

## Shaped by the Water's Edge: Life in the Lower Cape Fear



*Wrightsville Beach, 1940, Cape Fear Museum Collection*

The Lower Cape Fear is part of North Carolina's Coastal Plain, and its waterways have played a key role in shaping the land and peoples' experiences in the region. The region's rivers, ocean, and sounds help connect the area's environment and history.

Bodies of water—both fresh, salt, and estuarine—are an important and influential part of the region's diverse ecosystem. According to the Nature Conservancy group, North Carolina's "...numerous rivers, streams and wetlands are the lifeblood of the Coastal Plain, providing rich habitat for plants and animals, soaking up floodwaters and feeding North Carolina's sounds and bays."

The Cape Fear River is the state's largest river system. University of North Carolina Wilmington's Lower Cape Fear River program described the watershed: "The Cape Fear River winds for 200 miles through the heart of the North Carolina piedmont, crossing the coastal plain, and empties into the great Atlantic Ocean near Southport. The river begins near Greensboro and Winston-Salem as two rivers, the Deep River and the Haw River. These two rivers converge near Moncure to form the Cape Fear River. The Black River joins the Cape Fear 15 miles above Wilmington, and the Northeast Cape Fear River enters the system at Wilmington." The lower part of the river—between Wilmington and the ocean—is

called the Cape Fear Estuary. Estuaries are affected by tides and are saline because they contain both salt and fresh water. They provide a nursery for ocean fish such as red drum and sea creatures such as shrimp and crabs.

Until the invention and spread of land-based steam-powered technologies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, waterways—the rivers, creeks, streams, and ocean—were the main arteries for the movement of goods, people, and information. As the Smithsonian’s *On the Water* exhibit website puts it, “Ships and sailors connected manufacturers and customers, farmers and consumers, immigrants and their new homes—across the oceans, along the coasts, and up inland waterways.” Like rivers around the nation, the Cape Fear River was a focal point for regional trade. It connected the city of Wilmington to parts of the interior of North Carolina. And it connected Wilmington to the ocean and the Atlantic world.