

# “THE VOICE OF THE SHIPYARD”: Arthur Miller in Wilmington, North Carolina, 1941

BY DAVID S. CECELSKI

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ABOVE **Arthur Miller, circa 1940**

RIGHT **Aerial view of the Cape Fear River and Wilmington, circa 1940**

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On a recent winter day in Washington, DC, I found the National Folklife Center on a quiet, secluded hallway on the first floor of the Library of Congress. A radio documentary drew me there: a BBC 4 show entitled *Arthur Miller: The Accidental Music Collector* had featured several excerpts from a collection of sound recordings at the National Folklife Center that related to my historical work about the North Carolina coast during the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> I had come to the National Folklife Center to hear the original recordings in their entirety. Once I introduced myself and indicated what I was looking for, a curator graciously settled me into a cubicle and brought me several old-fashioned reel-to-reel tapes, copies made from a dozen 33 RPM, 16-inch hard disc originals. I wound the first tape between the reels, put on headphones, and turned on the machine. The first thing I heard was the great American playwright Arthur Miller's voice in a sprawling trailer camp that housed shipyard workers on the edge of Wilmington, North Carolina, in the fall of 1941.

That audiotape was part of a collection of recordings that Miller made in Wilmington on the eve of World War II.<sup>2</sup> Largely forgotten for more than seventy years, the Miller recordings first began to get public attention only recently, when the English literary scholar Christopher Bigsby listened to them as part of his research for his landmark biography, *Arthur Miller, 1915–1962*.<sup>3</sup> Bigsby, a professor at the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom, also interviewed Miller not long before the playwright's death in 2005 about his sojourn in Wilmington. Excerpts from that interview and the Library of Congress recordings formed the heart of *Arthur Miller: The Accidental Music Collector*, which first aired in 2005. It is a charming, thoughtful piece based on “a Studs Terkel-like portrait of a town in transition,” as Bigsby put it (190). In both the radio documentary and his book, however, Bigsby was concerned most with how, if at all, Miller's experience in Wilmington had shaped his development as a playwright. My own interest was more provincial: I looked at Miller as a uniquely insightful eyewitness to one of the greatest upheavals and transformative moments in the history of the North Carolina coast: the Second World War.

<sup>1</sup> British Broadcasting Corporation, Radio 4, *Arthur Miller: The Accidental Music Collector*, originally aired on 22 Feb. 2005; hereafter cited parenthetically as (BBC, *Arthur Miller*)

<sup>3</sup> On Miller's early life, including his Wilmington trip, see Christopher Bigsby, *Arthur Miller, 1915–1962* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009) 188-94; subsequently cited parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quoted passages are from the *Arthur Miller and John Langenegger recordings in Wilmington, North Carolina, Fall 1941* (Sound recordings AFS 6386-6395), twelve 16-in. discs and radio script draft (typescript), Archive of Folk Culture, National Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.