Damschick of Houston, says Miss Dixon and Miss Babin like to stay on Portsmouth despite the isolationism "because they don't like to see it abandoned."

"Their main concern is the house place - to keep it going," she said.

There are influences on the 20-mile-long island, which lies across an inlet from Grand Isle. Visitors must hire a boat and bounce through often-choppy water to reach the remains of the community.

PORTSMOUTH Island is the northeastern of three narrow strips of sand that are designated to become the Cape Hatteras National Seashore. When the state or North Carolina completes land acquisition, the National Park Service will take over the 50 mile proposed park.

North Carolina property control officer Carroll J. Mann Jr., who is in charge of acquisition of the land says the state will have spent about \$20,000 when all the land is acquired. By next July

"We want to preserve the atmosphere as much as possible," he said, pointing out that while no in-depth plan for restoration has been made, "a historical study is in

"THERE won't be any 'N' traveling out there," Barker said. "Money is short these days."

Alone and alone structures still stand in various states of repair in the village at the northern end of the island. The houses of Miss Dixon and Miss Babb, and a couple of others, are well kept. The remainder includes some that are virtual wrecks.

The temple of a Methodist church is an island landmark visible for miles. The school

"See those trees!" he gestured toward a clump of cedars in the distance. "One of the French houses on the island stood there. A ship ran aground back in 1811. He had a daughter who could sail as well as he could," Gaultier recalled.

HELVES lived the others: white empty walls and two wooden counters stood in front of them. Groups of paid regulations were still in use drawer beneath a dusty

Outside again, Gaskill resembled about days past when there were no tourists to pay him for the island trip and he did it for pleasure.

Gaskill runs his boat over these times a week with the small vessel Porpoose in its habitat, and he also takes orders for and delivers groceries. He says sailors at the moment also give him more business than he can handle.

In other seasons there are a few tourists, in addition to

Garfield says he's heard it said no objection to the government's plans. He says maintenance of the island's unique character is a good idea.

"It's a nice place," he said.



Methodist Church Is an Island Landmark
Services There May Continue After Park Is Created

AS WITH the other half-
ins in use by organizations
on individuals, its least well
known is 25 years or less. But
it is the most common.

Portsmouth was notified
the early 20th and was ex-
pected to visit the American
to visit the American
During its first 25 years,
understanding how best to
transfer the information
transferring ranges from
from good living needs to reach
was used to cross the
the American to visit the
other.

Thanks of Yankee invasion.
The first 25 years of the
leave during the Civil War
and history by only two
of those returned.
The first 25 years of the
has declined steadily.
The last 25 years have
permanently died a poor
age. The first 25 years
has been going back and
forth to Portsmouth, prac-
tically all his life — 64 years.
The first 25 years of the
has declined steadily.
The last 25 years have
permanently died a poor
age. The first 25 years
has been going back and
forth to Portsmouth, prac-
tically all his life — 64 years.

TO VISITOR: 



Image 6. Sam Tolson's grave, Portsmouth, N.C., March 2009. (Photo by the author.)



Image 7. Elma and Nora Dixon weaving basketball nets, Portsmouth, N.C., circa 1960. (CSWMHC)



Image 8. Henry and Lizzie Pigott, circa 1955. (CSWMHC)



Image 9. Lum Gaskill (left) and Henry Pigott, Portsmouth, N.C., circa 1960. (CSWMHC)



Image 10. Portsmouth School, 1916. (CSWMHC)



Image 11. Lionel Gilgo, ca. 1995. (CSWMHC)



Image 12. Hedrick Arthur and Hazel Gilgo Arthur, Bettie, North Carolina, March 2009.

(Photo by the author)

INVITATION AND ACCEPTANCE

Lord, I'm Coming Home 237

COMING HOME. S. S. S. with Refrain

WILLIAM J. KIRKPATRICK, 1858-1921 WILLIAM J. KIRKPATRICK, 1858-1921

1. I've wan-dered far a - way from God, Now I'm com-ing home;
 2. I've wast-ed man - y pre - cious years, Now I'm com-ing home;
 3. I've tired of sin and stray-ing, Lord, Now I'm com-ing home;
 4. My soul is sick, my heart is sore, Now I'm com-ing home;

The paths of sin too long I've trod, Lord, I'm com-ing home.
 I now re-pent with bit - ter tears, Lord, I'm com-ing home.
 I'll trust Thy love, be - lieve Thy word, Lord, I'm com-ing home.
 My strength re - new, my hope re - store, Lord, I'm com-ing home.

REFRAIN

Com - ing home, com - ing home, Nev - er - more to roam,

O - pen wide Thine arms of love, Lord, I'm com-ing home.

Image 13. Hymn 237, Methodist Hymnal.



Image 14. The rebuilt "Annabelle," Great Marsh Boatworks, Marshallberg, N.C. March 2008.

(Photo by the author)



Image 15. Jimmy Amspacher, Great Marsh Boatworks, Marshallberg, N.C. March 2008.

(Photo by the author)

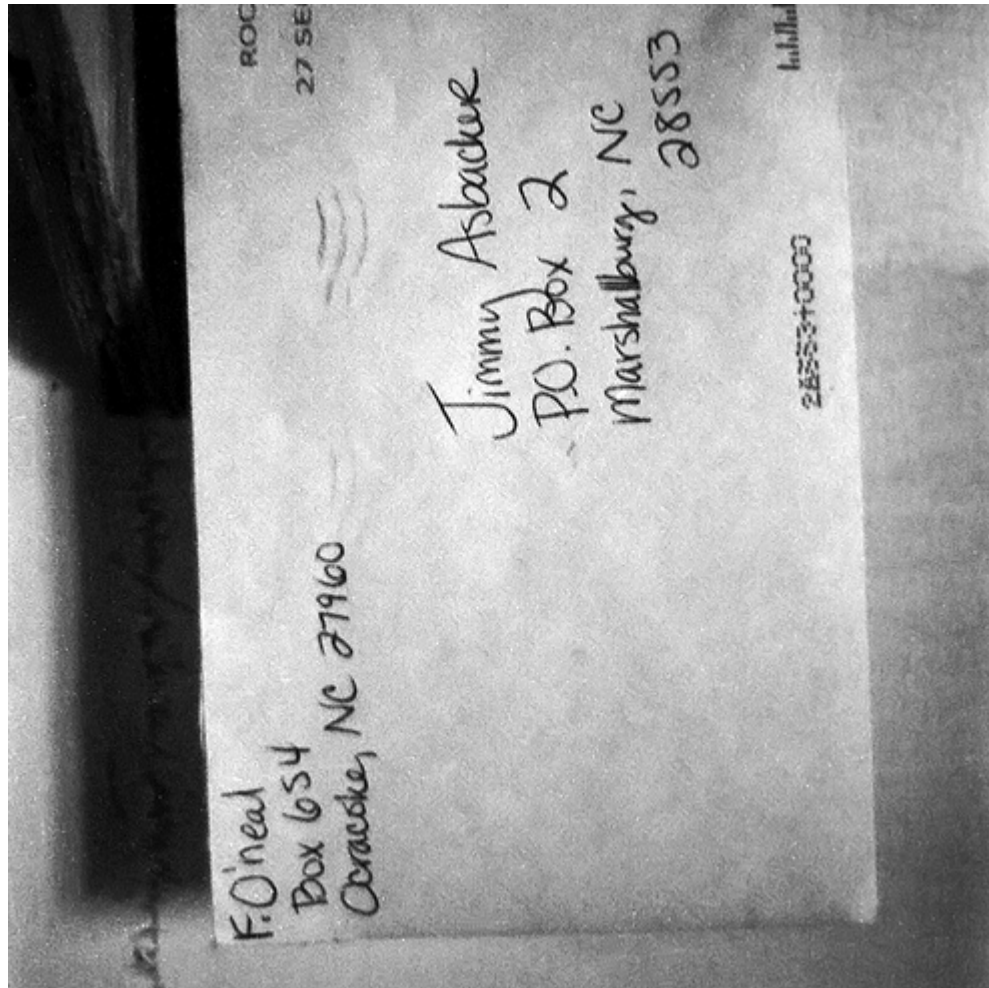


Image 16. Letter from Fowler O'Neal to Jimmy "Asbacher,"

Great Marsh Boatworks, Marshallburg, N.C. March 2008.

(Photo by the Author)



Image 17. George O'Neal's "Annabelle," (circa 1890-1915), Marshallberg, N.C. (Photo by the author)



Image 18. Chester Lynn (left) and Jimmy Amspacher sailing the “Annabelle” between Ocracoke and Portsmouth, April 20, 2008. (Photo by the author)



Image 19. Methodist Church, Portsmouth, April 21, 2008. (Photo by the author)



Image 20. Interior of the Methodist Church, Portsmouth village, March 2009. (Photo by the author)



Image 21. Interior of the Methodist Church, Portsmouth village, March 2009. (Photo by the author)



Image 22. Cross made of wild oats, cork, and sea shells. Methodist Church, Portsmouth, N.C., March 2009.

(Photo by the author)



Image 23. Post Office, Portsmouth, N.C., March 2009.

The wooden marker on the right marks the height of tides during various hurricanes.

(Photo by the author)



Image 24. Cemetery, Portsmouth village. March 2009. (Photo by the author)



Image 25. Portsmouth village, March 2009. (Photo by the author)



Image 26. Dixon-Salter House, Portsmouth village, March 2009. (Photo by the author)



Image 27. Grave of Monroe Gilgo (1882-1927), Portsmouth, N.C. (Photo by the author)

Bibliography

- Arthur, Hazel Gilgo. Personal interview. Bettie, N.C. February 8, 2009.
- Barnes, Brook Miles and Barry R. Truitt, eds., *Seashore Chronicles: Three Centuries of the Virginia Barrier Islands*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997.
- Bedwell, Dorothy Byrum. *Portsmouth: Island With A Soul*. New Bern: IES Publications, 1984.
- Brown, Julian M. Personal interview. Gloucester, N.C. October 10, 2007.
- Cecelski, David. *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.
- Cloud, Ellen Fulcher. *Portsmouth: The Way It Was*. Havelock, N.C.: The Print Shop, 1996.
- Dunn, Durwood. *Cades Cove: The Life and Death of a Southern Appalachian Community, 1818-1937*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988.
- Foster, Ernie. Personal interview. Hatteras, N.C. March 12, 2009.
- Gilgo, Lionel. Personal interview. Beaufort, N.C. February 8, 2009.
- Gillis, Christina Marsden. *Writing on Stone: Scenes from a Maine Island Life*. Lebanon, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2008.
- Glassie, Henry. *The Potter's Art*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Gundaker, Grey, ed., *Keep Your Head to the Sky: Interpreting African American Home Ground*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998.
- Jabbour, Alan, et. al., *North Shore Cemetery Decoration Project: Ethnohistorical and Ethnographic Investigations for the Proposed North Shore Road, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Swain County, North Carolina*. S.I.: s.n., 2005.
- Lowenthal, David. *The Past Is A Foreign Country*. Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Lynn, Chester. Personal interview. Harkers Island, N.C. April 20, 2009.

- Knopp, Lisa. *The Nature of Home: A Lexicon and Essays*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002.
- The Mailboat*. Special Portsmouth Issue. Harkers Island, N.C. Spring 1992.
- MacCannell, Dean. *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. London: Oxford University Press, 1964.
- Mason, Connie. Personal interview. Harkers Island, N.C. February 7, 2009.
- Meissner, Richard. Personal interview. Harkers Island, N.C. February 7, 2009.
- Palmquist, Peter. "Silver Plates on a Golden Shore: 'The Real Thing Itself.'" In John Wood, ed., *America and the Daguerreotype*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991.
- Salter, Ben B. and Doris S. Willis, *Portsmouth Island: Short Stories and History*. Privately published, 1972.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *A Book of Migrations: Some Passages in Ireland*. London: Verso, 1997.
- , *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. New York: Viking, 2005.
- , *Hollow City: The Siege of San Francisco and the Crisis of American Urbanism*. London: Verso, 2000.
- Stannard, David E. "Sex, Death and Daguerreotypes: Toward an Understanding of Image as Elegy." In John Wood, ed., *America and the Daguerreotype*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991.
- Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.
- Stick, David. *The Outer Banks of North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1957.
- Stilgoe, John. "Disjunction, Disunion, Daguerreotype." *Harvard Library Bulletin*. Spring 2003 (Vol. 14, No. 1): 37-44.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1974.
- White, Richard. *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1996.

Williamson, Sonny. Personal interview. Marshallberg, N.C. March 3, 2008.

Wood, John. *America and the Daguerreotype*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991.