A Concise History of Ocracoke Island

By Kevin Cutler

I have called Ocracoke Island home since the summer of 1976. During this time I have come to love the island and its people, and I've developed an interest in the history of Ocracoke.

The following is a short, general history of the island. I hope this story will convey to you, the reader, some of the features of life on Ocracoke that make it unique.

I am proud to be a transplanted "O'Cooker," and encourage you to visit us sometime.

The island of Ocracoke lies about thirty miles off the North Carolina mainland. It is accessible by ferry from three areas: Cedar Island in Carteret County, Swan Quarter in Hyde County, and Hatteras Island in Dare County. In addition, a small airstrip is available for private planes.

Ocracoke has been called the most romantic of all the islands and towns on the Outer Banks. Unlike many other areas, it has escaped much of the modernization and development of today. It is for this reason, and for the natural beauty of the island, that many people visit Ocracoke each year. The fishing is excellent, and miles of unspoiled beaches offer swimming areas and sea shells to delight any collector.

Once known as Wokokon (the name is of Indian origin), the island first appeared on an early map from the Sir Walter Raleigh expeditions between 1584 and 1587. It has been discovered that the first white settlers on American soil stopped at what is now Ocracoke before continuing north to Roanoke Island where the first English colony was established.

One of the island's major claims to fame was the infamous pirate Edward Teach, or Blackbeard. So named because of his rich, black mane, the pirate terrorized the coast of North Carolina between 1716 and 1718. But his pirating came to an end in 1718 when Lt. Robert Maynard of the British Navy engaged Blackbeard and his crew in a fierce battle in a channel just off the island. Fighting was nothing new to the pirates, and may a life had been extinguished by the blood-thirsty buccaneer. But this time luck was on the side of Maynard and his men. Blackbeard was captured and beheaded, with his head being carried on to Virginia as proof that the pirate was dead. One colorful legend has it that the body was thrown overboard into the waters of the Pamlico Sound, where it proceeded to swim around the ship several times before sinking beneath the surface.

Although Blackbeard has been dead for over 250 years, his memory lives on. Rumors still circulate that he buried treasure beneath the sands of the island, but none has been found or,
at least, reported. Visitors to the island are enthralled by the play "A Tale of Blackbeard," which was written by island resident Julia Howard. The play, cast with mostly local performers, concerns the last days of the pirate's life. The drama has much singing and dancing and is well worth a trip to Ocracoke.

The village of Ocracoke, located at the southern end of the island, is a small, quaint town nestled around Silver Lake, known locally as "the creek." Since the island is small, you can walk or ride bikes while out sightseeing. In addition, a local restaurant serves as the station for the Ocracoke Trolley, a tour bus that visits the many sites of historical interest found in the area. Since the tour does offer a history of the island, it is educational; even many "locals" who have taken the tour learned something new about their town.

Perhaps the most famous of the trolley's stops is the Ocracoke lighthouse. Built between 1823 and 1824, the lighthouse is the shortest in North Carolina (only 75 feet high) and one of the oldest in continuous service on the Atlantic Coast. As is the purpose of any lighthouse, the Ocracoke beacon serves as a marker for ships at sea, allowing the captains to stay on course and veer away from the treacherous shoals. Today, the beam of the lighthouse glows over the village and furnishes a sense of security to those who call Ocracoke home.

Of particular interest are the island's two churches: the Assembly of God Church and the United Methodist Church. Religion is an important part of an "O'Cocker's" life, and the Christmas programs presented in each church are eagerly awaited with the
Assembly of God Church.

United Methodist Church.
approach of the holiday season.

Services for the Ocracoke Assembly of God Church were first held without a proper building. Sermons were preached in the schoolhouse around 1937, until a family’s yard was used for this purpose. When cold weather came, the family closed in a portion of their porch, thus forming the first Assembly of God Church for Ocracoke Island.

A church was constructed about 1940 by men and boys of the congregation. It wasn’t until 1947, however, that a parsonage was built. At this time, the church received lumber from the old Pamlico Inn, destroyed during a hurricane three years earlier, and a permanent home for pastors was completed. The following year the naval base donated one of its old buildings to the church, and this was attached to the rear of the structure for use as Sunday School classrooms.

When the old parsonage was destroyed by fire in late 1954, the present house was built with insurance money and donations from local residents. During the 1970s, the exterior of the church was repaired, Sunday School rooms remodeled, and carpeting installed in the church sanctuary and parsonage.

The present Ocracoke United Methodist Church was dedicated on July 4, 1943. With the establishment of this church two congregations were joined: Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and Wesley Chapel, Methodist Episcopal Church. Lumber from these two churches was used to construct the new building, and various pieces of furniture and materials were installed.

On a table in the sanctuary stands a wooden cross with a unique story behind it. It was placed there in memory of Capt. James Baughm Gaskill, an island native, who lost his life on March 11, 1942, when his ship was destroyed by a German U-boat. The cross was constructed from salvage from Gaskill’s ship that washed ashore on Ocracoke Island.

After the naval base at Ocracoke was evacuated following World War II, one of its wooden buildings was moved onto the church grounds for use as a fellowship hall. This structure continues to serve many purposes, including dinners, meetings, and wedding receptions.

A pottery workshop, built in 1975 as a gift from two families, has provided many hours of enjoyment for creative adults and children.

Education is another important part of life on Ocracoke. To answer a question often posed to island residents: yes, we do have a school. In fact, the first school on Ocracoke Island was founded over a hundred years ago for children whose fathers were in the Life Saving Service.

A rivalry later began between the residents of the south side of Silver Lake and the north side. Two schools were then put into operation, and although one school was moved during a storm, this rivalry continued for some time.

A building called the "lodge" was used as a schoolhouse in the early 1900's. While classes were held downstairs, the upper floor
was used as the "Odd Fellow's Hall." Today, with two wings added, the lodge serves as the center of the Island Inn.

Public school was held at the lodge until a new school was built near the present Methodist Church in 1917. One teacher who taught in this school was Selma Wise Spencer. A native of Pamlico County, Mrs. Spencer had previously taught in that area and Alamance County before coming to Ocracoke in the fall of 1930. At this time, she remembers, there were between 80-90 students at the school. Mrs. Spencer also points out that there was no high school before this time; students either terminated their education after the seventh grade or enrolled in boarding schools on the mainland. Many went to the Washington Collegiate Institute in Beaufort County; some went to Vanceboro, and one father sent his daughters to a boarding school in the western part of the state.

The first graduating class of Ocracoke School received their diplomas in 1931; at this time there were three seniors. Mrs. Spencer remembers that the boys who graduated either joined the Coast Guard or worked on the water. This is still true of many of the male graduates. Some, but not many, continued on to college, and Mrs. Spencer is proud of the fact that quite a few became teachers themselves.

As for this early school structure, Mrs. Spencer says that rain water was a problem as it tended to wash the sand away from the foundation. So, during the depression, men were hired to move sand from a nearby dune to place around the school. The school had a cistern with a water pump inside the building.

The county provided coal for the stove in winter, but the students had to gather sticks and twigs to start the fire. The responsibility of keeping the stove burning fell to the older boys. Mrs. Spencer also points out that the students had to purchase their own textbooks, as these were not provided by the state then as they are now.

Mrs. Spencer taught at Ocracoke for 24 years; she served as principal for two years during this time. She remembers that there were only two years she didn't teach: one, when her mother was ill and the year she and her late husband built their home. She married Benjamin E. Spencer, a native of the island, in 1934. The ceremony took place in his aunt's home, and the house still stands a short distance down the road from where Mrs. Spencer now lives.

Mrs. Selma Spencer has enjoyed life at Ocracoke. When asked her feelings on living here and teaching at the school, she said:

Anything you do has its ups and downs, but it has been an enjoyable 52 years. It has been a joy to see many of my former pupils succeed in their professions and to have them as friends today. Some pupils have gone on to become nurses, teachers, merchants, and businessmen.

Although she retired from teaching in 1962, Mrs. Spencer has remained active. She has been invaluable to the Ocracoke United Methodist Church. Also, the present school is able to enjoy and benefit from this former teacher as Mrs. Spencer serves as a volunteer arithmetic aide for the younger students.
The main building for the current Ocracoke School was built in 1971, replacing the old structure. During construction, classes were held in the Methodist Church. Two trailers on the premises are also used for classes. A new gymatorium, completed in 1978, houses a classroom for kindergarten, grades one, and two, and a shop for maintenance class.

At the end of the 1982-83 school year there were approximately 120 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade, and a faculty of sixteen, including principal, full- and part-time teachers, aides, secretary, and custodian. The school offers a full range of courses as well as extracurricular activities. Students participate in cheerleading, softball, and basketball. The journalism class publishes a yearbook and newspaper and maintains a fully-equipped
darkroom.

Annual events include the junior-senior prom and banquet, and the homecoming celebration. With the latter, graduates of Ocracoke School return for a barbecue dinner, basketball games, and the homecoming queen pageant when a high school girl is voted by her peers to reign over the next year's festivities.

Since the school is so small, the students form close relationships and are often referred to as one big family. This feeling extends to the community of Ocracoke, too. This is one of the reasons the community is unique.

No history of Ocracoke would be complete without mentioning the British Cemetery and the banker ponies. The small, enclosed graveyard sheltered with live oaks and cedars is the final resting place for four British sailors, killed when their ship, "HMS Bedfordshire," was destroyed in 1942. Their bodies were washed ashore, where two were identified. The identities of the other seamen remain a mystery today. The people of Ocracoke arranged a funeral service for the men, and land was donated for the cemetery by the Williams family. A ceremony is annually held to honor the sailors, and a flag of the British Empire is kept flying over the graves. The local Coast Guard Station maintains the tiny cemetery and provides flowers. The immaculate, white picket fence bears these lines: "If I should die think only this of me: that there's some corner of a foreign field that is forever England."

The banker ponies have been on Ocracoke for many decades. Various legends disagree on how they arrived on the island; one states that today's herd descends from two circus
horses that swam ashore when their ship went down during a journey between Havana and New York. Other tales place the ponies on the Outer Banks as a result of the expeditions of Spanish explorers, or were left behind with the disappearance of the settlers on Roanoke Island, now known as the Lost Colony.

The ponies once wandered at will about Ocracoke Island, but the coming of the automobile made this dangerous for these beautiful creatures. They were fenced in for their own safety, and are cared for by the National Park Service. Today's herd numbers around twenty, and can be seen near the Hatteras ferry.

This article has discussed many topics: the island's school, churches, and other items of interest.

Ocracoke is unique and we hope to keep it that way. It has changed a bit since the early days, but it still offers the peacefulness and beauty it is known for. A preservation society was recently formed to help Ocracoke retain these qualities.

It is my hope that this story has given you some insight into life on the island. I hope, too, that it has shown that you don't need all those "extras" to enjoy life: the simple living and enjoyment of nature's beauty in all its glory is enough for me.

The Ocracoke lighthouse.