

Tar Heel Town

# Edenton

The South's Prettiest Small Town  
reveals character through its women.

By Michael Graff

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TRAVIS DOVE

**At the waterfront in Edenton,** locals used to hang drams of whiskey on the limbs of the cypress trees in the water (this page) for passing boaters. Now, the trees — which stand in the water near the Barker House (opposite page) — are part of the scenery in one of North Carolina's most stunning towns.



**Things are small and simple** in downtown Edenton. Cars traveling toward the water on Broad Street pass the Taylor Twin Cinema on the right. First opened in 1925, the Taylor now has two movie screens for films.



Many years ago, a woman in Edenton signed her name to a piece of paper, and another woman signed the same paper, and another woman did, too, and more women followed, until 50 of them had organized the first full-blown women's movement in United States history.

This really didn't bother the king all that much.

It was 1774, and he was losing control of his colonies. A year earlier, men up in Boston threw tea into the harbor, which made the king so mad he punished the whole city and closed the port. And now these women — these women — in this North Carolina town signed a petition to say they wouldn't take any of that English tea in their homes, either.

How should England, father to the colonies, respond to these little ladies in this little town? By patronizing, of course. A cartoonist drew a satirical image. London magazines called the women "uncontrollable," a demeaning sentiment that's been repeated throughout time whenever women break through male customs. But that was all. For the most part, the Crown dismissed the

Edenton Tea Party as nothing. They were just women, after all.

Men are fools sometimes. We sail a ship across an ocean and build a home and form a colony and report back and take the credit for creating America. But Edenton, a delightful, horseshoe-shaped town surrounded by cypress trees and the Albemarle Sound in far northeastern North Carolina, reminds us of the other half.

Edenton claims to be the South's Prettiest Small Town. But it is like many small, coastal North Carolina communities. Its main business today is preserving history and getting others to come see it. But what makes Edenton different is that the significant players in that history — starting when it was founded in 1722 as the second incorporated town in the state and continuing today — are women.

**From the inside of the Barker House** (opposite page, bottom) to the pomegranates in the herb garden at the Cupola House (top right) to the moonlit waterfront (top left), Edenton's small, quiet treasures have been preserved through the years.





**Anne Rowe** is the Barker House manager and embraces some of the same personality traits as the home's first owner, Penelope Barker.

What England dismissed then was another step for Americans. Yes, Colonial women wanted the tea; it was the main piece of social activities during the time. But when these women declared they didn't want this tea — not at their parties, not in their homes — they sent a signal that they, too, were united in the fight for independence. The signal went ignored. A year later, the Revolutionary War began.

Today, a print of that mocking cartoon hangs in the Barker House, a 1782 Colonial home that sits on Edenton Bay at the most prominent place in town,

**“I didn't date boys who lived in the cotton mill village. You knew those kids from school who were from there, but you did not date them.”**

— *Anne Rowe, Barker House manager, on what it was like to grow up in Edenton years ago*

right on the water. The house is named for Thomas and Penelope Barker. Thomas Barker was a Colonial agent and an important figure during the Revolution. But nobody talks about him much here. Compared to his wife, Thomas is just supporting cast.

As a colonial agent, Thomas was stuck in England from 1761 to 1778. As a married spouse alone in the colonies, Penelope was the woman who organized the tea party. She remains the first lady of Edenton, and those who've come along after her embraced her essence, even today.

#### **Classy side**

Anne Rowe carries a tray of tea and cookies to the living room in the Barker House.

She is a descendent of George Washington. She speaks properly, with noticeable breaths of air slowly pushing out each word. You might call her dignified.

She grew up in one of Edenton's many old houses, the 1850 Wessington House. The house has 10 rooms and two stories, and it was in Rowe's family for 122 years. Rowe lived in it alone until 2008, when she decided she couldn't keep it up anymore. She sold it for \$1.6 million and now lives in a small home on the water, still within eyesight

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of Wessington.

Now in her 60s, Rowe works as the Barker House manager. She knows everything about Penelope Barker.

Penelope, born here in Chowan County, was married twice before she met Thomas. Both of those husbands died, and Penelope inherited significant property from them. And when Thomas died in 1787, he left Penelope all of his property, including two plantations. Penelope Barker was one of the wealthiest women in America.

Rowe, wearing pearls around her neck, talks about Barker as if she were a hero to all women — someone who had the strength to endure the loss of three husbands and the courage to start a movement.

“She was brighter than most,” Rowe says. “And she was interested in the greater world.”

Rowe was born in Edenton in the 1940s. At that time, the cotton mill was the biggest business in town. Many of Edenton’s men were either executives at the mill or workers at the mill. The executives lived in the big, old houses at the water with their families. The workers lived in the little, modest houses in the mill village with their families.

Rowe’s father was on the mill’s board of directors. She lived at Wessington.

“In high school, I didn’t date boys who lived in the cotton mill village,” Rowe says. “You knew those kids from school who were from there, but you did not date them. I was clueless about [class structure]. It was a very Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn type of existence.”



### Walking with purpose

Carolyn Owens grew up on black swampland outside of town and was a mill worker. Her husband grew up in that mill village; they live in his parents' house now.

Their son was a football offensive lineman, one of the best high school football players in the state. As a senior, he was selected to the North Carolina all-star team to play in the Shrine Bowl, a game which pits

North Carolina against South Carolina.

Owens played girls' basketball when she was in high school.

This is a tough, strong family.

Owens's knees are older now, and she hobbles. But she can still walk every street in downtown Edenton and tell a story about almost every corner. She's a walking tour guide with the Edenton Visitors Center.

On every tour, she walks into St. Paul's Episcopal

Church, the second-oldest church in the state, and tells about the forward-facing pews and the fire that nearly took the whole place. She walks past the Allison House and says that's where Governor James Iredell lived; she walks up the stairs of the Cupola House and points to the window where a child long ago scratched the words, "When this you see, remember me." And on every tour, she walks into the courthouse, the oldest government building in North Carolina, and she runs her hand across a solid pine table, the oldest law table in the country, and she says that this is her favorite building in town.

"Because it's just simple," she says. "You can almost hear the lawyers standing up there and making their statements."

Just outside the courthouse is one of the most spectacular views in Edenton, a straight shot across a long, rectangular greenway lined with sycamore trees and out to the shallow water of Edenton Bay.

Alongside that greenway is a concrete teapot mounted on top of a cannon barrel. The marker honors the Edenton Tea Party, the women who signed their document in that courthouse.

When she gives a tour, Carolyn Owens stops at the teapot and pulls a handkerchief from her back pocket, and she wipes off the cobwebs.



**Strength and smiles**

Sharon Keeter's wrist jingles with jewelry when she stands up to wave from her seat in the trolley.

She sees someone she recognizes on the front steps of the Chowan County office building.

"I wave at her every day," Keeter says. "Everybody knows me as the trolley lady."

Keeter, like Owens, was born and raised in Chowan County, and she knows the town's history just as well. She doesn't walk the town, but instead stands behind a microphone on trolley tours for the Edenton Visitors Center.

She knows everything about every house here. Most of them are Colonial homes that have been restored. She knows who's lived in them. She knows where gravestones still stand in otherwise empty cemeteries. She knows the names on those gravestones, and she knows which ones have no known descendants.

She knows all about Harriet Jacobs, a black woman born into slavery in 1813, who lived for seven years in her grandmother's attic to escape harassment from her master. Jacobs wrote a book about it, *Incidents in*

*the Life of a Slave Girl.*

Edenton's women are tough.

Keeter was 7 when her father died in an accident — he was cleaning a gun, and it went off. Her mother was an operator with the telephone company and then rose to become supervisor.

Keeter raised a family of her own. She named a daughter Lesley. Lesley was a rising educator in the local school system, an assistant principal, and she was 34 last year when doctors diagnosed her with cancer. Lesley died only four months later, in January; she had a 3-year-old and a 1-year-old.

Keeter wears bracelets on her arm. One is a cancer bracelet, and the other has her kids' and grandkids' names on it.

The bracelets jingle when she waves at people from the trolley.

**Southern home**

The old mill and mill village, with two- and three-bedroom homes clustered close together, is now one of the prize projects for Preservation North Carolina. The organization helped restore the mill into open-



**Tour Edenton with Carolyn Owens**, and she'll take you into churches, cemeteries, and old homes.

floor-plan and exposed-brick condominiums. The small homes are now owned by people who've renovated them.

Carol and John Becker live in one of those homes. Carol created a backyard garden of flowers that brings elegance to their tiny piece of property that once belonged to a rank-and-file mill worker.

Carol is not an Edenton native. She was born in Richmond County, the daughter of United States Representative Charles B. Deane. She had a privileged life growing up, but she gave her dad fits. She was more into arts than politics.

John is from England. Before he began a career in business, he was an accomplished theater performer. As a young man, John took a job as a stage electrician at a venue in Miami, Florida. He was backstage one night, operating a tape recorder for a convention that involved several members of Congress. A congressman from North Carolina brought his family to the stage and took the microphone.

John heard the congressman's voice and Southern accent.

"I'd never heard anything like it," John says now through his heavy British accent. "And I said, 'Who in the world is making this noise?' So I came out from behind the curtain. And that was the first time I laid eyes on





**John and Carol Becker** had many options when they were choosing a place to retire. But they picked Edenton's old mill village, where they purchased a small mill house and made it home, inside and out.

Carol. My fate was sealed.”

Carol and John have lived in Edenton on three separate occasions, first in the 1960s, when John worked as a stock broker, and his company transferred him here from Charlotte. Then, after several moves to New York and Edenton and Europe, they came back here to retire. They joined the community initiative to fix up the homes in the mill village.

The Beckers lived all over the world, and they could have retired in just about any place they wanted. But they chose here.

They chose the place where women across four centuries and all social classes have made and passed down history. They chose the place where all old houses — the big, stately ones and the little, quaint ones — have been preserved. They chose a place on the water that calls itself the South's Prettiest Small Town. They chose a place where one woman started a movement that helped ensure the colonies would declare war on England.

Carol's an American woman, and John's an English man.

And this is Edenton, and she is beautiful. 🍷

*Michael Graff is the senior editor of Our State magazine. His most recent stories for Our State were "Value in a Small Town" and "Wildcat Country" (November 2011).*

## Visit

### Preservation North Carolina Northeast Regional Office

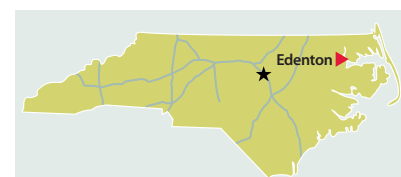
420 Elliott Street  
Edenton, N.C. 27932  
(252) 482-7455  
presnc.org

### Edenton Historical Commission

505 South Broad Street  
Edenton, N.C. 27932  
(252) 482-7800  
ehcnc.org

### Historic Edenton Visitors Center

108 North Broad Street  
Edenton, N.C. 27932  
(252) 482-2637  
nhistoricsites.org/iredell



# 4 Things Not to Miss



1



2



3



4

PHOTOGRAPHY BY COURTNEY GONZALEZ

### 1. National Fish Hatchery

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service established the Edenton National Fish Hatchery in 1898 to help keep the region's waters stocked with fish. In 36 ponds, the hatchery spawns and grows fish to be large enough to drop into the Roanoke, Tar-Pamlico, Neuse, and Cape Fear river basins. Among the species grown are shad, striped bass, and herring. The hatchery includes an aquarium, where visitors can see the types of wildlife that live in the area. Tagged fish that originated here have been caught as far away as Massachusetts. **1102 West Queen Street. (252) 482-4118. fws.gov/edenton.**

### 2. Roanoke River Lighthouse

There were once 15 screw-pile lighthouses on the North Carolina sounds and rivers, and this is the last one still standing. The Edenton Historical Commission bought the lighthouse in 2007 and began restoring it in Colonial Park on the banks of Edenton Bay. It is scheduled to be complete this year. The lighthouse was moved as a complete structure for its restoration. **South Broad Street. (252) 482-2832. townofedenton.com.**

### 3. Cupola House

You won't be allowed to climb up into the cupola in the top of the Cupola House — an octagon-shaped landing with four windows that offer the best views of Edenton. But the rest of the house has plenty to see. With formal gardens outside and period-specific decorations inside, the Cupola House still stands as the iconic symbol of Edenton, more than 250 years after Francis Corbin built the home in 1758. **408 South Broad Street. (252) 482-4686. cupolahouse.org.**

### 4. Waterman's Grill

If you want to be where locals are on any night of the week, the Waterman's Grill is probably the place. Brian Roberts and Rick and Katy Eberson opened the restaurant in 1996 in one of Edenton's downtown historic buildings. In the 1960s and '70s, a fish market occupied the building. The restaurant remains relatively no-frills, with an upstairs and downstairs and a wide variety of seafood, including a raw bar. **427 South Broad Street. (252) 482-7733. watermansgrill.com.**

## One to grow on...

### The Pack House Inn

Built in 1915 as a tobacco-packing house at a nearby plantation, the building was cut in half, moved to Edenton, and restored as a bed and breakfast. Innkeepers Giuliano Giannone and Michael Scalpi recently added the Lord's Proprietor's Inn on the same property to accommodate additional guests. They serve a three-course breakfast in the old Tillie Bond Cottage. *Pamela Lanier's Bed and Breakfast Directory* named Giannone and Scalpi the 2011 Innkeepers of the Year.

**103 East Albemarle Street. (252) 482-3641. thepackhouse.com.**

