

Southport on parade: How a tiny coastal city became home to the N.C. 4th of July Festival



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Renee Spencer

Randy Jones was about 6 years old when he first took part in Southport's Fourth of July festivities.

Like many locals, his first role was that of parade participant.

"That was about 1970, and it would have been the Waccamaw Bank float," he recalled. "I can remember specifically being put in red, white and blue clothes, and my mother putting me on the float."

He recalled even then, much of the summer revolved around getting ready for the Fourth of July events. Jones described it as a "homecoming" where those who had moved away would come back to town and families would gather and enjoy the festivities. Once it was all over, it was soon time to get ready for school.

"That was the pinnacle of the summer growing up here," Jones said. "Everything peaked at the Fourth." More than five decades have passed, and the Fourth of July is still a big event in Southport. Since 1972, the city has hosted the state's official Independence Day celebration, the N.C. 4th of July Festival, which encompasses several days of events, including an arts and crafts fair, a naturalization ceremony, a salute to veterans, a 90-minute parade, two fireworks shows and more.

Jones, now the festival president, has had a front row seat to many of the recent changes. He credits the community and a team of dedicated volunteers with helping the event grow and become what it is today.

THE TRADITION IS BORN

Southport has a long history of patriotism and community. The first recorded Independence Day celebration took place in 1795. Historical accounts show the community gathered for a picnic on the lawn of Fort Johnston and boats on the river fired their cannons in salute.

The area has a rich military history with Fort Johnston located on Southport's Waterfront and Fort Caswell located in nearby Caswell Beach. Therefore, the early Independence Day celebrations involved a parade with soldiers stationed at the nearby forts and war veterans, pageants featuring local school children, and traditional field-day events, such as sack races and relay races, which took place at what is now known as Franklin Square Park.

Over the next hundred years, the festival evolved, becoming the "Live Oak Festival" in the 1950s – paying tribute to Southport's calling card tree canopy – and featured parades, balls and pageants.

Then in 1962, the Southport Jaycees held the organization's first boat raffle on the evening of July 4. The following year, another local organization, the Southport Junior Women's Club, started the "Arts Festival," which featured arts and crafts. Despite the additions, the events remained geared to the celebration of America's independence and kept the tradition of military involvement.

The Southport Jaycees took the helm and served as the festival organizer for several years, working with other local organizations to coordinate events. But in 1972, the festival was incorporated as a nonprofit organization and became its own entity with a board of directors and a team of volunteers. The event was then named the “N.C. 4th of July Festival,” and it became the state’s official Independence Day celebration.

To help coordinate the events, the festival entered into a relationship with the Southport-Oak Island Chamber of Commerce in 1994. The Chamber served as the festival’s administrator, overseeing the board of directors and its budget until 2022.

Jones credits the work of the chamber and its executive vice-president Karen Sphar for helping it continue to grow and flourish during those years. When the chamber made the decision to step away from the festival administrator position in August 2022 to focus on its membership and promote its mission, the city of Southport stepped into the administrator role.

Jones said the transition was seamless because the N.C. 4th of July Festival is its own nonprofit entity with its own volunteer board of directors. But he noted having the city of Southport as the administrator is a natural fit.

In addition to providing the setting and backdrop for most of the festival's events, city employees provide support before, during and after the event.

"This festival could never have grown to what it is if it was not for the support of the city of Southport and everyone who has taken an active role in it," he said.

RAIN ON A PARADE

While the team of volunteers begins working each fall to prepare for the next year’s festival, their hard work doesn’t always mean things go perfectly. But the show has continued to go on despite storms, tropical systems, and an explosion in the river.

Wayne Berry has volunteered with the festival since 1974 and recalled rain nearly canceled the parade in 1976. A summer storm inundated Southport on the morning of July 4.

“At the corner of Moore and Howe (streets), water was almost knee-deep,” Berry said.

In the hours leading up to the parade, officials pondered what to do. They delayed calling it off, hoping the rain would stop. It didn’t. Many of the units had already left, but those that remained — including the boat that would be raffled by the Jaycees later that evening — took center stage.

“When it was time for the parade to start, Miss North Carolina got on the boat — and I mean it was raining — and she said, ‘Let’s go.’ Then it was hard for everybody else to say no,” Berry recalled. “She was game, and I think she had an umbrella.”

While that was just a summer storm, tropical systems have threatened to ruin the fun several times over the years. The most recent was in 2022 when Tropical Storm Colin quickly formed offshore. While the threat was short-lived with the storm dissipating in 24 hours, it did force festival organizers to modify the schedule,



shifting some events and canceling others. Several years before, a tropical system moved through the area during the celebration, canceling one day of the festivities, but leaving in time for fun on the Fourth.

Bad weather hasn't been the only complication over the years. In the 1960s and 1970s, the festival often featured military demonstrations, such as skydiving. While Berry couldn't recall the year, he does remember a skydiver missing Fort Johnston's lawn, landing in a tree and needing a hand getting down.

GOING OUT WITH A BIG BANG

The most significant event in festival history occurred on July 4, 1973. In those days, a group of local men shot the fireworks from a barge in the Cape Fear River. In a video produced by the N.C. 4th of July Festival and shared on the festival's Facebook page in July 2020, Jimmy "PeeWee" Russ, Skeeter Trott, and Foxy Howard Jr. explained a group of local men did everything from making the mortars to launching them into the sky.

Russ, who passed away in June 2023, said the men who put on the fireworks shows were "a good crew," and explained they were selective about who they allowed to participate, strictly prohibiting anyone who had consumed alcohol from the activity.

"Even though we were amateurs, we were almost professionals," Russ said in the video.

Trott explained experts came to Southport and trained them on the procedures, and the men were all assigned to specific jobs, including set up and cleaning between rounds. They had strict rules and safety procedures in place.

On the night of July 4, 1973, Trott recalled the barge was set up off Battery Island, facing Southport's Waterfront and the wind was coming from the south-southwest.

"About the time we started shooting them, the wind shifted," Trott recalled in the video.

The men aren't certain what caused the explosion, but they believe the wind lifted the canvas tarp that covered the undetonated fireworks, and sparks from a fired round ignited them. In the video, Russ recalled that he was coming out from underneath the tarp just as he saw Trott and some of the other men jumping overboard. Howard, who was sitting on top of the tarp, said "everything was on fire" including the water.

On land, spectators watched the event play out. Jones was sitting on the rocks at the city's waterfront, when the explosion occurred.

"They were going off, and all of a sudden, it was like this ball of fire was there on the barge," Jones said. "We're like, 'What is going on,' and you saw people jumping off the barge."

"On the Garrison Lawn, you could've heard a pin drop," Berry recalled.

Thankfully, none of the men were seriously injured. Several families had taken their personal skiffs out to watch the fireworks on the river and they, along with the local North Carolina Wildlife Officer, sprang into action after the explosion and quickly plucked the men from the river.

Only one man in the group -- Billy Doshier, better known by the nickname "Sardina" -- couldn't swim, and he made it to a nearby sandbar. Because his wallet was still dry after the ordeal, the men joke that Doshier "walked on water" that night.

FROM HOMECOMING TO TOURIST ATTRACTION

Over the years, the festival has continued to grow and change with the times. While it's still a homecoming for many Southport natives, it's now a draw for tourists with an estimated 50,000 people packing into the city's downtown area through the days-long event.

True to its roots, the festival still relies heavily on volunteers and community support. But some of the volunteer roles and events have changed. For example, the fireworks are still fired from a barge in the Cape Fear River, but in accordance with state regulations, the task is now performed by a licensed and insured company.

Natives and longtime residents reminisce about some of the unique events from the 1960s and 1970s that have since gone by the wayside, such as speedboat races along the city's waterfront. Spectators also enjoyed rousing games of "donkeyball" played in what is now Taylor Field Park. For those unfamiliar with the concept, "donkeyball" was simply baseball played by men riding atop donkeys. If that sounds like organized chaos, it was.

"Sometimes the donkeys moved, and sometimes they didn't," Berry recalled.

But that's what made it fun.

The 1970s also brought the short-lived "World's Largest Ice Cream Sundae." Festival organizers scooped ice cream into a specially constructed hog trough -- one the length of a city block -- and both children and adults grabbed spoons and dug into the frozen treat.

"We didn't care if it was safe or not, we just worried if we could get to it before it melted," Jones recalled.

Berry said the health department soon put a stop to the giant trough, but festival organizers kept the tradition going a few more years using a large fiberglass bowl with volunteers scooping out portions into individual containers. He noted after a year or two, that too was deemed unsanitary.

While the "World's Largest Ice Cream Sundae" has been retired for decades, Trisha Howarth, festival past-president and publicity chair, said they still have the trough and hope to find a way to incorporate it into the festival's modern-day events.

"It's about capturing that sense of nostalgia," Jones added.

The Town of Oak Island kicked off the extended July 4th weekend with a Beach Day celebration of our Independence Day with a day of festivities Thursday July 1, 2021. The events included inflatable rides and vendors at Middleton Park, beach volleyball, free concerts and other events.

MOVING INTO THE MODERN ERA

This will mark the fifth year Jones has served as the festival's president. In keeping with tradition, the outgoing president and incoming president typically work alongside each other that first year, with the incoming president serving alone in the second year and helping the next incoming president in the third year. Jones and Howarth served together his first year with Jones taking the helm at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In July 2020, the N.C. 4th of July Festival was held virtually with volunteers past and present recalling their favorite memories and events in videos throughout the week leading up to July 4. When the Southport city officials decided not to host the event in 2021 citing the ongoing pandemic, a hybrid event was held with in-person events moving to Oak Island. As a result, the town of Oak Island

became more involved in the festival and new events were incorporated, such as the stand-up paddleboard parade and arts and crafts festival held in accordance with beach day.

Last year, was the city of Southport's first year as festival administrator, and that brought some changes, such as moving the waterfront stage onto the lawn at Waterfront Park and creating a food truck row. The reviews were mixed; many longed to see things return to the way they were, while others enjoyed having a less congested space along Howe Street.



Festivalgoers will see more changes this year as concern for the health of Franklin Square Park's trees necessitated moving the arts and crafts vendors to Bay Street. Some vendors have expressed concerns about the move because they will have to stand on concrete, but others are excited because it will allow festivalgoers to enjoy Southport's river views and salubrious breezes as they shop.

“If there’s anything that we’ve learned over the years, it’s that change is hard,” Jones said.

While it's not possible to bring back the past, the festival board hopes to capture some bits of yesteryear -- the sense of community, spirit of patriotism and nostalgia -- as the festival moves into the future.

“The festival truly mirrors the city of Southport because when you look at how Southport has always been concerned about change and how we go forward with that, the festival’s in the same kind of approach,” he said. “We always have to look at change as an opportunity, and we welcome it because it’s inevitable.”

Renee Spencer is the community engagement editor at the StarNews. Reach her at RSpencer@Gannett.com.