



**North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources**  
**State Historic Preservation Office**

Ramona M. Bartos, Administrator

Governor Pat McCrory  
Secretary Susan Kluttz

Office of Archives and History  
Deputy Secretary Kevin Cherry

March 12, 2015

MEMORANDUM

TO: Mary Pope Furr  
Office of Human Environment  
NCDOT Division of Highways

FROM: Renee Gledhill-Earley *Renee Gledhill-Earley*  
Environmental Review Coordinator

SUBJECT: Evaluation of Nixon Oyster Plant, Extension of SR 1409 (Military Cutoff Road), U-4751,  
New Hanover County, ER 05-2123

Thank you for your letter of February 24, 2015, transmitting the above-referenced report and National Register of Historic Places evaluation. We have reviewed the report and **do not concur that the property is eligible for listing in the National Register** for the reasons outlined below.

The report does not make a compelling argument for the National Register eligibility of the Nixon Oyster Plant. Criterion A for the local shellfish industry and commerce is implied, but not clearly stated and no context for that industry's significance is provided. From an article about Mr. Nixon and the plant found on the Internet, Mr. Nixon stated that New Hanover oysters were not as popular as Topsail oysters or those farther north but were a local taste.

Criterion B is claimed for the plant's association with Mr. Nixon, but without establishing the significance of the local shellfish industry, it is difficult to claim Mr. Nixon's significant contributions to that industry.

Criterion C is claimed for the plant as an example of a fish house, but no context for oyster houses is provided. Other than the oyster shell bays and coolers, there is not much to distinguish this building from any other type of building. The absence of interior views or description does not help, although we doubt there is much left of the shucking room to establish the building as a fish house.

The captions for Figures 6 and 7 appear to have been reversed.

The above comments are made pursuant to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation's Regulations for Compliance with Section 106 codified at 36 CFR Part 800.

Thank you for your cooperation and consideration. If you have questions concerning the above comment, contact Renee Gledhill-Earley, environmental review coordinator, at 919-807-6579 or [environmental.review@ncdcr.gov](mailto:environmental.review@ncdcr.gov). In all future communication concerning this project, please cite the above referenced tracking number.

# National Register of Historic Places Evaluation for the Nixon Oyster Plant

New Hanover County, North Carolina

TIP# U-4751 and WBS# 40191.1.2



NEW SOUTH ASSOCIATES, INC.



**National Register of Historic Places Evaluation for the Nixon Oyster Plant**

New Hanover County, North Carolina

TIP# U-4751 and WBS# 40191.1.2

Report submitted to:  
North Carolina Department of Transportation, Human Environment Section  
1598 Mail Service Center  
Raleigh, North Carolina 27699-1598

Report prepared by:  
New South Associates  
6150 East Ponce de Leon Avenue  
Stone Mountain, Georgia 30083

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary Beth Reed". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Mary Beth Reed – Principal Investigator

Ellen Turco – Historian and Author

January 26, 2015 • **Revised Draft Report**  
New South Associates Technical Report 2436





## **MANAGEMENT SUMMARY**

The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) is proposing an extension of SR 1409 (Military Cutoff Road) in New Hanover County, North Carolina. The project is designated as TIP# U-4751 and WBS# 40191.1.2. The subject of this report, the Nixon Oyster Plant (NH 3632), is a late discovery in the planning process. In October 2014, New South Associates, Inc. was contracted by NCDOT to assess the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) eligibility of the Nixon Oyster Plant. New South recommends that the Nixon Oyster Plant is eligible under Criteria A, B, and C.



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## **I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND METHODOLOGY**

The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) is proposing to extend SR 1409 (Military Cutoff Road) in New Hanover County, North Carolina. A Historic Architectural Resources Survey Report and subsequent addendum were prepared for the project in 2010 and 2011. While working on the mitigation requirements for Mt. Ararat Church and Cemetery, the consultant, New South Associates, Inc. identified the Nixon Oyster Plant. New South was contracted to evaluate the property.

New South senior architectural historian Ellen Turco conducted the work on this intensive survey in October and November of 2014. The property was visually inspected, and the exterior and setting was documented through written notes and digital photographs. Research was conducted at the North Carolina Division of Archives and History; New Hanover County Public Library, Special Collections; and the New Hanover County Register of Deeds Office. Interviews were conducted with a number of knowledgeable local informants: John Barfield, Sr., Cynthia Harrison Bell, Nina Brown, Reverend Alonza Davis, Carrie L. Nixon, and Reverend Jerry M. Powers. The historical development, architecture, and cultural significance of the resource was then assessed and evaluated within its respective contexts according to the established NRHP criteria.

The results of this intensive-level investigation and NRHP evaluation are presented in the following chapters of this report. This report complies with the basic requirements of Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended; the Department of Transportation Act of 1966, as amended; the Department of Transportation regulations and procedures (23 CFR 771 and Technical Advisory T 6640.8A); the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation regulations on the Protection of Historic Properties (36 CFR 800); and NCDOT's Historic Architectural Resources, Survey Procedures and Report Guidelines.

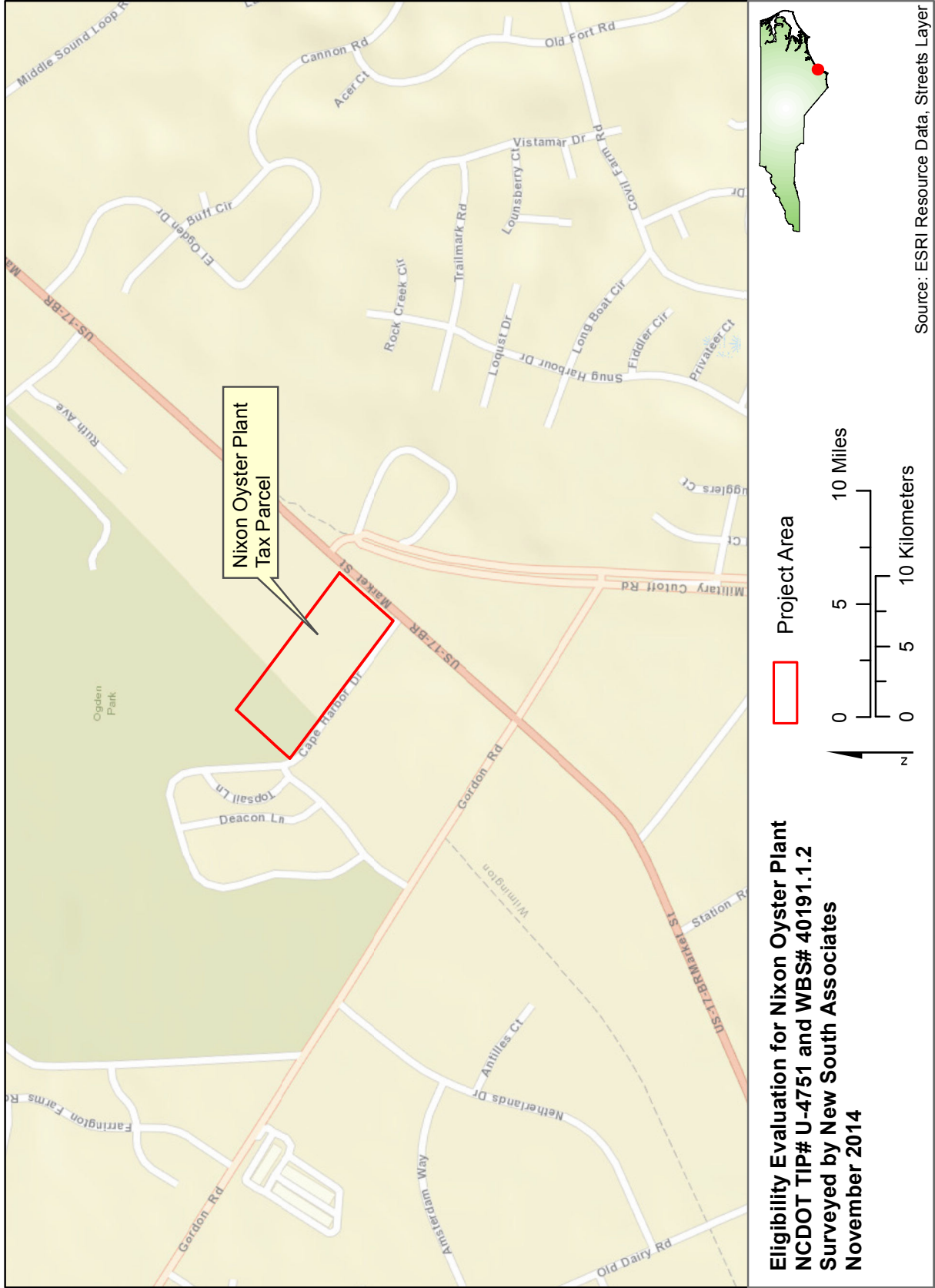


Figure 1. Project Location

## II. NIXON OYSTER PLANT

Resource Name	Nixon Oyster Plant
HPO Site #	NH 3632
Location	6955 Market Street, Wilmington
PIN	R04400-002-004-000
Date	Circa 1955
Recommendation	Eligible for NRHP Under A, B and C



### DESCRIPTION

The Nixon Oyster Plant is a collection of utilitarian concrete block buildings in the suburban Ogden community of New Hanover County. The complex is near the center of a rectangular 9.67-acre parcel on the northeast side of Market Street (U.S. 17 North), just southwest of its intersection with Military Cutoff Road (SR 1409) (Figure 2). The Stone Garden, a commercial stone yard and landscaping center has leased the property for about 15 years. Southeast of the oyster plant complex is the Cornelius Nixon House, a heavily altered Cape Cod-style dwelling built around 1949 and now used as the Stone Garden's office and showroom (Figure 3, 4 and 5). Pallets of stone and pavers, piles of mulch, gravel and groupings of prefabricated statuary, and fountains are spread over the flat sandy site (Figures 6 and 7). Oyster shell middens are located behind the plant.

The Nixon Oyster Plant consists of four utilitarian buildings. The complex is anchored by the main processing building. A stand-alone refrigerated cooler building, a storage building, and an outhouse are located behind and to the northwest of the main building (Figure 8). All of the buildings are one-story and constructed of concrete block walls with wood framed roofs, which are covered by a patchwork of rolled and shingled composite roofing and metal sheeting.



Figure 2. Property Location







*Figure 3. Cornelius Nixon House, Front, Southeast Side*



*Figure 4. Cornelius Nixon House, Northeast Side*





*Figure 5. Cornelius Nixon House, Rear, Northwest Side*



*Figure 6. Stone Yard Looking East with Oyster Plant in Background*





Figure 7. Stone Yard Looking West Toward Market Street

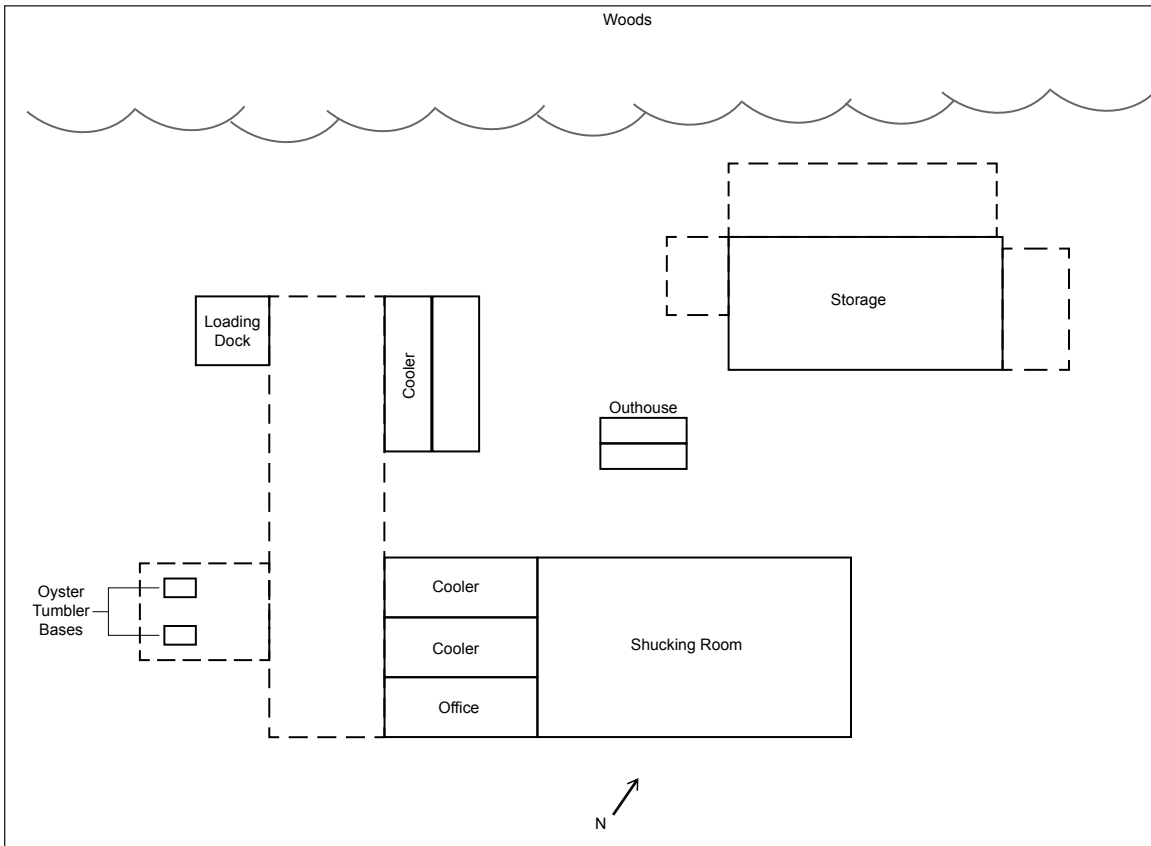


Figure 8. Site Plan

The largest building is the circa 1955 shed-roofed processing building, which contains a large open shucking room at the northeast end and a business office and two large refrigerated walk-in coolers at the southwest end (Figure 9). The front of the building displays a central bank of square windows. Under the windows is a ground level recessed oyster shell bay, about three-feet in height (Figure 10). Workers would drop shells from the shucking room into the bay to piles outside. Sets of paired window openings are located at the northeast and southwest ends of the front elevation. The window bank and northeast window opening are covered with boards. The window and oyster shell bay pattern is repeated on the rear elevation, except there is no southwest window opening (Figure 11). The paired windows are wood six-light sashes and the window bank has metal ventilation grills and no glazing. The shucking room is accessed by two exterior doors; one on the rear elevation northeast of the window bank, and the other a glazed door centered on the northeast side wall.

The business office is situated in the southwest corner of the processing building and accessed by a plywood door surmounted by a two-light transom (Figure 12). An open shed porch situated on square wood posts spans the southwest side of the complex and connects the processing building and the detached cooler (Figure 13; also see Figure 9). Under the shed is a concrete pad floor. Behind the office are two refrigerated coolers with massive insulated metal doors on strap hinges that are secured by large bolt latches (Figure 14).

A second partially open shed projects from the southwest side of the processing building (Figure 15). This shed has walls of 5V metal and a poured concrete floor. Under the shed are square wood oyster tumbler bases, which supported the rotating tanks used to clean unshucked oysters. A concrete drainage trough runs along the perimeter.

Northwest of the processing building is a circa 1957 windowless cooler with a gabled roof (Figures 16 and 17). As previously noted, the cooler is connected to the processing building by an open shed porch. Centered in the cooler's southwest wall is a massive insulated metal door with a round temperature gauges mounted to the doorframe (Figure 18 and 19). At the northwest end of the shed porch is a deteriorated truck loading dock (figure 20).

The storage building is northeast of the processing building (Figure 21). Constructed sometime after 1969, it is a long rectangular windowless building with three doors on the southeast side. Two of the doors are solid wood, and one is a paneled replacement door. The interior is partitioned into three storage units with plywood walls and ceilings, which show evidence of water damage (Figure 22). Wood frame open storage sheds have been built on the northeast and northwest sides (Figure 23).

The processing building, cooler, and storage building are arranged to form a working courtyard. Poured concrete covers the ground and inset drains collected water. At the center of the courtyard is a two-bay gabled-roof outhouse, which dates to circa 1965 (Figure 24).





*Figure 9. Processing Building, Southeast (Front) Side*



*Figure 10. Processing Building, Front Oyster Shell Bays*





*Figure 11. Processing Building, Northeast and Northwest (Rear) Side*



*Figure 12. Processing Building, Southwest Corner Showing Open Shed and Location of Business Office*





*Figure 13. Processing Building, Southwest Side Under Shed Showing Office and Middle Cooler Doors*



*Figure 14. Processing Building, Southwest Side Under Shed Showing Middle and West Cooler Doors*





*Figure 15. Oyster Tumbler Shed*



*Figure 16. Southwest Side of Cooler*





*Figure 17. Northeast Side of Cooler*



*Figure 18. Cooler Building Door*





*Figure 19. Temperature Gauge*



*Figure 20. Loading Dock*





*Figure 21. Storage Building, Southeast Side*



*Figure 22. Typical Partitioned Room in Storage Building*





*Figure 23. Storage Sheds on Northeast and Northwest Sides*



*Figure 24. Outhouse*

## HISTORY AND CONTEXT

The Nixon Oyster Plant is historically associated with Cornelius Nixon, Jr., a prominent African American business leader in New Hanover County. The property is also one of significance to the county's commercial seafood processing industry. It is an example of a seafood packing house, or "fish house," in which catches were processed and packaged for wholesale markets. Many fish houses also had a lesser retail component where products were sold directly to local consumers.

Commercial fishing is one of the state's oldest economic activities along the coast. The modern era of commercial fishing began in 1890, when the state had its first million-dollar year. The industry peaked in 1959 (Orr and Stewart 2000:165). Since then, it has declined overall due to labor shortages, the regulation of fisheries, overseas competition, and soaring coastal real estate values (Garity-Blake and Nash 2012:3). After 1960, shellfish became an increasingly large portion of the state's catch, while finfish catches declined. Shellfish harvests increased 3.5 times between 1975 and 1995 (Orr and Stewart 2000:166). Cornelius Nixon grew the Nixon Oyster Plant within the context of the state's shellfish industry expansion of the mid-to-late twentieth century.

Born in 1921, Nixon was a native of the Middle Sound community where he would remain for his entire life. Nixon attended the Middle Sound Colored School and the Williston Industrial School in Wilmington. However, the young man's entrepreneurial spirit had manifested itself before he finished high school. His first "job," at the age of seven, was picking green beans from grandmother's garden (Steelman 2011). As a teenager, he worked several self-created jobs harvesting oysters and selling them, along with locally grown vegetables, door-to-door and along the roadsides. Remarkably, Nixon bought real estate before he was of legal age. The Nixon Oyster Plant tract is thought to be one of his earliest purchases. He recounted lending his mother the money for the property and having her reassign it to him when he turned 21 years of age (New Hanover County Courthouse [NHCC] 1942 Deed Book [DB] 318:249; Carrie L. Nixon personal communication, 2014; Smalls 2010). The subject tract is one piece of what would become Nixon's extensive land holdings in Harnett Township and Wilmington.

After graduating from high school in 1939, Nixon readily expanded his seafood and vegetable business. Soon he had three trucks, and several employees who sold goods throughout New Hanover, Pender, and Brunswick counties. He quickly realized that oysters were a lucrative commodity. New Hanover County is surrounded by water on three sides and harvesting shellfish was something that most middle and lower class rural people did to supplement their diet and income. Having grown up in the tightly knit community of Middle Sound, Nixon had an extensive network of friends and relations who would bring him shucked oysters, which was the public's preference at this time. His customers included both locals and tourists. During World War II, Nixon would wait at the gates of the local shipyards and sell to workers who had been bussed in from across the state (Hotz 2010).

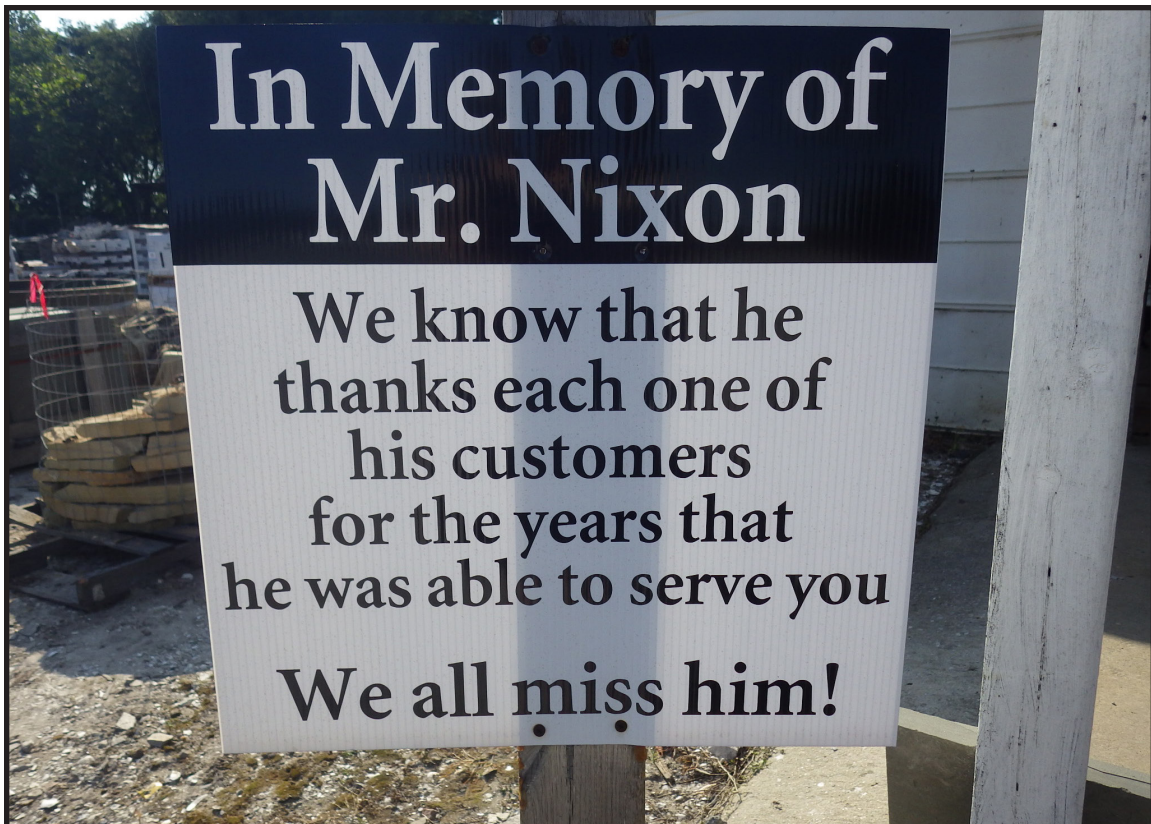
In the mid-1940s, Nixon expanded into oyster processing. Due to concerns about sanitary standards, the county began requiring oysters to be shucked and jarred at certified facilities. This led to the end of cottage-industry oyster sales. Nixon opened his first oyster processing plant in a converted crab house on Greenville Sound. This was the first oyster plant to be certified by the county health department. According to Nixon's wife, after a few years, he moved the enterprise to a rented place at the end of Stokley Drive on Wrightsville Sound (Ruth Nixon, personal communication 2014; Hotz 2010). Today a number of popular seafood restaurants, such as the Bridge Tender and the Fish House Grill, and marinas populate the waterfront area near the intersection of Airlie Drive and Stokely Drive. These buildings appear to be of recent construction and property tax records indicate they post-date 1962. Therefore, it is unlikely that Nixon's Wrightsville Sound oyster house remains standing. The exact location of the Greenville Sound oyster house could not be determined through informant interviews, and it is not known if this building is extant.

Cornelius Nixon married Ruth Spicer in 1953. Around this time, the couple built a new and modern certified oyster plant on the tract that Nixon had acquired with his mother's help around 1940. In front of the plant they built a Cape Cod-style home where they raised six children. At the height of the season, Nixon's plant employed 12 workers. Since many people had lost income when the county cracked down on the cottage oyster trade, these jobs were very important to the community. Nixon is recalled as a friend and mentor by scores of former employees (John Barfield, Sr., personal communication 2014; Smalls 2010). The Nixon Oyster Plant sold jarred oysters wholesale to the Marine bases at Camp Lejeune and Cherry Point, the A&P grocery store chain, and directly to thousands of locals and vacationers who would come to the plant. Many vacationers considered their beach visit incomplete without a trip to the oyster plant to visit with Nixon and buy oysters to enjoy at the beach or to take inland on ice. Later, he adapted his product as the public's tastes shifted from shucked oysters to those in the shell. Nixon was instrumental in helping to start the state's oyster shell recycling program where shells are collected and returned to the coastal waters as habitat (Townsend 2011).

Cornelius Nixon was a respected business owner, real estate investor, esteemed employer, community leader, and benefactor of the Mt. Ararat AME Church in Middle Sound. He was so admired locally, that he was featured in no fewer than seven newspaper articles throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Nixon passed away in 2011 and is interred nearby at the Bella Highsmith Cemetery (Figure 25).

The fish house is an increasingly rare property type in coastal North Carolina. A 2012 study determined that the state continues to lose seafood-packing capacity. Between 2001 and 2011, 47 packing facilities were closed, signifying a 36 percent decline in facilities since 2000 (Garity-Blake and Nash 2012:3). A review of the files of the state historic architectural survey found 16 properties relating to the marine products industry in coastal North Carolina. According to John





*Figure 25. Sign at the Nixon Oyster Plant*

Wood, Restoration Specialist in the North Carolina Department of Archives and History Eastern Office, most of the recorded resources are concentrated in Carteret County, which has a recent architectural survey conducted in 2011 that focused on identifying and recording marine industry resources (John Wood, personal communication 2014). These resources include fishing piers, fish camps, lodges, restaurants, and various types of processing facilities, similar to the Nixon Oyster Plant. Carteret County survey files note that many of county's fishing-related resources were decimated by storms and that there are about a dozen small twentieth-century frame fish houses remaining, most of which are located on waterways near the dwellings of their proprietors (CR 1256) (Little 2012). The R.W. Jones Fish Company (CR 1288), circa 1950-1970s, is comparable to the Nixon Oyster Plant in terms of both date and construction. It is a complex of five utilitarian frame and concrete block buildings with wood roof trusses and prefabricated metal sheds of recent construction. Originally, the house packed locally caught clams, scallops, and finfish. Today, processing and packing is mostly handled on large trawlers at sea and the company processes conch and soft shell crab once a year in April. It has not been formally evaluated for the NRHP.

Uncle Henry Kirkum's Oyster Roast (NH 615), was identified in New Hanover County and is described as a one-story, L-shaped, gabled, frame "oyster roasting facility and restaurant" with detached cooler, oyster furnace, and outhouse. The north bank of Whiskey Creek has been developed



with a housing subdivision known as Windchase, and the oyster house is no longer standing. Due to the consolidation of the local oyster industry attributed to New Hanover County's certification program and Hurricane Hazel in 1954 (as well as Floyd [1999], Dennis [1999], Isabelle [2003], and Ophelia [2005]), it is unlikely that waterfront facilities built before the middle of the twentieth century survive.

The Rose Bay Oyster Company on Rose Bay Canal in Hyde County consists of two elongated concrete block buildings with gabled-roofs covered with sheet metal, vehicular loading docks, and boat docks (Brown 1999:7). Slots in the concrete walls allowed oyster shells to be dropped into piles outside the building. The first buildings in the utilitarian complex were wood; the present concrete block ones were built around 1955. In 1999, the plant was still processing oysters, crabs, shrimp, and finfish (Brown 1999:6). The Rosebay Oyster Company was evaluated for the NRHP in 1999 when it had not yet reached 50 years of age. It was determined the property did not possess the exceptional significance required under Criteria Consideration G, and therefore was not eligible for the NRHP (Brown 1999:4).

## **INTEGRITY**

The Nixon Oyster Plant retains sufficient integrity to convey the plant's original design, appearance, and function and the plant remains on its original site. Middens of discarded oyster shells are in the immediate vicinity of the building, which help to maintain the property's historic setting and feeling. However, as one moves away from the plant the parcel reflects its present use as a commercial stoneyard. The plant's utilitarian building materials, such as the concrete block walls, poured concrete floors, and massive insulated metal cooler doors, remain intact. The workmanship and design intent of the plant's designer and builder, Cornelius Nixon, remains evident. Although the buildings' wood roof structures are deteriorated and the complex is no longer used for oyster processing, its historic appearance and function are readily apparent. The plant retains its strong historic associations with Cornelius Nixon, who worked here until a few months before he passed away, and the post-1940 "certified" oyster processing industry in New Hanover County.

## **EVALUATION**

Properties can be eligible for the NRHP under Criterion A if they are associated with a significant event or pattern of events that have made contributions to history at the local, state, or national level. The commercial fishing industry has historically been very important to coastal North Carolina. Shellfish became increasingly important to the state's seafood industry as finfish catches declined for a number of reasons in the mid-twentieth century. Cornelius Nixon contributed to this trend with the establishment of his successful oyster processing plant. Nixon Oyster Plant represents the commercialization of this former cottage industry that took place in the mid-twentieth century as local oyster hucksters were forced out of the market by newly implemented sanitary regulations.

The plant was among the most successful wholesale and retail processors in New Hanover County and remained a viable concern in a declining local industry until Cornelius Nixon's death in 2011. Other previously identified historic New Hanover County fish houses, such as Uncle Henry Kirkum's Oyster Roast and Nixon's second oyster houses, have been lost due to development. Therefore, the Nixon Oyster Plant appears to be one of the last of this property type in the county. For these reasons, the Nixon Oyster Plant is recommended eligible for the NRHP at the local level under Criterion A

Properties can be eligible for the NRHP under Criterion B if they are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past. The Nixon Oyster House best represents the productive life of Cornelius Nixon, who was locally significant as a leader in the seafood processing industry and as a pillar of the African American Middle Sound community. His house remains on the oyster plant site, but has undergone significant physical changes as it has been adapted for modern commercial use by a stone yard. His grave stands approximately one half mile northeast of the oyster plant in the Bella Highsmith section of the Mt. Ararat Church Cemetery. However, graves are not generally eligible for the NRHP under criterion B if other intact resources associated with that person survive. In this case, the Nixon Oyster Plant better illustrates Nixon's contributions to local history than his burial place. Nixon was an entrepreneur who was the first in the county to adopt modern oyster processing practices in a complex he designed especially for this purpose. He grew his business to be a large scale regional supplier to institutions and retailers. His businesses' financial success enabled Nixon to employ many Middle Sounders over the years, and he is remembered by the community as a leader and benefactor. Therefore, the Nixon Oyster Plant is recommended eligible for the NRHP at the local level under Criterion B.

Properties can be eligible for the NRHP under Criterion C if they embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or represent the work of a master, or possess high artistic values. Data in the statewide architectural survey suggests that coastal fish and shellfish processing buildings are an increasingly rare property type due to destructive storms, changes in industry practices, and most significantly, increasing property values in coastal communities. The Nixon Oyster Plant is an historic oyster processing facility, or fish house, in New Hanover County. The complex, designed and constructed by Cornelius Nixon around 1955, displays sanitation features that would not have been seen in earlier wood frame fish houses. These features were: electrified cold storage, concrete walls and floors with drains, and plumbed indoor restroom facilities.

The number of historic fish houses remaining in the state is unknown; although it is known that the numbers are declining (Garity-Blake and Nash 2012:3). Two similar resources were identified as extant during the background research phase of this project: the R.W. Jones Fish Company in Carteret County and the Rosebay Oyster Company in Hyde County. Both are utilitarian complexes

of frame and concrete block buildings. The Nixon Oyster Plant compares well with these two buildings, and all of them continue to convey their historic use through their design. The wood roof of the Nixon Oyster Plant has deteriorated since Nixon's death in 2011. However, the bulk of the complex is made up of concrete and retains integrity, as does the relationship between the various functional parts of the complex. As the only known surviving resource of its type in New Hanover County, the Nixon Oyster Plant is a rare and important vestige of a once vital local industry. Therefore, the Nixon Oyster Plant is recommended eligible for the NRHP at the local level under Criterion C.

It is unlikely that additional study of this property would yield any unretrieved data not discoverable through informant interviews and documentary sources. Therefore, the Nixon Oyster Plant is recommended not eligible for the NRHP under Criteria D.

### **BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

The recommended NRHP boundary includes the four buildings that make up the complex, the main processing building, cooler, a storage building and outhouse, and a 20-foot buffer around these buildings. The recommended boundary includes approximately 0.38 acres (16,575.53 square feet). The entire 9.67-acre legal parcel is not included because of a change of use that has modified the historic setting. The Cornelius Nixon House, which is also on the parcel, was not included due to exterior alterations and extensive interior remodeling for the present commercial occupant.

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