

The people and places that saved downtown Wilmington

Gene Merritt for StarNews Media

23-29 minutes

An unprecedented public-private partnership transformed blocks of empty, rundown buildings into the vibrant downtown we enjoy today

In the late 1970s, DARE (Downtown Area Revitalization Effort) led efforts to save a dying downtown Wilmington. The unprecedented public-private partnership transformed blocks of empty, rundown buildings. Gene Merritt, a DARE founder, has been documenting the efforts that resulted in the vibrant downtown we enjoy today.

Fifth in a series

PART 1: [How DARE led effort to revive a dying downtown](#)

PART 2: [Running off riff raff, embracing riverfront](#)

PART 3: [Liquor-law change a shot in the arm for restaurants](#)

PART 4: [A new century finds a new Wilmington](#)

DARE (now WDI) was a pioneer in North Carolina when it formed an unprecedented public-private partnership for economic development. That partnership approach -- rather than going it alone -- was essential to DARE's success and remains vital as many groups and individuals help downtown evolve and thrive.

When DARE began operating in July 1978, its \$105,000 budget had equal financial commitments from the city, county and the private sector. This public-private partnership has resulted in a huge return on investment for all involved. The once-dying Central Business District now represents one of the county's most valuable tax-base areas per square mile. For businesses, the result was an entirely new sector -- downtown and riverfront tourism and recreation.

As DARE and downtown grew and evolved, more and more individuals and organizations joined the effort, each playing a unique role. Here are some of them, in no particular order. (If there are any you feel I've overlooked, please let me know.)

THE PEOPLE

DARE/WDI directors

Gene Merritt; Mary Gornto; Bob Murphrey; Susi Hamilton; John Hinnant; Ed Wolverton.

DARE/WDI board leaders

Rick Willetts; Norman Osborn; Jim Quinn; Kent Stephens; Bob Helms; Frank Martin; Rick Zigler; Gene Merritt; Steve Harper; Sandy Wood; Nancy Bullock; Alice Mitchell; Bill Shell; Bill Rose; Rose Anne Mack; Dave Spetrino; Calvin Wells; Dick Enghahl; Mark Saulnier; Dave Spetrino; Jay Parker; Vinton Fountain; Don Britt; Cathey Luna; Bob Murphrey; Bob Philpott; Clark Hipp; Pete Davenport; John Bullock; Lawrence Craig; Robert Rosenberg; Mike Creed; Phil Whittington; Debbie Erickson; Colin Tarrett; Nancy Geimer; Ronnie Burbank; Tom Davis; Dane Scalise.

Ben Halterman

After working as a political consultant to help get [Ben Halterman](#) elected mayor in 1976, I urged him to push for revitalization of the struggling downtown. He got the city's Planning Department involved and formed the Mayor's Committee on Revitalization. At a time when many leaders still saw the downtown riverfront as a location for industrial uses (it had been a railroad and shipping hub for decades, after all), Halterman was more open-minded. The mayor quickly embraced the idea that the riverfront had a brighter future as an entertainment, recreation and tourist destination rather than home to a coal depot.

Rick Willetts, III

The Willetts Family made a bold statement in 1959 when the [Cooperative Savings and Loan Building](#) at Second and Market streets brought modern architecture to downtown Wilmington.

Willetts chaired the Mayor's Committee on Revitalization, and he

and I incorporated DARE and got it up and running in 1978. He served as the first president of DARE (1978-1979). His family's former business, Cooperative Bank, made many loans to assist in the redevelopment of downtown.

Sarah Caldes, Roger Frankoff

Both Wilmington Planning Department employees, they played a vital role in the research and planning required for the establishment of DARE.

Christine Burton

DARE's first office manager provided key support that enabled the fledgling organization to succeed.

Thomas Wright, Jr.

Local businessman, historic preservationist, and community leader, [Thomas Wright Jr.](#) played an important role in the early days of downtown revitalization efforts. He developed Chandler's Wharf, which became one of the two important downtown commercial anchors (the Cotton Exchange being the other). In DARE's early years of ridding downtown of topless bars and adult bookstores, one strategy was to purchase buildings and evict the tenants. Wright, who was president of Wright Chemical Corp., signed the notes at the bank to help us make the purchases. This was a tremendous act of support on his part.

Joe Reaves and Mal Murray

Among the very first "urban pioneers" in downtown Wilmington, the businessmen purchased a group of old buildings on North Front Street and created the [Cotton Exchange](#), opening the collection of unique restaurants and shops in 1977.

The Bullock Family

John Bullock and his wife, Jean, purchased the Cotton Exchange and their family continues to operate it today, along with Warehouse C at Chandler's Wharf and the Front Street Centre, 130 N. Front St. Their daughter, Nancy Bullock, has been a long-time leader in all aspects of downtown's revitalization, including forming the Downtown Wilmington Association (now called the Downtown

Business Alliance), and working with DARE/WDI and the WHET (Wilmington Harbor Enhancement Trust).

Don Britt

Britt, a local attorney, and his wife, Kathy, have been strong advocates for historic preservation and downtown revitalization for many years, active in DARE/WDI, the Historic Wilmington Foundation and Residents of Old Wilmington.

Bob Jenkins

Jenkins, who [died in 2018 at age 83](#), was a downtown revitalization pioneer. During downtown's tough times of the late 1970s, he bought a building at 12 Market St., ran his interior design business on the first floor and lived on the second. That was unique for downtown Wilmington and became a successful strategy for DARE over the years. Bob's history tours were legendary and an important part of downtown's evolution into a tourist destination. The visitor's center at the foot of Market Street was recently named for Jenkins.

Carl Marshburn

Marshburn had a sternwheel riverboat built in Mississippi and brought it to downtown Wilmington in 1988. The Henrietta II plied the Cape Fear River until New Year's Eve 1999, followed by the Henrietta III until 2016. Marshburn and his Cape Fear Riverboats, Inc. now conduct tours on three different vessels. Marshburn has been a strong advocate of downtown as a destination for tourists, recreation and history.

John and Janet Pucci

The couple started Springbrook Farms more than 30 years ago, providing horse-drawn carriage tours downtown. Popular in cities such as Charleston, the carriage rides were an important addition to downtown Wilmington's tourist experience.

Michael Caliva

Michael and Deborah Caliva purchased the historic building at 9 S. Front St. in 1980. The couple leased the space to Perry Fisher, who opened Front Streets News, a newsstand and gathering place in the early years of downtown's comeback. The Calivas later opened

Caffe Phoenix there. The stylish Phoenix was downtown's first "big-city" restaurant and was known as a good place to spot TV/film industry celebrities.

Beverly Tetterton

Former director of the library's local-history room, Tetterton was a fount of knowledge on downtown's past. She performed research on façade renovations and compiled other information needed to comply with historic-tax-credit guidelines. Her publications and presentations helped spark a renewed interest in downtown's old buildings and architecture.

Ed Turberg and Janet Seapker

Ed Turberg and his wife, Janet Seapker, dedicated many years of service to and passion for historic-preservation in Wilmington.

Turberg, an architectural historian, provided invaluable research.

Seapker is retired as director of the Cape Fear Museum. [Turberg died last December at age 78.](#)

R.T. Jones

Jones, who was Wilmington dockmaster, performed essential work toward the development, revitalization and maintenance of the repurposed downtown waterfront and docks.

Dave Spetrino, Dave Nathans, Todd Toconis

The importance of this trio to the revitalization of downtown Wilmington, [North Fourth Street](#), and the inner-city in general, cannot be overestimated. They are leaders in in-fill development, providing new life for vacant or under-used parcels. Spetrino and Nathans as builder-developers and Toconis as a broker-developer have been involved in many renovations and new-construction projects downtown and on the North Side.

Libby and Maureen Beccarino

Associated with PBC Design + Build for a number of years, Libby and his wife, Maureen, have built nearly 50 housing units in the downtown area, and were honored by the Historic Wilmington Foundation for their work and leadership in preservation.

Bill Kingoff

A colorful civic leader, he operated [Kingoff's Jewelers](#) downtown for many years. His father, Ben Kingoff, established the business in 1919. Bill was a staunch supporter of DARE and provided creative and innovative ideas. Bill's wife, Janice, and his son Michael continue to operate Kingoff's in Hanover Shopping Center.

Chuck Schoninger

Schoninger is an entrepreneur who has been leading the development of the northern end of downtown. His company developed the new marina near the convention center, two new restaurants, and has facilitated the development of new condominium and apartment buildings on the waterfront. His latest endeavor is to create a houseboat community at the marina.

John Sutton

Along with Stuart Cooke, John was my partner in the development of Water Street Center, the 12-story building on Water Street near the Hotel Ballast (constructed on the site of the former parking deck). John has been an active developer and investor in downtown and owns a number of properties, including the Masonic Temple Building.

Jay Dechesere

His Synthesis Architects and Planners was an important resource for DARE in its early years, assisting in façade design, renovations and other projects. His firm designed the Wilmington Fire Department headquarters on Market Street, one of the best examples I know of blending new construction into a historic setting.

John Sawyer

Architect John Sawyer has been a loyal and dedicated member of the downtown community for many years. He has assisted in many historic preservation renovation projects, including the renovation of the architecturally significant New Hanover County administration building at 320 Chestnut Street.

Clark Hipp

An architect and real estate developer/investor, Hipp has been very

active in promoting downtown, including serving as president of WDI and on many task forces and committees.

Tom Davis

His City Block Apartments on North Third Street was a breakthrough project for residential development in the downtown area.

Capt. Frank Conlon

As then-director of the Battleship North Carolina, Conlon worked with DARE to establish the River Taxi dock and service between downtown and the battleship. He was the first chairman of the Coastline Convention Center board.

Ligon Flynn

The late architect allowed his property at Second and Market streets to be used as public parking, an important example of parking efficiency in an urban environment.

Jay Parker

City Executive of First Citizens Bank, Parker was an active supporter of DARE in its early years. He provided DARE with acquisition loans for various properties, the largest being what became the Coastline Convention Center.

Capt. Robert Parker

First operator of the J.M. Maffitt riverboat/tour boat. He also operated the RiverTaxi for DARE for a number of years.

Bobby Harrelson

The longtime local developer erected an impressive five-story, Class A office building at Third and Chestnut streets at a time when no significant building was going on downtown. The building housed BB&T Bank for many years and is now home to CresCom Bank. The fourth floor is the [new headquarters for StarNews Media](#).

James Goodnight III

The Raleigh developer (son of billionaire SAS software CEO and New Hanover High School graduate James Goodnight) has been investing in historic structures in downtown Wilmington for five years, making a significant impact. His quality renovation projects

are models for others to follow.

Roger Perry

His Chapel Hill-based East West Partners is developing one of the largest projects ever in downtown Wilmington. [RiverPlace](#), a 12-story mixed-use development set for completion in 2020, will house retail, office and residential space as well as parking. It's on the last section of the property where the Water Street Parking Deck once stood. Finding a better use for the prime piece of land has been a longtime goal for the city and DARE.

Ian Moseley, Justin Smith

The duo and their partners have been leaders in downtown's dining and entertainment sector. Their numerous successful restaurants and entertainment venues have strongly supported the nightlife economy of downtown Wilmington.

ORGANIZATIONS/BUSINESSES

City of Wilmington

A DARE partner from day one, the City of Wilmington has made significant investments in downtown, especially in infrastructure. The city has also provide vital leadership and expertise.

Without a doubt, the city's most important contribution has been the development of the Riverwalk. The Riverwalk has been a major driver of downtown's revitalization. In addition to the extensive development spurred by the project -- restaurants, hotels, and a marina, among others -- the Riverwalk itself has become a major tourist destination. I think of it as a "linear urban park."

Then-Mayor Spence Broadhurst, City Manager Sterling Cheatham and other staff helped fashion the deal that led to PPD building its world headquarters downtown. That was an important early milestone in the transformation of the formerly heavy-industrialized northern riverfront area.

Although it was a long struggle, the city remained committed to building a large convention center downtown. With a full-service hotel now attached and other hotels opening nearby, the Wilmington Convention Center is starting to fulfill its potential and

has become an important economic asset.

Major improvements of the streetscape and infrastructure of North Third has been an important aesthetic and economic improvement for downtown. This City of Wilmington project should be a model for other parts of our city that could use the same treatment.

New Hanover County

The county's impact on downtown has been both good and bad. When most county offices left downtown for College Road, it created an economic vacuum for a good while. On the positive side, transforming the old Belk store into a spacious and attractive public library was an important moment in the earlier days of downtown's comeback. The county also stayed committed to the architecturally significant administration building at Fourth and Chestnut streets, performing significant renovation and restoration work. It remains an important downtown presence for a variety of county services.

It also should be noted that county bond issues enabled the growth and development of Cape Fear Community College, including construction of the stellar Wilson Center performing-arts complex.

Private Sector

The third leg of the public-private partnership, the private sector, has been the truly critical element in the revitalization process. Local real estate brokers, property owners and developers have created and continue to create new projects that have dramatically improved the downtown area. They have provided strong financial support for DARE/WDI over the years, along with personal leadership on the board and committees. These entrepreneurs have brought tremendous vision to what downtown can be.

DBA

The Downtown Wilmington Association, currently doing business as the Downtown Business Alliance, was incorporated in 2004, but efforts to promote the interests of downtown businesses had been going on for many years. Various merchant associations have operated in the City of Wilmington, including the Greater

Wilmington Merchants Association. DARE, Inc. never saw its role as a merchant's association or a Chamber of Commerce, rather an economic development organization established for the public good. DBA established RIMS on the River in 2004, and its popularity is gaining every year, bringing thousands of people to downtown Wilmington. DBA was also instrumental in establishing the now very popular St. Patrick's Day celebration.

WHET, Inc.

Wilmington Harbor Enhancement Trust, Inc. was founded in 1993 by Dickson Baldrige. The first president was Randall Bray, an architect. Among the early leaders on the board of directors was the popular Judge Gilbert Burnett. WHET's primary purpose was to encourage recreational use of the Cape Fear River. WHET encouraged the city and DARE to promote the installation of dock space to accommodate recreational boating.

Residents of Old Wilmington

The preservation of the residential historic district, promoted by ROW, has created customers for downtown businesses and supported a growing tourism industry.

Wilmington Trolley Company

Offering narrated bus tours of downtown Wilmington for 21 years, Wilmington Trolley Company and its owner Wes Moore has contributed significantly to tourism development.

The Film Industry

Since the early 1980s when Dino De Laurentis opened his 23rd Street movie studio, the film industry has provided jobs and overall positive economic impact on Wilmington. Downtown has been a location site for many movies and TV series, giving birth to a tourism niche of its own.

PPD headquarters

After a proposal for a new PPD headquarters to be built at the site of the old Water Street Parking Deck fell through, the city didn't give up. When then-CEO Fred Eshelman made the decision to locate PPD's world headquarters on the northern riverfront, it was a huge

win for downtown and helped spur a remarkable and ongoing transformation of the northern end of downtown.

Finkelstein's

In business for over 100 years, the jewelry and music store at Front and Market streets is downtown's oldest retail business. Owner Bobby Hammelburg has been a leader in promoting downtown for a number of years and his , having served on the board of WDI, Inc. and DBA and on various committees and task forces. Bobby's mother-in-law, Anne Finkelstein, was a downtown leader for many years.

Anne Marie and Roy Clifton/Riverboat Landing Restaurant

With their former balconied restaurant at Front and Water streets, the Cliftons were early leaders in downtown's restaurant and entertainment business.

Front Street Brewery

Now owned by Thomas Harris, this was Wilmington's first craft brewery. The well-managed business is a popular place for visitors and locals and has become a bit of a downtown institution.

The Barbary Coast

"The Coast" has been serving cold beer in downtown Wilmington for over 70 years. It was operated for many years by former boxer Buddy Best, then by his son, Paul Best. In response to DARE's efforts to improve bar standards downtown, the Barbary Coast has a sign that reads: "We've upped our standards. Up yours!" a pitch-perfect sentiment from a place that's always prided itself as a bit of an edgy dive bar. Scenes from the movie "Blue Velvet" were filmed there. It is now owned and operated by Eli Ellsworth and partners.

The City Club at DeRosset

Jon Weiss and his excellent staff, including Greg Matheson, have done a wonderful job of running the City Club. This beautiful historic structure houses a high-class club environment with excellent food in a great environment.

Port City Java

The local coffee shop has become a mainstay of downtown Wilmington.

Wilmington Water Tours

They have helped promote tourism and economic development and their boat is a fixture on the downtown Wilmington waterfront.

DESTINATIONS

Cape Fear River

With the downtown retail economy in shambles in 1978, one critical element remained unchanged -- the Cape Fear River. Always considered our “industrial canal,” the river became a critical player in the downtown revitalization process. We started promoting the value of the river as a recreation destination in 1978 and that use continues to evolve and expand today. In 1979, the first Riverfest was held, demonstrating that the downtown riverfront itself was a destination. In the late 1970s, work began at the foot of Market Street on the first section of the Riverwalk. The Riverwalk was completed in 2017, extending 1.75 miles nearly from bridge to bridge.

Historic District

The Wilmington Historic District is one of the largest in the nation and includes the Central Business District as well as the surrounding residential district.

DARE’s strategy was to rebuild downtown on the strength of historic preservation techniques, such as grants and tax credits. During DARE’s 40 years of operation, we have lost very few historic structures and have saved many more. The preservation of historic structures has provided the unique flavor of downtown Wilmington as compared to many other cities.

Cotton Exchange

Joe Reaves and Mal Murray were some of the first urban pioneers in downtown. They purchased a group of old buildings on North Front Street and opened the Cotton Exchange in 1977. Considering that downtown was spiraling downward in the mid-1970s, it was a tremendous business risk for Reaves and Murray. Serving as an

anchor for the northern end of the historic business district, the Cotton Exchange was one of the most important achievements of downtown's redevelopment, proving that downtown had a niche as a shopping destination.

A number of small businesses have been located in the Cotton Exchange for quite a few years. They include Fidler's Gallery, The German Café, Paddy's Hollow Restaurant and Pub, The Golden Gallery, The Scoop, T.S. Browns, and Two Sisters Bookery.

Chandler's Wharf

In the late 1970s, local preservationist Thomas Wright Jr. started work on Chandler's Wharf, anchoring the south end of historic business district. Most of the structures were moved there from other locations. Initially, there was one small building housing a sandwich shop. The Pilot House and Elijah's restaurants were later established and brought dining to the riverfront. Other long-time tenants are A Proper Garden (Peg Beam) and A. Scott Rhodes, Jeweler.

The Residential Historic District

DARE has always understood the importance of a vibrant residential historic district surrounding the Central Business District. The residents of these areas are customers of downtown businesses and patrons of the cultural and public institutions.

Thanks to the leadership of a number of investors and property owners, including the staff and board of the Historic Wilmington Foundation, we have preserved and maintained the integrity of the residential historic district.

Cape Fear Community College

The growth and development of CFCC has played a vital role in the revitalization of downtown, creating an important transition area to the newly developed area near the convention center. [CFCC's Wilson Center](#) has become the crown jewel of the region's entertainment venues.

Thalian Hall Center for the Performing Arts

This cultural and historic icon has long served the city, home to live

theater, music, dance, cinema and other arts. During the tough times of the early 1970s, [Thalian Hall](#) was one of the few places that drew people to downtown. Thalian's longtime director, Tony Rivenbark, has done exceptional work in making the center successful and expanding its offerings.

Public Library

Downtown's loss of Belk's in the mid-1970s was somewhat lessened by the renovation and reuse of the building as the main branch of the New Hanover County Library, which became another reason for people to come downtown. The resources of the library's local-history room has served not only DARE, but many other individuals and groups doing research for historic preservation.

Coast Guard

The Coast Guard has maintained a presence in downtown Wilmington off and on for nearly 200 years. The various colorful ships docked at the riverfront over the years have been points of interest and good reminder of the downtown's nautical heritage. It will be a loss for downtown when the Coast Guard moves its Wilmington operation to Florida in a few years.

Churches

Houses of worship are a glue that kept the inner-city alive despite times of steep economic downturns, keeping many people coming downtown who otherwise wouldn't have. In addition to being spiritual and social anchors, the downtown churches and synagogue make strong historic and architectural statements, notably the spires that tower over the city.

Acme Art

Located a bit off the beaten path at 711 N. Fifth Ave., Acme is a collection of artists' studios, with a concentration on painting, photography and sculpture. A cultural anchor for the North Fourth Street area, the studio hosts an exhibition open to the public every fourth Friday.

North Waterfront Park

Located near the PPD building, this [new city park](#) will cover 6 acres

and be home to an amphitheater with a capacity of 6,780, making it the largest concert venue in Southeastern North Carolina. It is scheduled to be completed next year.

Next time: The series wraps up with some revealing numbers comparing 1978 and today; work that's still needed; and where downtown might be headed over the next 40 years.