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Despite Hurricanes And Setbacks This North Carolina Entrepreneur Stays The Course



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Joseph W. Baggett was one of nine children. A North Carolina native, his father died during the depression. When he finished high school he went into the mountains of North Carolina to be a land surveyor with the WPA. But his siblings would have none of that. They insisted that their brother Joseph go to college. He ultimately got a medical degree in obstetrics and gynecology.



Mary Baggett Martin BLOCKADE RUNNER BEACH RESORT

As someone who was always forward thinking, Baggett didn't just want to rely on building his medical practice. He was determined to create something more. He decided that hospitality would make an ideal investment for him and his medical school friends.

“North Carolina was just beginning to have hotels develop in them,” says his daughter Mary Baggett Martin. “So my dad went at it full blast.”

In 1971 Baggett and the doctors purchased an oceanfront hotel, **Blockade Runner**, on tranquil Wrightsville Beach in North Carolina six miles from the city of Wilmington. The island enclave is surrounded by a diverse waterway with the Atlantic Ocean on one side and the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway on the other. The hotel also had some pedigree because it was built by Lawrence Lewis, Jr., whose great uncle was the famous industrialist and hotelier, Henry Morrison Flagler. Ultimately Joseph Baggett took sole ownership of the hotel from the other physicians.

In April 1984, Joseph’s daughter Mary Baggett Martin became the first family member to take over running the property. By September, Mary Baggett Martin who was still wet behind the ears, was forced into disaster mode when Hurricane Diana hit. “It sat on our coast 15 miles off the beach for four solid days without coming ashore,” says Baggett Martin. “When it came in, a 90 to 110 mile per hour storm came through.” The property was battered and devastated. “The lights were all hanging. The ceiling grid work was in shambles. The roofs, windows and building was compromised,” she recalls.



The Blockade Runner lies before the Atlantic Ocean COURTESY BLOCKADE RUNNER BEACH RESORT

Baggett Martin tried her best to hang on. “When you inherit a staff and they know you are the owner’s daughter they are perplexed. They wondered what I was going to do,” says Baggett Martin. “They thought I would be on the beach every day sunning.” Instead she got to work and rebuilt the property inch by inch.

Now decades later Baggett Martin is still running Blockade Runner Beach Resort with her brother Bill Baggett. The 55 year-old resort has endured eight hurricanes and several super storms since it was first built, yet it continues to thrive. There are gardens galore, plenty of beachfront hammocks to tuck into and of course the long stretch of Wrightsville Beach. “We now we have 225 employees. For many of them, this is their first job ever,” Baggett Martin proudly says. “There is not anything that I would want to do other than this.”

The Blockade Runner is set on Wrightsville Beach. Connie Nelson of [Wilmington and Beaches Convention and Visitor's Bureau](#) revealed more about the locale.

Jeryl Brunner: What makes Wrightsville Beach special?

Connie Nelson: The geography of Wrightsville Beach is unique because the five mile island faces the Atlantic Ocean to the east and the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway to the west. That affords breathtaking ocean sunrises for a morning run or yoga routine. And there are stunning waterway sunsets during an early evening cruise or paddle excursion. Not to mention, the dining options range from casual cafes to farm-to-sea-to-table restaurants. Then after dark the beach bars come alive with the island nightlife.

Wrightsville Beach is also a year-round coastal destination with water sports like surfing, standup paddling, kayaking, fishing, sailing, and diving. As soon as you cross the drawbridge you notice that people everywhere are on the water or strolling along the luminous beach, cycling around the island, jogging or walking The Loop, which is a fitness trail that circles the community park.



Paddleboarding on the Intracoastal Waterway COURTESY BLOCKADE RUNNER BEACH RESORT

Brunner: And you can get your cosmopolitan fix in Wilmington, which is nearby.

Nelson: Absolutely. One of the perks about visiting Wrightsville Beach is its easy accessibility and close proximity to Wilmington. Cross a very short drawbridge and enjoy Wilmington's dining, shopping, and craft beer offerings, and the river district and attractions, all within a 20-minute drive from the beach.

Wilmington's scenic riverfront has a pedestrian-friendly 1.75-mile Riverwalk. We are often compared to Charleston, as Wilmington's walkable downtown provides easy access to several of the area's most celebrated restaurants, locally owned shops, craft breweries, entertainment and nightlife. There is even a brand new boutique hotel, ARRIVE Wilmington, to complement convention-area hotels and bed-and-breakfast inns located in the heart of the historic river district.

The 230-block National Register Historic District combines the city's historic charm and rich past with modern design and new attractions. You can explore Wilmington's river

district by guided walking or Segway tours, narrated river cruises, horse-drawn carriage and trolley tours, ghost walks, or tours with food and film location themes.

Plus, Wilmington is the region's arts and cultural center with art galleries and venues that host live theatrical productions, concerts, festivals and events. There are family-friendly museums and three historic homes open to the public. You can also board a water taxi to cross the river and tour the iconic WWII Battleship North Carolina's nine decks.

Brunner: What are some Wrightsville gems that people may not know?

Nelson: Wrightsville Beach Scenic Tours offers a variety of narrated scenic cruises and guided nature tours. Capt. Joe Abbate is a naturalist and shares his knowledge of coastal wildlife and habitats. Cruises to Masonboro Island, an estuarine research reserve that is accessible only by boat, provide a rare treat to explore an uninhabited barrier island. Surf and SUP instruction is offered by several surf camps and SUP schools, in addition to Blockade Runner Beach Resort's adventure program with additional kayak, sailing, fishing and yoga options. Experienced paddlers can rent from local outfitters all the paddle gear they need to explore area waterways.

Wrightsville Beach Museum of History is a can't-miss, along with the adjacent coastal education center. And don't let the exterior of Redix Department Store, a nondescript warehouse, fool you. Inside is everything from bait and tackle, beach gear, and souvenirs to designer resort clothing, footwear, and a large selection of bathing suits. Airlie Gardens, just across the waterway, is a botanical gem that is well worth the short 7-minute drive over the bridge. A garden of the coastal south it features 67 acres of walking paths, formal gardens, seasonal blooms, ancient live oaks, and contemporary sculpture. Airlie Gardens is also a popular film location and a member of the North Carolina Birding Trail.

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