

SEAWALL
Foot of Hamilton Street
Beaufort
Beaufort County
South Carolina

HABS No. SC-856

HABS
SC-856

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20240

ADDENDUM TO:
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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Addendum to
SEAWALL

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Location: Foot of Hamilton Street and other points along Bay Street fronting the Beaufort River, in Beaufort, South Carolina.

Owners: Private and the City of Beaufort, South Carolina, according to location.

Significance: The extant sea walls illustrate tabby's utility for large scale, public works projects and a transition in fabrication after the Civil War which involved the substitution of Portland cement for oyster shell derived lime.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

In Beaufort, sea walls built to protect or stabilize areas which can become inundated during high spring tides extend in an interrupted sequence along the Beaufort River. The oldest surviving section fronts that part of Black's Point (now the Point) comprising City Block No. 8, Block No. 12, and Block No.13. Formerly surrounded by tidal creeks on two sides and bounded by the Beaufort River elsewhere, this area constituted an enclave inhabited by some of Beaufort's most prosperous planters immediately before the Civil War.

Construction is best preserved at the foot of Hamilton Street west and south of Block No. 13 where it borders land belonging to Colonel Robert Barnwell in 1861. Rising to a maximum height of about 4'-6" above the low water mark, the seawall here is made of an oyster shell and lime tabby, preserved more or less intact although heavily eroded by tidal action. Maps of Beaufort prepared for the US Direct Tax Commission shows these walls were already standing in 1862 but when construction commenced is not recorded. One possibility is that they are associated with ship building activities located along the tidal creek which formerly bisected Black's Point. If so, a date in the late eighteenth century or early 1800s is possible.¹

¹ A manuscript sketch of Beaufort's defenses dated 1808 locates an otherwise unknown *Navy Yard* either beside or close to the wide creek bounding Block No. 13 on its west side. Another, anonymous manuscript map (Beaufort Museum Collection, Beaufort, SC) probably made soon after the American Revolution, shows land immediately east of the same creek was then owned and occupied by the son and namesake of James Black, a well known, local merchant and shipbuilder killed during the American Revolution (1779). James Black Senior had acquired this land from the estate of Thomas Middleton soon after 1766 (see Rowland et al., 1996: 189). During 1808, Captain Francis Saltus is documented to have been building five gunboats for the US Navy in Beaufort, Nathaniel Ingram acting as supervising Navy agent. It is likely that this work was executed at the shipyard bordering Block 13 which Saltus purchased as executor of James Black's estate in 1819.

Joseph Barnwell records how Edmund Rhett (1808-63) when Intendant (mayor) of Beaufort intermittently during the 1850s and early 1860s “built brick and concrete (tabby) embankments along the margin of the river on Bay Street.”² These installations also survive, although much patched, in places, the best preserved section located immediately east of Carteret Street rising eight to ten feet above the low water mark. Made from an exceptionally dense material, rich in oyster shell, it is possible that tabby here contains a proportion of Portland cement in which case this wall represents an early intermediary between traditional tabby construction and shell concrete of a kind used in Beaufort and elsewhere on the sea islands after the Civil War.

Substitution of Portland cement for lime is definitely attested to near the end of the nineteenth century, the *Palmetto Post* for March of 1894 reporting that Beaufort Town Council had received proposals for building a concrete sea wall “1,000' long and 5' high measuring 3' and 1' at top.” The successful bidder, W. M. French, undertook to complete the work for \$2.35 per linear foot. His mix comprised one barrel of Portland cement, two barrels of sand, and five barrels of shell.

In 1911, Beaufort Town Council awarded construction of a sea wall located at the foot of Charles Street to R. R. Legare. As before the mix specified, which consisted of one part cement, two and one-half parts sand, and four parts shell, substituted cement for the lime used in pre-Civil War tabby but the price had increased to “\$3.25 per linear foot.”³ Segments of Legare’s work still survive in relatively good condition, although certain sections have seen alteration and partial demolition as a result of late twentieth-century drainage schemes.

PART II. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Bibliography

Barnwell, Joseph. *Recollections*. Undated typescript, Beaufort County Library, Beaufort, SC.

Harvey, Bruce G., Colin Brooker, David B. Schneider, and Sarah Fick. *Beaufort County Above-Ground Historic Resources Survey of Beaufort County, South Carolina*. Brockington Associates; Inc.; Brooker Architectural Design Consultants; Historic Beaufort Foundation; Preservation Consultants Inc.: 1990.

² Barnwell, 105.

³ Minutes. Beaufort Council, 16 October 1911, microfilm, Beaufort County Library, Beaufort, SC.

Rowland, Lawrence S., Alexander Moore, and George C. Rogers, Jr. *The History of Beaufort County, South Carolina, Volume 1, 1514-1861*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996.

Tucker, Spencer C. *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was sponsored by the Historic Beaufort Foundation and by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) division of the National Park Service, Paul D. Dolinsky, Chief, HABS. This report is one component of a larger survey of extant examples of tabby architecture within Beaufort County, South Carolina. The documentation was undertaken by HABS under the direction of Paul D. Dolinsky with assistance from Virginia B. Price, HABS Historian, who worked with Jefferson G. Mansell, (formerly of) the Historic Beaufort Foundation, Ian D. Hill, Beaufort County Planning Department, and Colin Brooker, Brooker Architectural Design Consultants, to identify subjects of study and locate them in the field in 2002 and 2003. Colin Brooker, whose research underpinned the project, wrote the historical report. Evan Thompson, now with the Historic Beaufort Foundation, assisted Brooker in the production of the reports. Jack E. Boucher, HABS Photographer, took the large format photographs.