

In Memoriam Victor Gregory Burrell, Jr. 1925–2009

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IN MEMORIAM
Victor Gregory Burrell, Jr.
1925–2009

Dr. Victor G. Burrell, Jr., former President and Honored Life Member of the National Shellfisheries Association, known to many as Vic, passed away on the morning of December 20, 2009 after a long and gallant battle against cancer. It eventually took him, but never beat him; he continued working nearly to the end. He was predeceased by his wife, Katherine, and is survived by four daughters, eight grandchildren and twelve great-grandchildren.

Vic was an amazing person—he had several careers but the one he enjoyed most was that of marine scientist. He was born Sept. 12, 1925 in Wilmington, NC, the son of Agnes Townsend and Victor G. Burrell, and grew up in Florence, SC, not far inland from the Grand Strand beach area of the state. Vic joined the Navy in 1943, and saw action in the Pacific theatre at Okinawa and Ie Shima. After the war, he came home to South Carolina to attend the College of Charleston, a very fine but at that time small liberal arts institution, and received a B.S. degree in English in 1949. After College, Vic entered the family meat packing business, but later branched out into the charter boat business, running a fishing boat out of Little River on the SC-NC border, and the oyster business. After 15 years in business, he decided to return to graduate school in 1965, earning M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the College of William and Mary (via the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, VIMS) in 1968 and 1972, respectively. This was a remarkable thing to do—to start over in school himself with four daughters to raise and educate. Vic and Katherine often said of their years in Virginia that they “ate” the party boat in order to survive graduate school.

I had the privilege of working with Vic one way or another for virtually all his career in the marine sciences. Vic was a life-long and avid supporter of the College of Charleston and its Alumni Association, was chosen as Alumnus of the Year by the Association in 1963 and later served as Association President. I first met him in late summer or early fall of 1964 when I entered my freshman year at the College and also met his oldest daughter, Cheri, who was in my class. In August of 1968 I left Charleston to attend graduate school at VIMS and to my surprise one of the first people I encountered there was Vic Burrell. He had recently completed a master’s degree and was embarking on a quest for a Ph.D. Over the next four years, we shared a major advisor (Willard A. Van Engel), lab space, cruises, and plankton samples and then moved back to Charleston together (our families’ belongings on the same moving van) to start our first post-graduate school jobs with the Marine Resources Research Institute (MRRI) of what is now the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources.

Although a student for all of his time at VIMS, Vic also worked tirelessly as a staff member. His motivations were simple – he had a family to feed and he absolutely loved his work. He served as field party chief for numerous cruises and other activities, and as Research Associate, Assistant Marine Scientist, and Associate Marine Scientist. Vic participated on several joint Canadian, Russian and U.S. ICNAF cruises in the North Atlantic. He also played a key role in the establishment and early days of the VIMS Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program, becoming the first industry liaison officer and then Head of Marine Extension. Thus began

his long association with the shellfish industry. Although Vic's dissertation work focused on the distribution and abundance of calanoid copepods in the York River, VA, most of Vic's post-graduate school work focused on shellfish biology.

While Vic and Katherine liked Virginia, their true home was always South Carolina. So, when the State began developing its new Marine Resources Center at Fort Johnson on Charleston Harbor in the late 1960's, they paid attention. Fortuitously for Vic (and me), the group of consultants retained by the State to select a site and advise on the development of what became the SC Marine Resources Center was chaired by none other than Dr. William Hargis, Director of VIMS. And when it came time to hire a director for the new laboratory that was to become the Marine Resources Research Institute, the State looked first to VIMS for likely candidates, and selected Dr. Edwin B. Joseph to be the Marine Center's first research director. Vic followed Ed to Charleston and became one of the first scientists hired to staff the new facility in early 1972, before the initial laboratory building was even complete. Vic arrived in February of 1972 and immediately jumped into writing proposals and developing plans for a whole suite of research projects and programs. He was a key player in the development of South Carolina's Sea Grant Program, which was initially headquartered at the Marine Resources Center; the State's multi-year Estuarine Survey Program, funded by the Coastal Plains Regional Commission; the MARMAP Program to provide fishery independent data on offshore resources in the South Atlantic Bight, funded by NOAA; and significant oyster and clam research programs. The MARMAP program, initiated in late 1972, continues today and is the longest-running offshore fish assessment program in the South Atlantic.

Vic was initially hired as an Associate Marine Scientist (the state's equivalent of Associate Professor rank in academic institutions), but his leadership capabilities were quickly recognized. By 1973, he was Assistant Director of the MRRI and he became Director in 1974, a position he held until his retirement in 1991. It was my pleasure and privilege to work as his Assistant Director from 1974 until 1984, when I moved to into the role of Director of the Marine Resources Division and he worked for me. In both situations, I can say we never had a truly cross word. He was always the quintessential gentleman and a practically-oriented scientist with a passion for using research to better human situations. He was also a marvelous mentor and a wonderful friend.

During his tenure as Director of the MRRI, Vic not only established and developed many of the laboratory's signature programs, he presided over its initial period of exponential growth and the enthusiasm that accompanies such a period. The Institute was composed of roughly 50 professional staff, including 11 or so at the Ph.D. level, and Vic was a mentor to every person who worked in the lab during his career there. Vic also continued his strong association with the College of Charleston as well as with other academic institutions in the area via service as an adjunct faculty member. In addition, he was a charter member of the Southeastern Estuarine Research Society and later was elected an Honorary Life Member. He also helped to organize the South Carolina Fisheries Workers association and was recognized as Fishery Conservationist of the Year in 2007 by the South Carolina chapter of the American Fisheries Society.



Vic was long associated with shellfish biology and the National Shellfisheries Association, spending well over 30 years as a member. He served as President of the NSA from 1982–1983 and was elected an Honorary Life Member in 1992, reflecting his outstanding contributions to the field. Vic's scientific output ranged from detailed field studies, to practical applications to assist the industry (such as development of a method for denaturing a red algal-derived seasonal coloring of oysters), to extensive reviews. In total, he published over 70 papers on zooplankton ecology, striped bass biology, shellfish

biology, and oyster culture, including a series for NOAA in 1996–1997 entitled "The History, Present Condition, and Future of the Molluscan Fisheries of North and Central America and Europe, Volumes 1–3," with Clyde Mackenzie and others. I have fond memories of traveling with him regularly during the 70's and early 80's from Charleston to Beaufort, SC to visit oyster and blue crab industry leaders and their commercial facilities. He maintained his relationship with active and retired watermen and their families to the end of his life, writing about the history of their occupations in South Carolina.

Long recognized for his broad expertise in estuarine science and fisheries, Vic served as the Governor's Designee on the Outer Continental Shelf Policy Committee and the Regional Technical Working Group for the Minerals Management Service; on the Charleston Harbor Estuary Citizens Committee and committees for the Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Conference and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission; and as a member of the Founding Board of Directors of the South Carolina Aquarium. He was listed in the International Director of Distinguished Leadership, Who's Who in the Southeast, Who's Who in America, Director of Distinguished Americans, Directory of North American Fisheries Scientists, American Men and Women of Science, and Personalities of the South.

For many years, Vic and Katherine lived only a mile or so away from the lab, so most of the time after his retirement in 1991, he simply walked in to work. He was a familiar site with his plantation straw hat and a friendly wave and smile for everyone who passed him on the road. Even after he and Katherine moved to an assisted living facility a few miles further away, Vic used to drive to his old neighborhood in the mornings and then walk on in to work as always. Although he no longer had lab space, the MRRI provided him an office and access to computer and the library, and Vic began what was to be the final of his several careers, this one as the recorder and interpreter of fisheries and fishers whose ways of life were rapidly changing and disappearing in South Carolina. In 2000, he authored a DNR educational report entitled "The Recreational Fishery in South Carolina: the Little River Story," reviewing the first organized offshore recreational fishing industry in South Carolina. He followed this with "South Carolina Oyster Industry: A History" in 2003, and in 2009, he and several SCDNR colleagues published a "History of the South Carolina Blue Crab Fishery." The blue crab publication was selected that year by the South Carolina State Library as one of the most notable SC state

government documents of the year. Vic was working on another South Carolina fishery history, this time dealing with the shrimp fishery, with a local English Teacher and author Ford Walpole, and David Whitaker of the SCDNR, at the time of his death. Hopefully it can be completed and published in the near future.

Vic and Katherine led very active social lives on James Island and in Charleston, regularly participating in the James Island Dance Club with their many friends, traveling, and thoroughly enjoying their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Katherine was a consummate hostess, and their Christmas parties and other gatherings were always extra special events. They were also energetic members of the Episcopal Church, and both remained active at Saint James Episcopal for as long as their health allowed, with Vic serving on the Vestry as Junior and Senior Warden on several occasions. In addition to his many other interests, Vic was an aficionado of big band swing and jazz, particularly that from the Depression era through post-war periods, and was knowledgeable enough about the music and musicians of that era to write a creditable history. He was always ready to engage in conversation about such music, and to share recordings he thought others would enjoy.

As a professional, Vic Burrell will be remembered for his many contributions to marine science and shellfish biology and to the development of a vibrant community of marine scientists in South Carolina. But I believe that Vic will be most often thought of as a wonderfully warm and engaging man who loved his family and his work, someone who always had a smile and story to share, an available ear to listen to another's problems, a willingness to help with anything that needed doing, a strong faith, and the ability to make any place he was a truly grand place to be. I once said that, if you looked up the term "Southern Gentleman" in a dictionary or encyclopedia, you should find a picture of Vic there, because I know of no other term that better defined him. He was a Southern Gentleman through and through and one of the finest human beings I have ever had the pleasure to know. Those of us who had the pleasure of being his friends and co-workers are all the richer for that association. Vic, we miss you.

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