

Island heritage *x people misc.*

Tom Barnwell Sr. was a ferryman in more ways than one

Editor's note: The following column is reprinted from The Island Packet of Nov. 11, 1971. It helps tell the story of islanders who were here before the bridge was built. A recent study says today's islanders overlook that culture.

The column was written about Tom Barnwell Sr., father of island businessman Thomas Barnwell Jr. (The late Jonathan Daniels of the obituary in the News and Observer in Raleigh, N.C., and a co-founder of The Packet.)

As many newcomers on this island at a young age, Tom Barnwell, who died in his early sixties last week, was too young to be a patriarch. Yet, he was just that as a strong man who saw much happen in little time on a native island swiftly altering about him. His chief possession, as a shrewdly humorous, impeccably polite man, was a universal respect. He was a citizen of dignity and wisdom. He will be much missed as the quiet and perceptive counselor he was in the life of this coastal community of white and black people living close together.

He lived long enough to count much change on the shore where he was born and died. In 1909, when he was born, the immediate day-by-day problem on this island was survival. Men worked at the basic tasks of farming



Sojourner's scrapbook

JONATHAN DANIELS

and fishing. Unbridged waters cut them off from the shore, and across the waters there was limited opportunity. Few health facilities were available. There was an almost absolute separation of races on an island from which all whites, except occasional hunters and fishermen, had disappeared. The public schools provided were poor in quality for all South Carolinians, scandalously poor for the blacks. But aspiration was marked here by the fact that young Tom was sent by his parents to the Penn School at Frogmore, which had been set up by Northern people moved by a noble missionary spirit toward their less fortunate fellow men.

Education here meant no easy opening of doors to opportunity for a black man in a state still captive to the hard doctrines of Negrophobia behind such leaders as Cole Blease and "Cotton Ed" Smith. Barnwell came back to his island. He married young Hannah White. Together across the years they made their home a light in a clearing

on a semitropical island. They did so in terms of leadership in religion, health and virtue for the community to which they belonged. They set their own children's faces forward.

Former corporation executives and military chieftains now settled here in rich retirement may have regarded the tasks Barnwell performed, and in which he excelled, as humble. In his last years Barnwell served as a doorman and a messenger. In his life he not only tended a door at an inn but helped to open doors for his people. He was in the character of his life a messenger of the glad tidings of greater hope and opportunity.

In the symbolism of his place on earth perhaps the best work he performed was that of ferryman. Undaunted, he faced rough waters and high winds. He had to know his way between reefs and marshes. Sometimes his boat moved in darkness. And often the shore seemed distant. The lanterns at the landing were sometimes far from bright. To many the crossing seemed slow.

Perhaps, like some of the others of us older ones here, Tom Barnwell, as his days lengthened, seemed old-fashioned to some younger people around him. He had walked humbly but always with dignity. He had not grown rich, though he always settled his scores. Yet there seemed in the new world little room for the slow pace of

the ferryman, little room for tolerance of the darkness.

He lived into the day of the bridge. Movement swiftened for everybody and sometimes those moving at the new pace were still impatient because they could not hurry forward even more rapidly. That is understandable in a people who still have a great distance to go toward the goals of justice, equality and opportunity which they properly seek.

Tom Barnwell's death not only provides the occasion to remember as a lost patriarch who moved, led and honored, among us. Also it serves as a time of reminder. Those able to move faster should hope for the future, the devotion to duty, the reverence for eternal things which, as a farmer-doorkeeper-ferryman, he possessed in bounteous measure. And he possessed them always in readiness to share with others.

All of us have many rivers to cross. We have reason, still, for praising those who in less fair weather help us across the dark, often turbulent waters behind us. And high among all, Thomas Barnwell is one who deserves such praise.

(This column and others by Jonathan Daniels from the first three years of The Packet's publication can be found in a book available at the island public library entitled "Gentlemanly Serpent.")