

REPORT OF AN INVESTIGATION OF SEVERAL  
HISTORIC HOUSES IN WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA

Ralston B. Lattimore

1935

REPORT  
OF AN INVESTIGATION OF SEVERAL HISTORIC HOUSES IN  
WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA

By Ralston B. Lattimore, Junior Historian, N. P. S.,

November 27-28, 1935.

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**"Cornwallis's Headquarters"**

Referred to locally as "the Burgwin house", the "Cornwallis House", the "Old Wright House", and the Mary Rowe Wiggins property, this house stands on the southwest corner of Third and Market Streets (No. 224 Market Street) in the City of Wilmington, N. C.

Court House Records

Lack of time prevented an examination of court house records in Wilmington, but I was told by Miss Mabel Webber, librarian, that the greater part of the earlier records of Wilmington had been removed to Raleigh.

History

Built prior to 1771, this house was the residence of John Burgwin, who went to England just before the outbreak of the Revolution not to return. After the Revolution the house was occupied by Judge Joshua Wright and family until after the Civil War (Judge Wright received title by deed, April 10, 1799,) when it became the property of Wm. H. McRary, and after his death the property of his widow, and upon her decease the home and property of Miss Rowe Wiggins, the sister of Mrs. McRary, until Miss Wiggins death in the early fall of 1930.

Before leaving Winnabore, Cornwallis ordered Lieutenant-Colonel Balfour at Charleston to send a competent force by water to seize Wilmington and to establish a base of supplies there. In consequence of which Major James H. Craig took possession of Wilmington, Jan. 28, 1781. His force consisted of eighteen vessels, carrying a full supply of provisions, munitions, and 400 regular troops, artillery and dragoons. At that time Wilmington contained but 200 houses and a population of 1,000 people. The whole Cape Fear region was defenseless. Tradition, which was well established as early as 1854, claims that Major Craig selected and occupied the Burgwin residence as headquarters. After the Battle of Guilford Court House, Cornwallis withdrew to Wilmington, arriving there April 7, 1781, and remained there eighteen days

for the purpose of reorganizing his shattered forces. On April 25, 1791, Cornwallis began his march toward Virginia. During the eighteen days that he remained in Wilmington, it is said that he occupied the Burgwin residence as headquarters. (I could find actual proof of this. The printed state and colonial records of North Carolina are silent on the subject. Various data was said to be in possession of Mrs. John D. Bellamy, Jr., but she was not in Wilmington and the data was not available to me.) Major Craig, left in command at Wilmington after the departure of Cornwallis, remained in the Burgwin house until toward the middle of November when he left Wilmington by sea with his forces.

#### Description of House

The Burgwin house, built on the down slope of a hill, is a two story frame structure, with cellar and attic, in a style of architecture, locally known, as Carolina Colonial. The best feature of its exterior is a very fine paladian door on the front facing Market street. The side lights and fan light were removed at a relatively late period and replaced with ornamental chased glass. (The original fan light can be found in the east room of the attic.)

An addition seems to have been built on the rear on the Third Street side of the house (interior finish such as simple), and a part of the back verandas (upper and lower) has been enclosed.

On the first floor, there is a stair hall of good proportions; the stair makes a double turn with a landing to the second floor; handrail and balusters carved mahogany of simple design, cornice intact. Two rooms to east, small and not well proportioned, contain original cornice and simple mantels of wood. Drawing room to west of entrance contains very beautiful cornice, again of simple design--original mantel removed and replaced by white marble mantel (mid 19th century). This room is of excellent proportions. The hall and rooms on second floor duplicate the first floor plan. However, the west bedroom located over the drawing room, has the most elaborate finish of any room in the house. The present entrance seems to be through what was at one time a closet, the old entrance having been blocked up with some kind of wall board. Cornice, panelling, mantel, and doors of this room are intact. An original door knob and lock in this room would lead one to suspect that all hardware was at one time brass. The two or three small rooms on the second floor located in the newer part of the house are of no particular interest. Two storage rooms are located in the attic and several rooms in the cellar; in the latter are very simple wood mantels. Tradition claims that there are dungeons under the cellar, used at one time as a military prison. There is a deep bricked pit

at the front end of the cellar, but the construction of this feature appears to have been a necessary part of the foundations due to the slope of the land. It is also said that a large brick sewer leads from St. James church under the Burgwin residence to the river.

To the rear of the house is an old garden on the edge of which is contained the brick kitchen, now occupied by a negro caretaker, Matilda Oscar, and to the west of the garden is a brick stable building (probably dating from mid-19th century) and a one story frame structure containing three small rooms, said to have been slave quarters.

The brick and stone foundation under the kitchen building is massive and the details of its construction are of interest.

#### State of Preservation

Roof, tin in bad repair, a number of leaks being visible in the upper rooms and in the attic. The floors in nearly all of the rooms have sagged, which would lead one to suspect that the house has settled to a great extent, the woodwork and floors of the cellar rooms are in an advanced state of decay and would necessitate rebuilding. A large hot air furnace in an unfinished part of the cellar also appeared to be in a state of decay. The kitchen building and the slave quarters are also in a state of decay. Estimating roughly, I would expect that it would require from \$10,000 to \$15,000 to restore the property.

At the present time the property is owned by the heirs of Miss Rowe Wiggins (see will attached).

#### Trustees for the Estate of Miss Rowe Wiggins

The Safety Deposit and Trust Company are of Baltimore, Maryland, are trustees and executors for the above estate. The Wilmington Savings and Trust Company, Wilmington, N. C., Richard Rogers, Trust Officer, are trustees for the property located in Wilmington. They represent the estate and not the heirs. They have the right to sell the property, but the sale must be approved according to the terms of the will of Miss Wiggins.

#### Asking Price

The nephews of Miss Wiggins, who have power under the will to approve or disapprove a sale of the property by the Wilmington Savings and Trust Company, have indicated that they wish a total of \$72,000 for the property located at Third and Market Streets. This property, in its entirety, consists of a plot of land, 146 feet on Market Street, 198 feet on Third Street, two small

one story brick stores on Market Street, the old residence on the corner of Market and Third, and the outbuildings mentioned above.

Tax Assessments (City and County--no State)

New Hanover County Court House..Assessment Book, 1932-1935, Vol. I, Block 153.

"Land.....	\$25,740	Rates...City	\$1.50	per hundred
<u>Buildings...</u>	<u>9,000</u>	County	.65	" "
Total.....	\$34,740			

Insurance carried on the buildings amounts to approx. \$8,000

Value of property

The Standard Oil Company has a filling station on the northwest corner of Market and Third--the northeast corner is occupied by an obsolete apartment house, and the southeast corner by St. James' Episcopal church.

An oil company, according to Richard Rogers, Trust Officer, has offered \$25,000 for the corner site occupied by the Burgwin house. This amount was offered for a plot of land, 100x100 ft. Obviously this offer is more than the property is worth. The two one story stores on Market Street located on the Wiggins Estate property bring in a gross revenue of not more than \$25.00 per month each. The main business district is several blocks away, and no tendency of business to move eastward on residential Market street can be noted at present. The offer of the oil company was turned down by Miss Wiggins nephews--one of whom wished \$35,000, and the other \$47,500. The Oil Company might be willing to pay \$30,000. An offer made by the Colonial Dames several years ago, \$20,000 for 66 ft. on Market street, the entire frontage on Third Street, and an "L" shaped piece of land in the rear including the stable and slave quarters, was also turned down.

Cooperation by Colonial Dames of North Carolina.

The North Carolina Society of Colonial Dames is most anxious to save the Burgwin house. If they are made custodians of the property and allowed to maintain headquarters in the building, they will attempt to raise from \$12,500 to \$15,000, which would be about their limit at the present time. The City of Wilmington might contribute a small additional sum, according to J. E. L. Wade, City Commissioner of Public Works. But to purchase the property and restore it would require a minimum outlay of approximately \$50,000.

Other Historic Residences  
in Wilmington, N. C.

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Bellamy Mansion

A great frame house on the northeast corner of Market and Fifth Streets, four stories including a brick basement, constructed 1857-1859 by the late Dr. John D. Bellamy, planter and merchant. The residence is said to have been built out of one year's profits from the sale of tar, pitch, and turpentine.

This house is in good repair, and is complete even to its furnishings (mid-Victorian) and is an excellent example of the town house of a plantation owner.

It is now occupied as a residence by Miss Ellen D. Bellamy, 84 years of age, and will not be sold during her lifetime.

Masonic Hall

Small brick building on ~~Front~~ Orange street, between Front and Second Streets. Constructed 1803 and used as a Masonic hall until circa 1843, when it was sold to Thomas W. Brown as a residence.

Diary of Ralston Lattimore  
Wilmington, N. C., Trip, November 26-28, 1935.

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- 6:15 P. M., Nov. 26, 1935. Left Charleston, S. C., for Wilmington, N. C., by bus.
- 11:15 P. M., Nov. 26. Arrived Wilmington, N. C.
- 9 A. M., Nov. 27. Took snapshots of "Cornwallis House" and neighborhood, and "Bellamy Mansion".
- 10 A. M. Nov. 27. Interview with Mrs. J. Walter Williamson, president, North Carolina Society, Colonial Dames, and Mrs. W. N. Harris, Recording Secretary. Also interviewed John D. Bellamy.
- 11:30 A. M. to 12 Noon. Walked through old part of Wilmington with Mrs. Harris.
- 12 Noon to 12:30 P. M., Nov. 27. Interview with Richard Rogers, trust officer, Wilmington Savings and Trust Co., which is trustee for the Cornwallis property.
- 12:30 to 1 P. M., Nov. 27. Interviewed City Commissioner of Public Works and secured marked map of Wilmington.
- 1 P. M. to 1:15 P. M. Secured city and county tax assessments and rate from auditor's office.
- 1:15 P. M. to 1:30 P. M. Made arrangements to secure photographs.
- 1:30 P. M. to 2 P. M. Interviewed Lewis N. Moore, Chamber of Commerce in regard to photographs.
- 2 P. M. to 2:30 P. M. Lunch.
- 2:30 P. M. to 3 P. M. Looking over collection of books in Historical room, Wilmington, Public Library.
- 3 P. M. Second interview with Mr. Rogers.
- 4 P. M. Second interview with Mrs. Williamson and tour of Bellamy mansion.
- 6 P. M. to 7 P. M. Dinner.
- 7 P. M. to 9 P. M. Taking notes in Wilmington Public Library.
- 11 A. M., November 28. Inspected "Cornwallis Headquarters".
- 12:30 P. M. to 1 P. M. Secured blue print of Wiggins property, and photographs.
- 1 P. M. to 1:30 P. M. Dinner.
- 1:30 P. M. to 5:30 P. M. Arranging report.
- 6:40 P. M. Left Wilmington, N. C., for Washington, D. C., via Atlantic Coast Line.
- 6:35 A. M., Nov. 29. Arrived in Washington, D. C.

**Historical Notes on  
Cornwallis's Headquarters  
in Wilmington, N. C.**

Lossing, Benson, Jr. The Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution  
In Two volumes. N. Y., Harper Brothers Publishers,  
1860.

Vol. II., p. 407.

"Before leaving Winneborough, Cornwallis despatched  
an order to Lt. Col. Balfour, who commanded at Charleston, to  
send a competent force by water to take Wilmington."

Vol. II, p. 575.

"Craig held undisturbed possession of Wilmington until  
the arrival of Cornwallis, on the seventh of April, after his  
battle with Greene at Guilford. He remained in Wilmington with  
his shattered army, eighteen days, to recruit, and to determine  
upon his future course. His residence was on the corner of  
Market and Third Streets; now, (1852) the dwelling of Doctor  
T. H. Wright. (Illustrated by small drawing of house). Apprised  
of Greene's march toward Camden, and hoping to draw him away from  
Rawdon, there encamped, Cornwallis marched into Virginia, and  
joined forces with Arnold and Phillips at Petersburg."

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Howell, Andrew J. The Book of Wilmington No imprint. 1930.

Pp. 61-67.

Tells of movements of Craig and Cornwallis at  
Wilmington. On page 62 is the statement that Cornwallis  
occupied the Burgwin house as his headquarters.

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Sprunt, James. Chronicles of the Cape Fear River, Raleigh,  
Edwards and Broughton Printing Co., 1914.

Pp. 88-89. Relates incidents connected with occupation  
of Wilmington by Major Craig and Cornwallis, but does not mention  
headquarters.

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Sprunt, James. Tales and Traditions of the Lower Cape Fear, 1661-  
1896. Wilmington, LeGwin Brothers Printers, 1896.

Contains nothing of value.

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John Burgwin (a biographical sketch) by Marshall DeLancey Haywood  
pp. 59-66. in Biographical History of North Carolina from Colonial  
Times to Present, Vol. VIII. (Chas. L. VanNeppen,  
Greensboro, N. C. MCMXVII. No mention of house.

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Printed State and Colonial Archives of North Carolina contain no references to the Burgwin house or Cerwallis's headquarters in Wilmington.

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Sketch Old Wright Home, Market and Third Streets, Wilmington, N. C. by John D. Bellamy, Jr. In Fortieth Annual Report of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of North Carolina, 1934. No imprint. Pp. 91-93.

\*Records collected and compiled from true and authentic data by John D. Bellamy, Jr., for his wife Mary Wright Giles.

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Feature article, illustrated. Historic Home Symbol of City's Age., by John C. Wessell, Jr. In The Sunday Star News Magazine, Wilmington, N. C., March 27, 1932.

Many errors in this article.

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BELLAMY MANSION? FIFTH AND MARKET STREETS,

WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA

(Sketch furnished by Mrs. J. Walter Williamson, President,  
North Carolina Society, Colonial Dames)

Was built by Dr. John D. Bellamy, then the wealthiest real estate and slave owner in the Wilmington section. Its construction began in 1857 and was finished in 1859 at a cost in excess of fifty thousand dollars. The design of the residence was made by the daughter of Dr. Bellamy, who was educated in Columbia, South Carolina, and who patterned the building after the old Colonial mansions of South Carolina. The architect was Mr. James F. Post, of Wilmington, N. C., who was the chief architect of that period. It is a fact that the labor in the construction of the building was done chiefly by negroes; in fact, nearly all the principal ante-bellum carpenters, masons, plasterers and interior finishers were negroes. Even the delicate and ornamental cornice work of plaster of Paris in the rooms was done by negro mechanics. The negroes Howes, Artises, Prices, Sadgware, and Kellogs were all employed in the work. The residence was occupied by the family just a year prior to the breaking out of the Civil War in 1861. Many of the bills for the columns, gas fixtures, grates and other costly furnishings were unpaid when war was declared, and the Confederate government sequestered the debts due by Dr. Bellamy to the northern creditors and forced them to be paid to the Confederate government, and after the Civil War terminated disastrously to the Confederate government Dr. Bellamy had to pay the debts over again to the northern creditors.

When Fort Fisher was bombarded and captured and Wilmington was evacuated, the Federal troops came into Wilmington and seized this residence for headquarters for the officers, and it was occupied by Generals Porter and Schofield successively, and finally by General Joseph R. Hawley, in command of the Wilmington district. The family have retained many of the painted signs that the officers tacked on the doors of the parlors and rooms of the home--general headquarters, orderlies' offices, private secretary's offices, etc.

It was when the residence was in the possession of General Hawley, in 1865, that Salmon P. Chase, who was Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court and who at the time aspired to become President of the United States, in opposition to the radical element of the North in congress who held that the Confederate states had gone out of the Union and should only be allowed to return under the most humiliating terms, took the position and declared that the Confederate states were never out of the Union, having unsuccessfully endeavored to go out, and that they were in the Union and

should be allowed to send members to Congress as usual to Washington. Judge Chase spoke from the piazza on Market Street to a crowd estimated to be about five thousand people. There were two military bands of music, which attracted the audience, composed chiefly of negroes, who were attracted by the music.

This building, as the other real estate of Dr. Bellamy, was seized by the Government, and was only restored to the Bellamy family after the Civil War, in 1866, when President Andrew Johnson extended a pardon to Dr. Bellamy on condition that he would make a bill of sale for his slaves to the Government and take an oath that he would never again own a slave or employ slave labor. This oath and pardon is now in the possession of the United States Government in the office of the Secretary of State in Washington, and the writer has seen the original bill of sale and the oath that Dr. Bellamy was required to take, which is now on file in Washington. Upon the restoration of this property to Dr. Bellamy in 1866 there was a condition annexed that he should not claim compensation for the use and occupation of the property by the Federal Government while in their possession.

(The above sketch was written by John Douglass Bellamy.)

List of Enclosures

Accompanying Report of Ralston Lattimore, Wilmington, N. C.,  
Nov. 27-28, 1935.

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1. Historical notes on Cornwallis's Headquarters at Wilmington, N. C., 2 pages.
2. Sketch (typewritten copy) of Bellamy Mansion by John D. Bellamy, two pages.
3. Fortieth Annual Report of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of North Carolina., 1934. (Containing sketch by John D. Bellamy on the "Old Wright House" also known as "Cornwallis's Headquarters".) One copy.
4. Addresses delivered under the auspices of the North Carolina Society of the Colonial Dames of America--1900-1926. Press of Jackson and Fell Co., Wilmington, N. C. Containing valuable information about Wilmington and vicinity. One copy.
5. Feature Article Historic Home Symbol of City's Age, by John C. Fessell, Jr. pages from the Sunday Star-News Magazine Section, Wilmington, N. C., March 27, 1932. One copy.
6. Map, Wilmington, North Carolina, compiled in the office of J. L. Sexton, G. E., 1918, showing location of historic sites mentioned in report. One copy.
7. Blueprint--Showing plot of property owned by Estate of Rowe Wiggins, at Third and Market Streets, Wilmington, N. C., on which is located the "Cornwallis House".
8. Leaflet published by Wilmington Chamber of Commerce listing points of historic interest, many of which have been marked by tablets. Contains small picture of "Cornwallis House" on cover. One copy.
9. Colored postcard showing St. James Episcopal Church, on corner of Third and Market, in Wilmington, opposite "Cornwallis House".
10. Post Card--black and white drawing of Bellamy Mansion.
11. Panoramic photographs showing Cornwallis House, Bellamy House, Masonic Hall (1803), town residence of Mr. James Sprunt, which was the home of the first elected governor of North Carolina, and country house of Mr. James Sprunt, which was the plantation home of "King Moore".