

**VOICES OF THE CAPE FEAR  
INTERVIEW WITH OF LESLIE N. BONEY, JR.**

**JULY 31, 1995**

**INTRODUCTION**

**This is Sam Bisette on the afternoon of July 31, 1995 and I'm sitting in the conference room of Leslie Boney Architects at 120 South 5th Street in Wilmington and going to be talking with Leslie Boney and seeing if he can help us to get a look at Wilmington from his perspective. I want to talk with him about the things that he has viewed and the interesting life that he has lived in Wilmington since his family moved here in 1922.**

INTERVIEWER: I'd like to ask you, Leslie, if you would, to sort of start us off with where you born and how you came to Wilmington.

BONEY: Sam, thanks for this opportunity to talk to you about Wilmington and about the Boney family. First of all, let me be sure that you in your future conversations identify me as Leslie Boney, Jr. I am proud to have been named for my father and I'm also somewhat aware of the fact that he was the architect and I'm still learning about it and trying to measure up to the heritage which he left me. I'm Junior and when someone calls and wants to talk to Mr. Boney on the telephone, I still think that they want to talk to my daddy. I was born in Wallace, North Carolina, which is 38 miles north of here on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January, 1920 and about eighteen months after that, we moved to Wilmington where I've lived ever since. My father was a native of Duplin County as was my mother and daddy had practiced architecture in Wilmington, Florence, Goldsboro and other places. At that time he was working for an architect here in Wilmington named James F. Goss. He was a partner with Mr. Goss, who died at a rather young age and Daddy took over his business. It was desirable for him to live in Wilmington then whereas before that, he had been commuting from Wallace to Wilmington. We have, as I said, been practicing architecture on a statewide basis since then. My mother was Marian Hussey and she and daddy gave us a rich heritage, which I think is one of the great things, which I have enjoyed all my life.

INTERVIEWER: Let me say that I have a fond remembrance of your mother, your mother's painting abilities, and I enjoy a painting that is at home on my wall in my den that she did years and years ago.

BONEY: Well, she would be flattered. Mother said that she didn't know why anybody ever wanted one of her paintings because she was not really an accomplished artist, but we have some of mother's early paintings, which she did as a girl. Later in life, she took up painting again and enjoyed watercolors. She would be flattered that you had one of her paintings, being an accomplished artist that you are.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I'm glad that we had an opportunity to bring that in. Tell me about your early schooling when you got into Wilmington which was the later part of the 1920's. You were four to six years old when you started school. What happened then?

BONEY: Well, I lived in Sunset Park, which was in a suburb of Wilmington and there was a small elementary school there which was later called Shaw Shaw School and there just a few students in the first grade there. The teacher was Miss Julia Jones and I suppose maybe a half a dozen kids showed up for the first grade. Miss Jones knew my mother and my sister, Mary, who had been there before me. She would say, "Mrs. Boney, why don't you send Leslie to school?" Mother would say, "Well, he's only five years old and you're supposed to be six." Mrs. Boney said, "Well, let's send him anyway and we'll see how things move along." She gave me a haircut to get me ready for school and Dr. Graham gave me some inoculations. The reason I say I was given a haircut is because I had long hair because my father always liked his boys to have a

long haircut, which wasn't very boyish. In any event, my mother got me ready for school. At the end of the first month, Mrs. Jones sent a note home to my mother. The report card said that I was entirely unsatisfactory with all my studies that they would check off and she said, "Mrs. Boney, unless Leslie improves I think that we'd better hold him out for another year." Well, according to my mother, during the next month Mrs. Jones gave me a book and when I had something concrete that I could work on, I apparently did all right because Mrs. Jones kept me in school and I maintained the grade though I was always the youngest kid in the class.

INTERVIEWER: That's very interesting. While we are at this point, how about your brothers and sisters and so forth? Lets get a little of that in so we'll know the background.

BONEY: Mary was the first and older sister and I was the second child followed by Bill, William Joseph named for my grandfather and Charles, named for my other grandfather and the youngest child was Sue Alford that was named for my aunt and Alford is my paternal grandmother's name.

INTERVIEWER: And you became a family of architects?

BONEY: Yes, the News and Observer did a tiny little article on me some years ago and the subtitle was, Architects on the Family Plan. Daddy used to say when I gravitated into architecture and Bill came along and Charles, he said, "One of you ought to be a lawyer, the other one ought to be a doctor." He said, "You just ought not be in the same business because it has so many ups and downs and then one could help the other when times weren't so good." We didn't take daddy's advise, we all became architects, and attended NC State which was his alma mater also.

INTERVIEWER: Well it's interesting that you've been able to retain the business as much as your firm has grown to be able to maintain it in the same location and in quarters that obviously have worked, attractive and certainly it's nice to have things of this kind, this nature, professions located in the downtown historical district of Wilmington.

BONEY: I work here and I grew up in this old house and we have expanded from this one particular location at 120 South 5<sup>th</sup> Street to other adjacent buildings so that we could accommodate the increase in size of personnel that were necessary to operate with the number of architects that we've got in our firm now.

INTERVIEWER: It looks as if you have settled on the University of your choice, North Carolina State with the records that you have of you and your family members all going. I notice that you are a graduate of 1940, I believe were you not of State, and Charles went to State did he not?

BONEY: Yes, some 12 members of my family attended NC State.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I thought there was about four, so I was just about one third of the way down the pike.

BONEY: Well, you haven't considered my nephews.

INTERVIEWER: I hadn't considered the next generation.

BONEY: Right. Actually, daddy was a 1903 graduate of NC State.

INTERVIEWER: What was it named then?

BONEY: It was the North Carolina School of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts and briefly, it was known as A&M.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

BONEY: Daddy grew up in Wallace and his family and some other families engaged a teacher named Mr. Samuel Wilson Clement to teach their children. Mr. Clement was Daddy's only teacher from first through the twelfth grade and Mr. Clement prepared Daddy for what is now NC State, A&M. With this beginning in his education, he has had lifelong interest in education and followed that in his profession. By the time of his death, he had designed more school buildings than any other architect in North Carolina.

INTERVIEWER: One of the most beautifully executed renderings that I have ever seen was the one that he did for New Hanover High School which one of you showed me one day years ago. It was done in ink, but it was a perfectly beautiful rendering of a high school that I graduated from some years ago.

BONEY: I wish I could see that rendering Sam, but I don't really remember it. Daddy was working at that time for an architect from Florence, South Carolina, W.J. Wilkins and he was in charge of the Wilmington office. Mr. Wilkins and daddy designed New Hanover High School. That would have been about 1920 or 1921. Incidentally, Daddy told me that there was a great controversy in the community that they had bought an entire block to build a school on, which they thought was a terrible waste of land and secondly, that they'd gone all the way out to 13th Street on Market Street and located this school so far out of town.

INTERVIEWER: Out in the country.

BONEY: Out in the country and the back end of it was a trash dump. Well, daddy made additions to the school. The first original building opened in 1920 and it was added to in the 1930's, 40's, and 50's. So, we are tied up with your alma mater in a number of ways.

INTERVIEWER: Well I've been interested in the Wilmington College, which was located in the Isaac Bear Building on Market Street and then moved to six hundred acres on College Road. You speak about a city block, six hundred acres on College Road, was still in the country for us then. Well, let's move ahead a minute. You apparently did quite a stint of military service during World War II and if I remember correctly, you were in the Engineers. Could you tell me a little about that?

BONEY: Well I graduated from North Carolina State in 1940 and I was only 20. I was unable to secure a commission because you had to be 21 years old. I had taken the ROTC course and was thus eligible to become a second lieutenant, but I wasn't old enough. So, when the war came along and I still hadn't become commissioned, I had become 21 and applied for a commission. I was made a second lieutenant in what was then the Quarter Master Corp. That was the group that was building for the Army, constructing quartermasters. It was later absorbed into the US Army Corp of Engineers. I entered the service at Camp Davis on the 5th of November, 1941, a month before Pearl Harbor. I later worked for the District Engineer in Wilmington. During this time, we were building at places like Camp Davis, Fort Fisher, Fort Bragg, and I was assigned for several months to Greensboro where we built something called a Basic Training Center Number 10. I was stationed at Fort Bragg for a while and then later was trained for overseas duty at Fort Belvoir and my subsequent assignment was to go to the southwest Pacific.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned Greensboro; did that later become an overseas replacement depot?

BONEY: Oh, I think yes.

INTERVIEWER: I was familiar with that more so than I really wanted to be because I spent a very rough three weeks there at one time. Going ahead, Leslie, after the war was over, you came back, and got settled, tell us a little bit about the way things went. That would have been 1946 or so and tell me how things went

for you in your profession? Also, tell me when that lovely lady, Lillian, came along on the scene.

BONEY: Well, that was a long time later. When I returned from the service, I came back to work for daddy. He's the only man that I have ever worked for other than Uncle Sam and he took me into the business and made me a partner and as he did my brothers when they came out. They joined the firm and we became partners together with daddy as the senior partner. We had our office at that time in the Murchison Building and later, we had this area in our house with an English basement at 120 South Fifth Street and it was more spacious than our place in the Murchison Building. It was also more convenient for daddy to have this place beneath his living quarters up above. So, after a couple of years, we gravitated and established this as a headquarters and did away with the office in the Murchison Building. Daddy had always been involved in educational design and this became a natural point of gravitation for us as we developed our skills and became architects each in our own rights.

INTERVIEWER: And you are specialists in the area of building and planning schools?

BONEY: Schools and colleges.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, colleges.

BONEY: Daddy also designed an awful lot of housing. The first low-rent housing project in North Carolina was his design. That's now known as Taylor Homes here in Wilmington. It was 216 units and it was the initial housing project and prototype by which other architects designed their projects. Daddy would finish the plans and an architect from Raleigh or Charlotte would get his plans and specs. They were okay because Daddy had gotten them approved. He was something of a pioneer, if I might say so, in this area of housing which had so many special requirements.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. While being exposed to Wilmington as you came here in the early 1920's on through the depression, do you have any recollections of anything that would be of value during that period of time that was significant, humorous, or worthwhile to recount. Of all my favorite stories, I don't know that we have one of that period. If not, we'll move ahead, but I wanted to give you an opportunity if there's anything that perhaps might occur to you.

BONEY: Well, the main thing that I suppose that occurs to me during that time was the struggle that there was within the family from a financial point of view. These were hard times and I know that my mother and father with five children coped with the lack of money in a really admirable way. I still salute them for the way that they were able to make ends meet and get all their children an education during these really difficult times.

INTERVIEWER: I differ only one year and my background was in Rocky Mount during the hard times. I moved to Wilmington in 1938 around the corner, and so I got a viewpoint of what you are talking about. I mentioned Lillian a minute ago and you said, "A little later on the scene."

BONEY: Well, it was much later than 1946 when I got out of the army and I married Lillian Maxwell Bellamy in 1954.

INTERVIEWER: I'd like to talk just a little bit about things in the community. I know that you are going in a minute into so many things that vary from National, State, and local interest, but it appears to me if I remember right, that you have had a strong interest in Wilmington's history and Wilmington's architectural heritage for as long as I have known you. You have worked on various projects relating to these.

BONEY: Well, that's true. I think that in many ways people have said this, but we certainly can and should learn from our past. Then, we'll have some better ideas to where we ought to be going. Wilmington has a

rich heritage in architecture and I think that we today have a responsibility for trying to recognize that and trying to preserve that which is still available to us and is usable in the present day and time.

INTERVIEWER: In addition to yourself and your interests, who are some of the others that you credit with making Wilmington aware of this and doing something in a concrete way about. I know that there are certain individuals that did some spearheading and you might know who those were.

BONEY: Well, the first benefactor or person who was able to see the ideas and dreams which I have are what I call Wilmington's first family, who are Elizabeth and Tom Wright. There were just times when Wilmington's buildings were in critical danger of being destroyed and these great folks came through with not only words, but also they came through with the money that was necessary to save and to establish them. There were also leaders in the formation of the Historical Wilmington Foundation, which as you know, would buy buildings and have them restored or sold to people with the covenant that they would restore them. They saw the advantages, which there were to this. Another name earlier that comes to my mind, which I would pay tribute to is Mr. Lewis Toomer Moore. Mr. Moore lived across the street from us here at 120 along with his wife and his three daughters.

INTERVIEWER: Florence Moore was his wife.

BONEY: Florence was his daughter, Mrs. Jack Dunn. The next daughter was Peggy who is now married to William E. Purdew.

INTERVIEWER: Louis Moore was a dear friend of mine. We had a business relationship for many years. He was a director of the People's Building and Loan Association.

BONEY: I remember that.

INTERVIEWER: So, I saw him on a weekly basis for many years.

BONEY: He was a great man. Mr. Moore was also the director of the Chamber of Commerce. Mr. Moore had a vision of what Wilmington could be and should be and knew that it had to grow and develop, but he also knew where it had been, the value of our history. He was a one-man army to see that Wilmington's history was brought to the attention of the current generation. He has left books, which have been written by him.

INTERVIEWER: His interests, particularly in Oakdale cemetery, were remarkable. He led us to appreciate and understand the value of Oakdale Cemetery in his constant talks to civic clubs and various other groups.

BONEY: Well, I'm glad too, that you've been able to pickup on that interest, preserve it, and see that more people know about Oakdale. Of course, his story about Oakdale is not just about the beauty of the dogwoods, but it's in the history of the people who are now buried in that great little beauty spot.

INTERVIEWER: He calls out the deeds of people that you would never know about if not for Louis Moore. I believe you had an interest in institutions in Wilmington with the Cape Fear Historical Society. Aren't you a past president?

BONEY: Yes, I've been involved in the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society.

INTERVIEWER: One of our beautiful historic buildings downtown that is still there, thanks to the efforts of some of the people who wanted it to continue on, is the Cape Fear Club. You did yeoman service with the Cape Fear Club and I as a member appreciate what you did in connection with renovations and things that

were done there.

BONEY: The Cape Fear Club is a great institution.

INTERVIEWER: You are the past president of that too, if I'm not mistaken.

BONEY: We are both past presidents. Cape Fear Club is a unique institution, it was well-built and well-designed, and it had been over the years somewhat I would say, enjoyed by well-intentioned people and Lewis Woodberry called on me one time and said we need to do something about the club to restore it to its original grandeur. So, we did help and I had lunch there today. I'm pleased to say some people around town were very complimentary about the Cape Fear Club, its décor, its furnishings, as well as the fine food.

INTERVIEWER: We've talked about the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society a minute ago. This year, Ruby and I attended the presentation of the Clarendon Cup for this year and I was interested to learn that you are a past recipient of the Clarendon Cup, if I've got my figures right.

BONEY: Well, I was honored to have that and have been involved in some writing from time to time.

INTERVIEWER: Let's talk about your profession a minute. Not only have you been interested in your profession and served it well, but you have also served it well at a state and national level. I do not know anything about the architectural side of things, but if being a fellow in the American Institute of Architects is what I think it is, then having achieved that a long time ago is quite a recognition. It pales beside the recognition you received with the Kemper award, which is reserved for one person in many thousands in this country. When did you receive it?

BONEY: It was in 1982.

INTERVIEWER: I'm glad for that to be made a matter of record. In connection with the state organization of architects, tell me a little bit about how you have worked in that for the benefit of North Carolina? We talked about Wilmington a minute ago.

BONEY: Well, professionally, I was the director and president of the North Carolina Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. At that time, it was the largest state chapter in the country. I have, because of my interest as an architect, been involved in a number of governmental commissions, employments, and study groups to consider different problems, financing of the public schools, various programs for the handicapped, and was instrumental in establishing what's now called "Keep North Carolina Beautiful Commission" during the administration of Governor Moore.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I just wanted to touch a little on that and wanted to be sure that we did not overlook that. I think you've been good in service to the alma mater and it looks like to me that you have served it well especially in connection with the alumni association and with other positions that you've held in connection with your university. I think that's great that you've maintained those ties.

BONEY: NC State is a great school, Sam. It is a service related organization that touches the lives of every person in this state. It is research oriented and it's trying to improve the lot of the people. I was impressed with this past year, Frank Kenan's gift of twenty million dollars to NC State. Frank is a strong UNC Chapel Hill alumnus and a great benefactor of that as well as many other institutions, but when he decided to give this large sum of money to NC State, it was with the thought that the business, industry of our state, and the Liberal arts could not function without the technical development and research which was being done at NC State. I salute him for his sound judgement in recognizing that principal. The things that are being done at NC State are not being done anywhere else and it is indeed a great institution of service.

INTERVIEWER: That's particularly true in view of how much of a technical electronic society we have become over these years when we think of the Liberal Arts, the technical side of it, and the things that you have in this building right now that enable you to function.

BONEY: Well, we couldn't do what we do to today without it and also in our buildings, we have to be aware of the needs in communication and in function in order that we can design properly to meet the needs of tomorrow.

INTERVIEWER: How many and what colleges have you been a trustee of?

BONEY: Well, I've been a trustee of Union Theological Seminary of Richmond, Virginia for some twenty years. I was a trustee of Fuller McDonald and later a trustee of St. Andrews.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I knew there was more than one. You've taken quite an interest in the building in which your church is located, the First Presbyterian Church have you not?

BONEY: I have.

INTERVIEWER: In connection with that, it looks like to me that you have done some work in connection with books that are being written, that have been written and things that you have written of your own or have edited or become involved in. Are any of those of particular interest that you would like to comment on?

BONEY: Well the largest publication was a book we called *Let There Be Light* and the subparagraph is the story of stained glass in the First Presbyterian Church. This not only has photographs of all the stained glass in the church which were done incidentally by Freda Wilkins, the accomplished artist, but it also deals with the history of the church as well as the architecture and the man who created that architecture, Hubert Upjohn from New York. It deals specifically with the stained glass artists, the first one being Owen Barnowit and the second being Henry Dewitt. We did have a part in the development of the church in 1950 and on the stained glass. I was involved particularly in a dream come true of editing this book which I am very proud of.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have anything in process that you're working on in connection with books that you care to mention or in a position that you can mention. Things that are being done sometimes you can't say much about.

BONEY: Well, I can talk about anything I'm doing. Today, I'm working on the final touches of a book called *Kenan's Chapel Prayers*. These prayers were given by my sister Mary Boney Sheets and we are putting them together in final book form as we speak and hopefully in another three or four months, we will have a nice book of Mary's prayers given at Kenan's Chapel.

INTERVIEWER: That's interesting. I have always been interested in Henry Bacon and what Henry Bacon left to Wilmington and to Washington D.C. in connection with being the architect at the Lincoln Memorial. Also, is there anything in that area which you have shown an interest.

BONEY: I suppose you could say Henry Bacon is kind of a hero of mine. I went to the Acropolis in 1965, which was a lifelong dream and as I stood there and watched the sun setting on the Parthanon, I recognized that this was a shell of a building and that we had a building, which I thought was of great importance in Washington called the Lincoln Memorial. It started my trend of thought as to who was Henry Bacon and what other buildings had he done. During my days in Tileston School, I'd seen renderings of that building because he'd given or someone had given a rendering of the Lincoln Memorial to Tileston, which was where Mr. Bacon went to school. He was a salutatorian at the Tileston School. He was born in Illinois but grew up

in formative years here in Wilmington.

INTERVIEWER: The land of Lincoln.

BONEY: From then on, I tried to find out who Henry Bacon was and my search has gone on now for some thirty years.

INTERVIEWER: Well, you were well acquainted with Henry Bacon McKoy?

BONEY: Yes, Mr. McKoy and his sister Elizabeth were great friends of mine.

INTERVIEWER: You gave a luncheon years ago and I was one of the persons invited and sat next to Mr. McKoy. I found him to be a charming and interesting gentleman who was interested in Wilmington. He gave the lodge building to St. John's, what later became St. John's Museum of Art.

BONEY: Yes, Mr. McKoy and I became fast friends.

INTERVIEWER: He said something that day that I have never forgotten. He said, "Young man, when you grow old, it gets to the point to where the only friends that you can have are the young people."

BONEY: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: He said, "Because I've lost most all of my friends."

BONEY: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: That was just something that happened, just a sidelight.

BONEY: Well he was a great man. He grew up here in Wilmington and he loved Wilmington. His sister, Miss Elizabeth, lived here all of her life and we became fast friends. When I came back from Athens and wanted to know something about Henry Bacon, I went to Ms. McKoy and we enjoyed many years of conversations about Henry Bacon and my efforts to uncover the real Henry Bacon. I'm glad to say that there is a book in process now which I have been involved with. Dr. Chris Thomas is writing this book on Henry Bacon and the Lincoln Memorial and I'm to do the introduction of that book for Chris.

INTERVIEWER: I look forward to seeing that one of these days. I don't think that we could close this without mentioning your interest in the Bellamy Mansion. We now have a museum in the Bellamy Mansion and you're a director. We have something, which is open to the public and is of great historic significance to Wilmington. I think a great deal of that, personally, is due to your efforts and your interest.

BONEY: Well, the Bellamy Mansion is a great home. I know that the Bellamy's generally refer to it as the Bellamy House and later it had the title "mansion" attached to it, it was built by Dr. John D. Bellamy and he had his roots in Horry county and moved up there as a young man. He wanted to build a fine house for his wife and growing family and he was able through his business acumen and through his agricultural endeavors to have enough money to build such a fine building. I think the design would have to have come from Rufus Bunnell, who assisted Mr. James Post as a young architect and a man of great talent at only 20 years old. The real architect was Mr. James Post. James Post designed most of the buildings around Wilmington, which we consider important historical buildings including the house of my father's at 120 South 5<sup>th</sup> Street. Through the diary, which I uncovered of Mr. Bunnell, we found out how it was that he worked for Mr. Post during those prewar days. Sam, of interest is the conditions, which were here in Wilmington in those prewar days. He recounts that making you realize how strongly the people in Wilmington felt about the cause of slavery and the Union here. He, as a Northerner said that when he wanted to read the New York Times he would have to



quietly secure one from a ship that had come into the port and take it up to his room in order to read it. He was a very suspect young man because he was a "Yankee." Anyhow, he helped Mr. Post to design a fine house and this building, as you know, came into my wife's ownership over some time and she and her cousin, Emma Hendren owned the house and kept it from being destroyed. They, if nothing else, maintained that place and its a landmark.

INTERVIEWER: Who owns it now?

BONEY: It's now owned by Preservation North Carolina, which is a nonprofit organization in Raleigh. It was first of all given by Lillian, my wife, and Emma Hendren, her first cousin, to an entity called Bellamy Mansion, Inc. Bellamy Mansion, Inc. was a nonprofit group and through their efforts, the restoration of the house was started.

INTERVIEWER: There was a group of local people involved, as I recall.

BONEY: That's right. Hugh MacRae has been a principal in that. These two ladies, the board was expanded considerably and later, it was given by Bellamy Mansion, Inc. to Preservation North Carolina. They now manage this museum of design arts and as you say, we do have a very capable director, Jonathan Noffke.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, I was delighted to see that he had gotten together all of the available artist's pictures of the Bellamy Mansion and made a show of them sometime back.

BONEY: They'll have a hard time outdoing that as a show of interest because of the work which was exhibited there, probably twenty or thirty, is a favorite.

INTERVIEWER: Well to me, and one of the finest things that I can remember is Louis Orr's forty etchings of North Carolina and the one of the Bellamy Mansion.

BONEY: Well, that is great.

INTERVIEWER: That's one of my favorites. We've got a couple of minutes left, so let's have your thoughts and ideas of Wilmington as it is in the present and where you think we may be going in the future? We are in the throes of having a growth period that is unbelievable to many of us that is taking place. All we have to do is get out and try to drive from one place to another to realize that it is happening and look at all the building that is going on. Where are we going?

BONEY: We're going to grow even more. The challenge is for us to try to manage and control that growth and anticipate it and try to see that growth is in a somewhat orderly planned fashion. Wilmington really needs to know what it wants to become and it needs to lend itself in that concentrated direction. Growth is securely sure to take place here and we need not fight it, we must join it and control it.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, on that note, I expect we are going to have to end. I want to thank you for sharing your thoughts and ideas and remembrances and a little bit of history about the Boney family and about Wilmington. This tape is planned to go into the North Carolina Room of the New Hanover County Library as part of an oral history of Wilmington. I hope that this part of it will help to make the whole project worth while. Thank you very much Leslie, for your time this afternoon.

BONEY: Thank you.