

Shrimp Tales

SMALL BITES OF HISTORY



Beverly Bowers Jennings




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CAPT. SAM

BRUNSWICK, GA

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Dedication

In honor and appreciation of the shrimpers and their families, whose hard work inspired me to help to preserve their history.



WHICH-A-WAY



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TRADE WIN

Chapter 2

Thunderbolt, Savannah
& Isle of Hope





Thunderbolt, Savannah & Isle of Hope



Thunderbolt's curious name stems from Indian legend that a flash of lightning hit so hard it opened a spring of fresh water and that the place where it hit long after smelled of the bolt. Never mind that a bolt isn't a smell or a sight – it's a sound. And the smell didn't come from it but rather from the presence of iron in the springs. But the name endured, and any efforts to change it have failed woefully. Thunderbolt is here to stay.

The story of this small river town is entwined in the history of Savannah and shrimping, and all are utterly connected to the deep-water tidal river that flows through it. Indeed, its location on the Wilmington River 5 miles from Savannah and the high bluff upon which it sits made it of great strategic importance over time. Native Americans used it as a lookout point. For French forces during the Revolutionary War, it served as a defense post; the Confederate Army was stationed there during the

TRAWLERS – When the industry peaked around 1974, Thunderbolt had 150 trawlers at its docks. Early and Mary Toomer owned the eight trawlers pictured in this 1950's photo.

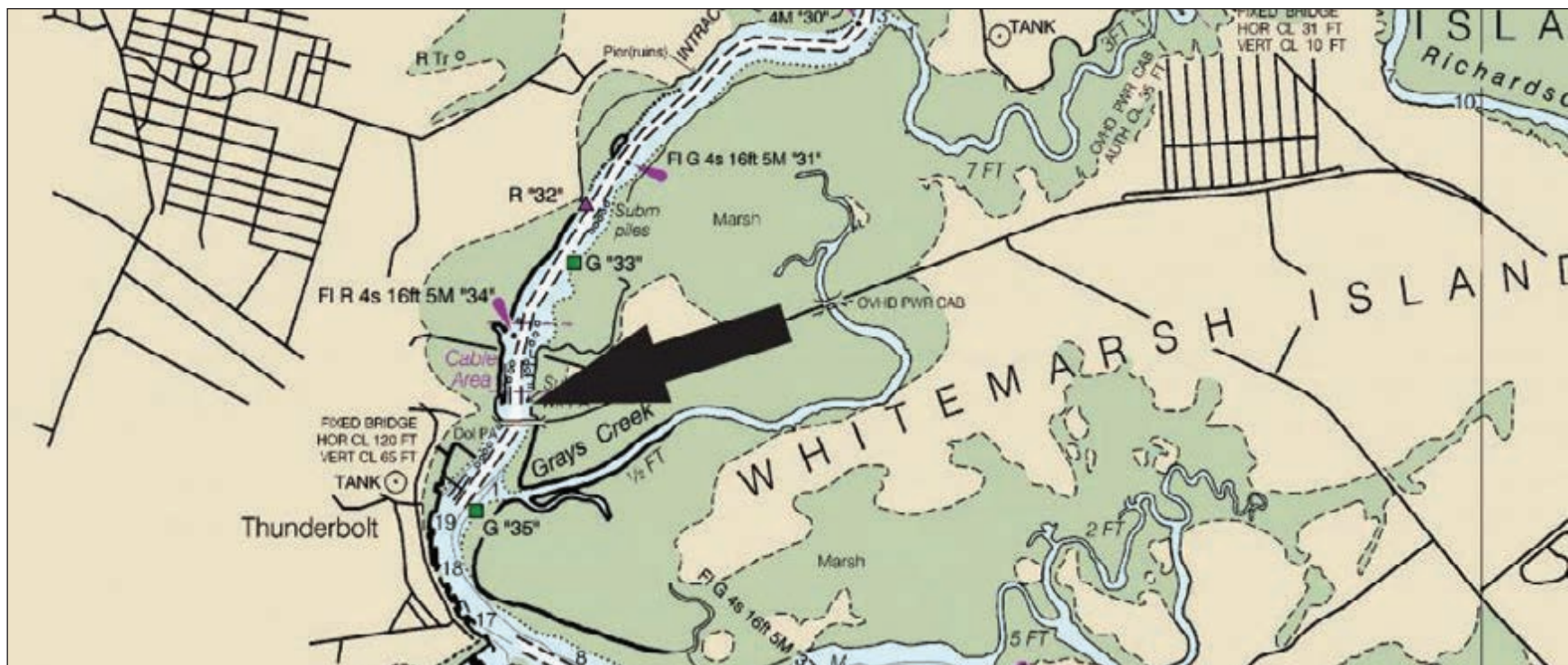
Civil War; and the U.S. Coast Guard and Navy used it for strategic defense during World War II.

Over time, the river has been the means for the town's sustenance, providing transportation, recreation, security, food and commerce. In the late 19th century, Thunderbolt became a drawing card for pleasure seekers and grew into a lively fishing village, in that order. Cool breezes, bucolic bluffs, deep water and its location within striking distance of Savannah, a seaport of significance, made it a natural as a getaway location for the wealthy, especially during Savannah's golden age of yachting (1897-1906).

The Savannah Yacht Club located its clubhouse just north of Thunderbolt's business district, putting it on track as destination for vacationers from places as far flung as New York and New Jersey. The double-decker club house and pavilion featured a bowling alley, billiards, shuffleboard and an indoor marble swimming pool.

Electricity, the expansion of the rail road system and the advent of streetcar systems worked in Thunderbolt's favor when the Savannah Electric Company built a

The story of this small river town is entwined in the history of Savannah and shrimping, and all are utterly connected to the deep-water tidal river that flows through it.



casino in Thunderbolt to promote streetcar ridership (it owned the railroad line) and showed off the wonders of electricity. With the casino came an amusement park, race track, zoo and beer garden as well as a steady flow of people.

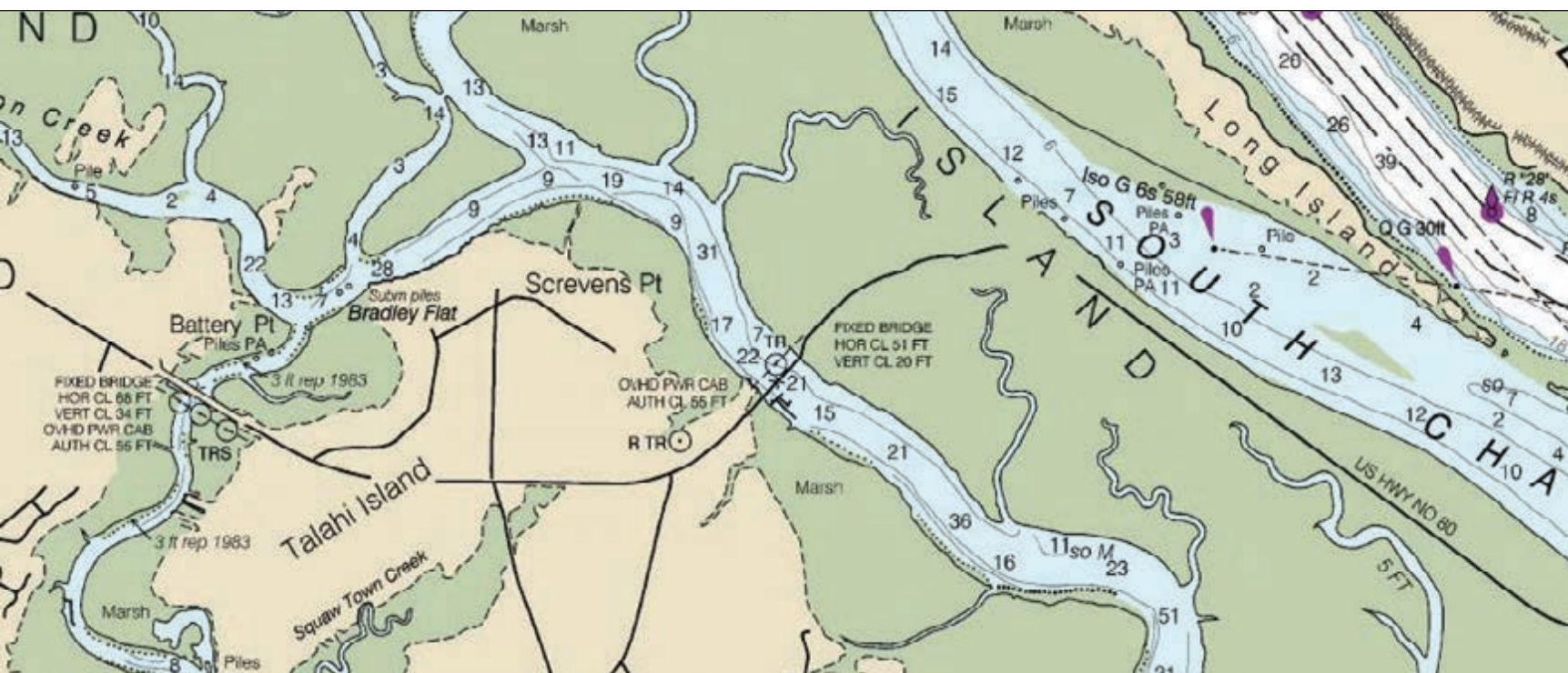
Fishermen were a presence but only on a small scale with hauls limited to the local community and Savannah. B.T. Elmgren's, L.G. Ambos and Adams boat works kept fishing boats painted and in working order.

In 1908, 1910 and 1911, Savannah would host an international road race as a way to promote the area and the virtues of motor cars. Thunderbolt was on the race path, a move that bolstered Thunderbolt's standing as an entertainment destination. Swept up with enthusiasm for the new technology, Thunderbolt's mayor bought a Model-T, the first resident to own a car. Locals saw these "electric horses" as a fad and poked fun at the mayor. Ironically, though, the growing popularity

of automobiles would eventually render the streetcar system obsolete and with it would go Thunderbolt's draw as an entertainment town. A fire in 1930 would destroy the casino, spelling the end of the town's resort heydays.

Thunderbolt's economy shifted, aligning with Savannah that was emerging as a major distribution point and seafood center. By the mid-1920s, there were 11 shrimp canning plants along the Georgia coast. By the 1930s and 40s, more than 100 shrimp boats operated out of Thunderbolt. Annual gross sales of fish through the port of Savannah exceeded \$200 million. Of that, \$800,000 came from canned and fresh shrimp.

A number of developments spurred the growth of Thunderbolt's thriving shrimping economy: the advent of power boats; refrigeration; a man called Paul Cannarella, who captained the first power shrimping boat; L. P. Maggione, who spirited canning innovations;



and Bill Mullis and Henry F. Ambos, who developed pan-ready shrimp.

When Paul Cannarella (1896-1986) pulled the first shrimp net with a powerboat, it brought in a tremendous catch, and others followed suit. Refrigeration replaced ice in the hold, making it possible to keep larger catches on board and for shrimpers to stay out longer and travel farther off-shore. This called for bigger more powerful boats that could haul more than one net. The surge in the catch capacity spurred the proliferation of businesses serving the fishing industry, including boat works, a net and crate manufacturing plant and several factories canning oysters, terrapin and clams, but shrimp canning was the biggest business.

In 1926, the Annual Convention of the Southern Fisheries Association was held in Savannah at the old DeSoto Hotel on Bull Street. It commended L. P. Maggioni & Company, Thunderbolt Fisheries, Canarella

Brothers and the prawn fisheries of Thunderbolt for their many contributions to the local economy.

After arriving in Georgia, the Cannarella family changed its name to Mathews, and today they still operate the Mathews Seafood Company in Savannah. As in Florida, most of the local fishermen were descendants of fishing families from Portugal, Italy and Scandinavia.

In 1939, the son of the inventor of Coca-Cola, purchased the defunct casino and 28 acres to construct a yacht basin. More than 500 feet of marshland was dredged to create a basin 8 feet deep at low tide that could accommodate up to 70 yachts at a time. Starting in the 1950s, it became the location of the blessing of the shrimp fleet, signaling the start of the shrimping season and honoring those who lost their lives at sea. These stories and more are detailed in the pages that follow.



THUNDERBOLT WATERFRONT – The small fishing village of Thunderbolt was known as the Town of Warsaw from 1856-1921. This waterfront photograph as taken around the turn of the 20th century. The modern photo was taken in the 1970s. (Ambos collection.)









ELMGREN'S LUNCHE'S - Early on, Thunderbolt was home to businesses that catered to fishermen, including Elmgren's Lunches that served crabs and prawns any style and Elmgren's Boatworks & Marine Ways.

Thunderbolt Ga. Dec



BOATWORKS - Elmgren's Boatworks & Marine Ways was established by Israel Elmgren, a shipbuilder from Sweden, who settled in Thunderbolt in the late 1800s. This photograph was taken on Dec. 28, 1908 in Thunderbolt, showing Israel (third from the left) and his son Frej (second from the right). Elmgren Boat Works framed boats mostly with live oak because it was tough and gnarly. (Thunderbolt Museum)

number 285 1908

