

Colonial North Carolina: A Safe Harbor for Pirates

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The colony of North Carolina was unique, one in which the people owned land and enjoyed religious toleration but were isolated from much of the Atlantic trade. Unlike any other colonial society, the demographic of settlers included a mixture of classes, religions, and races among landowners. The local government was comprised of the new landowners, so it tended to be informal and less structured than the colonial government of Virginia, creating a relaxed judicial system. The geography of the coastline of North Carolina presented many obstacles for the large ships of the Atlantic trade but attracted many pirate sloops, since it offered inlets and islands that could serve as hideouts. The people who settled in Carolina formed a society that did not define criminal activity in the same manner as their Virginian neighbors. As a result of these factors—the demographics of the population, the informal structure of government, and the geographic obstacles for legal trade—pirates, who provided luxury goods at cheaper prices than England and were an easily accessible source for trade, were embraced by the people and accepted into North Carolina communities.

Historians have written about colonial North Carolina, its geographical differences from other eastern colonies, and its history under proprietary rule. Jonathan Edward Barth's article, "'The Sinke of America': Society in the Albemarle Borderlands of North Carolina, 1663-1729," "seeks to provide a glimpse into early modern ideas on authority and disorder. . .in early North Carolina, a colony that many contemporaries considered a stain on the map of British America."¹ Barth's research and analysis support the claim that, in a region geographically designed to protect pirates from many seafaring naval vessels too large to navigate the Outer Banks, the early colonists of North Carolina were the types of individuals who were open to nurturing a mutually beneficial relationship with pirates, and were perfectly located to do so. Edwin Combs

¹Jonathan Edward Barth, "'The Sinke of America': Society in the Albemarle Borderlands of North Carolina, 1663-1729," *North Carolina Historical Review* 87, no. 1 (2010): 5. *Academic Search Complete*.

III argues that the North Carolina coastline offered only one port, Port Brunswick, which could reliably accommodate the large ships required for transatlantic trade; thus, marine commerce was greatly hindered compared to the coastline conditions of the colonies to the north.² Consequently, exports from North Carolina had to be transported over land for many miles before arriving at the port to be shipped out. North Carolinians' trading difficulties may have led the colonists to act illegally to make a profit from their exports, or to purchase necessities that may have been imported by shady characters. In a more localized argument, Charles R. Ewen, an archaeologist, pieces together his archaeological data with primary and secondary written sources to unveil a detailed view of what colonial Bath, a port town, was like and how the townspeople lived in the eighteenth century. Despite written documentation of a dozen families living in Bath at that time, Ewen's field research discovered seventy-one lots in the town, which suggests that the settlement was more populated than previously thought.³ Ewen also discusses a pirate's relationship with the people of the town of Bath.⁴ Although not specifically addressing the colony of North Carolina, Rebecca Simon argues that the Puritans who settled the first colonies made a significant impact upon the judicial system, and their perceived definition of a "criminal" became part of the jurisprudence of much of colonial America.⁵ Those ideas can lead to the hypothesis that there were commonalities between the colonial North Carolinians and the seafaring pirates of the eighteenth century. The historians, the archaeologist, and the social scientist mentioned above all agree that piracy was a problem for the British in their attempt to profit from the Atlantic trade. Barth and Ewen agree that piracy was different in colonial North Carolina; the people and the coastline itself welcomed pirates. Certain unique characteristics and situations of colonial North Carolina created an environment suitable for mutual gain between North Carolinian colonists and pirates, eventually resulting in the latter's integration into society without the encumbrance of a change in occupation. It is these characteristics and situations that merit exploration.

By 1696, piracy had become a costly nuisance to England, and King Charles II wanted the Proprietors of Carolina to ensure the safety of their import and export goods along the plantation trade routes. On behalf of the King, Edward Randolph proposed that Courts of Admiralty be established "in all the Colonys & Provinces upon the Coast of America" and that "collectors & others who have by ignorance or Connivance encouraged the illegal Trade in the plantations be removed, & honest & able officers be

² Edwin L. Combs III, "Trading in Lubberland: Marine Commerce in Colonial North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review* 80, no. 1 (January 2003): 13. *Academic Search Complete*.

³ Charles R. Ewen, "John Lawson's Bath: A Subterranean Perspective," *North Carolina Historical Review* 88, no. 3 (2011): 275. *Academic Search Complete*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁵ Rebecca Simon, "The Social Construction of Crime in the Atlantic World: Piracy as a Case Study," *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences* 6, no. 6 (2012): 77, *Academic Search Complete*.

put in their Rooms...for the better putting the said act in Execution.”⁶ In response, the Lords Proprietors sent a message to England claiming they were “willing and ready to erect such Courts [of Admiralty] and constitute such able officers as shall be well affected to his Majesty’s Government” in order to implement the trade laws and eradicate piracy along the Carolina coastline.⁷ Then, they assigned their colonial governor, a man chosen from among the settlers of Carolina, the task of establishing an admiralty court similar to the courts in other colonies, appointing a judge, a registrar, a marshal, and an attorney general to enforce the trade laws, and protecting the Crown’s interests.⁸

Even though the governing bodies of the American colonies were decided by the English, colonial laws were greatly influenced by the religious ideals of the time, ideals that had less value to North Carolinians than to other colonists. The Protestant Reformation in Britain and the Puritan beliefs dominant in the New England colonies made the definition of “crime” synonymous with opinions on what constituted “sin,” and this influenced the jurisprudence of the colonies.⁹ Irreligious acts like swearing, public drunkenness, and violence were classified as crimes deserving of punishment, like theft and murder. Rebecca Simon states in her case study of piracy:

Citizens regarded the law as a mechanism to ensure a community that was free from sin and corruption. Puritan colonists believed that work was pleasing to God when performed in a regular and disciplined manner. Sailors were seen as corrupt because their work alternated between frantic activity and idleness. Drunkenness, theft, and other moral crimes were the most prosecuted crimes in the British colonies.¹⁰

The Puritan colonists’ judgmental opinion of a sailor was mild in comparison to their opinion of a pirate. Pirates were a particular threat against the communities who believed in these moral guidelines; not only did they commit robbery and murder, but they also drank in excess, were violently rowdy, and swore regularly during conversation, thereby representing a rebellion against government, religion, and “proper” society.¹¹

⁶ Edward Randolph, *Proposals by Edward Randolph Concerning Trade in the Colonies* [July 31, 1696], *The Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, Vol.1 (2010):461, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr01-0212>.

⁷ Lords Proprietors et al., “Memorandum from Colonial Proprietors to the Board of Trade of England Concerning Courts of Admiralty [1696],” *The Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, Vol. 1 (2010): 472, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr01-0217>.

⁸ Randolph, “Proposals,” 461.

⁹ Simon, “The Social Construction,” 77.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 82.

Simon writes, “[Pirates] did not answer to any authority, government, state, or religion—the key factors that maintained a cohesive Atlantic world. . . . Pirates were not just economic foes against the British and colonists. They represented every blasphemy set against early modern Protestant society.”¹²

However, in North Carolina, society was not so “proper,” despite the fact that the colony shared many of the same laws as other colonies. Because eighteenth century North Carolinians did not share the same ethical viewpoint or religious beliefs as the Puritan colonists, their concept of who the “criminals” were may have differed, even though the laws that the Proprietors wished to implement were similar to those that were enforced in other colonies. North Carolina’s colonists enjoyed more religious toleration and diversity. When the Lords Proprietors sought individuals to settle and plant their land, they advertised that they would give any free man over the age of sixteen sixty acres of land to call his own, as long as he paid the taxes and shared the profits yielded from the land.¹³ They desperately wanted to attract settlers to the region to work the land, produce a crop, and start engaging in Atlantic trade, thereby creating a source of profit for themselves. That desperation for working men meant that the Proprietors welcomed political dissenters from English and Scottish soil, indentured servants, runaway slaves, outlaws, Quakers, individuals who were trying to evade the elitist class of plantation owners, and any others who wanted to have a piece of wilderness to call their own and work into something profitable.¹⁴ Barth’s description of the results of Proprietary rule—less defined class structure with many landowners, less rigid government rule, and more religious toleration—portrays a colony that was distinct from other British colonies and boasted a population of people who were very different from the elite gentlemen of Virginia and the Puritans of New England. According to Barth, those differences were significant because that mishmash population, who were considered “undesirables” to Virginians and New Englanders, had a greater tolerance for one another that allowed them to coexist relatively well and a relaxed government that afforded them more personal freedoms.¹⁵ With questionable personal histories and a lack of concern for the “proper” distinction between classes of people, colonial North Carolinians could arguably have socialized with other groups of individuals, like pirates, whom the Virginians and the English would have classified as “undesirables.” North Carolinians were considered lazy, carousing drunks by many Virginians—a petty attempt by the Virginians to diminish the courage of the “misfits” who had the audacity to desire land and freedom beyond what they would have achieved in Virginia.¹⁶ A missionary named Christoph von Graffenried even described North Carolinians as “a criminal and ungodly set of people. . . among whom there were burglars, thieves, lewd fellows, profane

¹² Ibid., 85.

¹³ Barth, “The Sinke,” 8.

¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹⁵ Ibid., 10.

¹⁶ Ibid., 22.

swearers, slanderers, etc...I was more sorry to leave such a beautiful and good country than such wicked people."¹⁷ However, acquiring a reputation for undisciplined, lazy, and irreverent behavior did not affect how North Carolinians lived their lives during the Proprietary era. Most of the earliest settlers became landowners and the government was made up of those who lived in the region, so the class structure and populist government were less stringent than in other colonial societies, which were primarily controlled by the plantation owners.¹⁸ North Carolinians enjoyed living in a less strict system of government in which, despite some involvement of the Lords Proprietors, they could determine how, and if, their colony would enforce the laws that were based on more extreme religious beliefs than they espoused. This attitude of the North Carolina colonists helped to make the colony a more welcoming place for pirates.

Another characteristic that made North Carolina an ideal place for piracy to flourish was that its coastal geography caused problems for commerce. Unlike the topography of other North American colonies, the North Carolina mainland lacked direct access to the Atlantic. The North Carolina coastline is blocked by the Outer Banks, a group of islands that separate the mainland from the Atlantic Ocean. The Outer Banks diminished the possibility of sustaining a navigable coastal port and participating in the plantation trade routes as successfully as neighboring Virginia. Since most travel and trade possibilities depended on coastal ports, this geographical barrier isolated the colony from much of the Atlantic trade industry. In 1720, Joseph Boone and John Barnwell described the colony of North Carolina as

[A] great quantity of good Land...and the Country very healthy, yet its situation renders it for ever uncapable of being a place of any consequence, for there lies a vast sound of 60 mile over between it and ye sea which break into the same thro' a chain of sand banks with barrs so shifting and shallow that sloops of 5 feet water runs great risqs, and if it sometimes happens that they have 8 or 10 feet water the next storm may alter it so, and perhaps in the very Chanell rise an island of sand as is really dreadfull and surprising This renders the place uncapable of a Trade to great Brittain.¹⁹

Consequently, exports from North Carolina had to be transported over land for many miles before arriving at a port to be shipped out. This geographical isolation caused more than one difficulty for North Carolinian farmers. Not only was it time-consuming

¹⁷ Christoph von Graffenried, "Narrative by Christoph von Graffenried Concerning His Voyage to North Carolina and the Founding of New Bern [1708]," trans. M. Du Four, *The Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, Vol. 1 (2010): 971, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr01-0486>

¹⁸ Barth, "The Sinke," 15.

¹⁹ Joseph Boone and John Barnwell, "Report by Joseph Boone and John Barnwell Concerning the North Carolina Boundaries [November 23, 1720]," *The Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, Vol. 2 (2010): 396, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr02-0201>.

and expensive to get their goods to a port town, but many North Carolinian exports had acquired a bad reputation of being of poor quality after being transported for longer periods of time, so they did not bring premium profits.²⁰ One businessman in New York “advised a New Bern correspondent not to ship any more indigo on his account: ‘The best of Carolina Indigo Would not Sell here it has a bad Name among Our Cuntry People some will not Look at it if you says its from Carolina.’”²¹ Also, Virginians complained that North Carolinian tobacco was packed wet or too full, allowing it to rot in transport and bringing down the price.²² The lower value of North Carolinian exports and the unfavorable balance of trade meant that there was a scarcity of hard currency in the colony.²³ According to Edwin Combs III, this made business very difficult in North Carolina; many businesses had to raise their prices in order to “profit from a trade in low-value exports.”²⁴ Also, Combs discusses the occurrence of smuggling, which evaded the enforcement of the Trade Laws and the Navigation Acts, and the fact that local officials did not seem very effective in preventing those crimes.²⁵ In response to written directions advising him to “crack down on illegal trade and punish smugglers,” one governor wrote, “I believe many Frauds are committed by running and short entries, as we have no tide Officers or Searchers but the Collectors and Naval Officers. . . . [I]t is impossible to prevent a Clandestine entry of goods which ought to pay Duties.”²⁶ That statement admitted the existence of smuggling along North Carolina’s waterways and an inability to control the situation, whether by default or by design, despite the Crown’s insistence on capturing and prosecuting offenders.

According to Charles R. Ewen, the colonists in eighteenth century Bath “were not thriving,” despite their efforts to be a part of the world trade economy.²⁷ That statement suggests economic vulnerability, which could be alleviated somewhat by having a trusted pirate included in the town’s commerce. The evidence of the notorious pirate Blackbeard’s immersion in the community implies that the citizens of Bath had a mutually beneficial relationship with the pirate, affording the townspeople a less expensive means to liquidate their exports and an influx of luxury goods to profit from.²⁸ Ewen writes, “[H]e never attacked the port, [but] he did traffic in stolen goods

²⁰ Combs, “Trading in Lubberland,” 15.

²¹ As quoted in Combs, “Trading in Lubberland,” 15.

²² *Ibid.*, 15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁶ As quoted in Combs, “Trading in Lubberland,” 22.

²⁷ Ewen, “John Lawson’s Bath,” 279.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 267.

there.”²⁹ In 1717, Blackbeard, also known as Edward Teach, Edward Tach, or Edward Thatch, swore his allegiance to the Crown and was officially pardoned for his crimes of piracy by North Carolina’s Governor Eden.³⁰ Blackbeard was known to have lived outside the port town of Bath for a while, and he even married a local girl, Mary Ormond, in the presence of the governor, Charles Eden.³¹ He was welcomed into the community under the pretense of being “involved in trade,” but allegedly Governor Eden, his secretary Tobias Knight, and other influential colonists were aware of, supported, and profited from Blackbeard’s continued acts of piracy.³² According to testimony heard by the Court of Admiralty in reference to Tobias Knight’s involvement with Blackbeard:

[S]oone after Thache’s [Blackbeard’s] arrival at Ocacock Inlet he went in a periangor. . . to Mr Tobias Knight Secty of North Carolina carrying with him a present of Chocolate Loaf Sugar and Sweet meats being part of what was taken on Board the ffrench ships. . . and Some boxes the Contents of which they did not know that they got to the sd Knight house about Twelve or one a Clock in the Night and carried up the caggs and boxes afsd which were all left there except one cagg of Sweet meets. . . that the sd Knight was then at home and the sd Thache staid with him til about an hour before the break of day and then departed that about three miles from the sd Knights house at a place called Chesters landing.³³

This testimony certainly implies a relationship of sorts between the “former” outlaw and the official. Most individuals who visit that late at night, bring multiple “presents,” and leave in the early hours of the morning, but before dawn, are good friends. More than that, they are up to something and trying to be discreet. The four men who witnessed those interactions, “Richd Stiles James Blake James White and Thomas Gates,” were African Americans, so their testimony was discredited at Knight’s request that the court “Consider as to the Evidence themselves they being such as Contradict themselves or as ought not to be taken in any Court of Record or else where against the sd Tobias Knight or any other white man.”³⁴ Also, an incriminating letter closing with “I expect the

²⁹ Ibid., 267.

³⁰ Ibid., 279.

³¹ Ibid., 270.

³² Ibid., 267.

³³ “Minutes of the North Carolina Governor’s Council, Including a Deposition, a Remonstrance, and Correspondence Concerning Tobias Knight’s Business with Edward Teach [May 27, 1719],” *The Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol.2 (2010): 341. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr02-0181>.

³⁴ Ibid., 345.

Governor this night or tomorrow who I believe would be likewise glad to see you before you goe, I have not time to add save my hearty respects to you and am your real ffreind And Servant T. KNIGHT” was found on board Blackbeard’s sloop, *Adventure*. However, what would have been conclusive evidence of guilt in the Virginian Admiralty Court, even if the black pirates’ testimony was eliminated, did not result in a guilty verdict for Tobias Knight. One can hypothesize that his colleagues did not want to see him persecuted for a “crime” that they were all guilty of committing: aiding and abetting piracy. Those trial documents are significant evidence that, at the very least, North Carolina’s government officials, including Secretary Tobias Knight and Governor Eden, were on friendly terms with Blackbeard.

The means by which Blackbeard’s career as a pirate ended, due to the Virginia governor’s intervention, corroborates the theory that North Carolina was a safe haven for Blackbeard and his crew. In a letter to one of the Lords Proprietors of the colony, Governor Alexander Spotswood of Virginia defended his reasons for attacking and killing Blackbeard in an inlet of North Carolina without permission or involvement from the local government. Governor Spotswood stressed the proximity of Governor Eden’s residence to the location of Blackbeard’s “chief resort” and wrote of the need for total secrecy of the plan of attack, “least among the many favourers of Pyrates...some of them might send Intelligence to Tach [Blackbeard].”³⁵ In May 1719, he also divulged his suspicions of certain North Carolinian government officials’ complicity with Blackbeard and other pirates in his letter to the Lords of Trade in England.³⁶ Spotswood also sent a letter to James Craggs, the Postmaster General of the United Kingdom on the same day in May 1719. In it he wrote as follows:

“[T]here are some in y’t Government y’t endeavour to justify Thach and his Crew as very honest men, and to condemn the Officers and Men belonging to the King’s Ships as Murderers for attacking and subduing them, When it is notorious that after they surrendered in y’t Province, and rec’d the benefit of his Maj’ty’s Mercy, they went out again on the same piratical design, not without the privity of some in principal Stations in that Gov’t...I hope the Lords proprietors themselves w’ll give little Credit to such Clandestine Testimonials when they shall know how dark apart some of their Officers have acted, particularly one who enjoyed the post of Secretary Chief Justice, one of their Lord’p’s Deputys and Collector of the Customs held a private Correspondence w’th Thach, concealed a Robbery he committed in that province, and received and concealed a considerable part of the

³⁵ Alexander Spotswood, “Letter from Alexander Spotswood to John Carteret, Earl Granville [February 14, 1719],” *The Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 2 (2010): 326, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr02-0174>.

³⁶ Alexander Spotswood, “Letter from Alexander Spotswood to the Board of Trade of Great Britain [Extract] [May 26, 1719],” *The Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 2 (2010): 337, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr02-0179>.

Cargo of this very ffrench Ship w'ch he knew Thach had no Right to give or he to receive...But it would be too tedious to relate how many favourers of Pirats there are in these parts.”³⁷

Despite Governor Spotswood’s suspicions and accusations, which were shared with many powerful individuals in England, North Carolina’s Court of Admiralty never investigated charges against anyone other than the Secretary of State, Tobias Knight, who was found not guilty.³⁸ Governor Spotswood’s disgust and disdain for the North Carolinian government is clear, and he believed his attack on Blackbeard on Carolina soil was necessary in order to eliminate the threat that the pirate represented to Virginian trade. His attitude was not much different, if at all, from the other Virginians who believed the colonists of North Carolina did not fit the mold of what a “proper” society should be like. However, his assessment of the relationship between the colonial government of North Carolina and Blackbeard was most likely accurate.

In conclusion, the demographic of the people in North Carolina was very different from other colonies and included people that Virginians and the English referred to as “lazy,” “ruffians,” “criminals,” “drunkards,” “religious dissenters,” and “dangerous,” which are not very different from the descriptions of “pirates” or “criminals” in Simon’s article.³⁹ In theory, many North Carolinians fostered relationships with the individuals classified as pirates because they shared similar characteristics, considering the colonists were often looked upon as outcasts from proper society too. That opinion was evident in a letter to the Proprietors dated November 23, 1720, in which Boone and Barnwell wrote the following:

“[T]his place is the receptacle of all the vagabouns & runaways of the main land of America for which reason and for their entertaining Pirats they are justly contemned by their neighbours, for which reason and that they may be under good Government and be made usefull to the rest of his Majesty's Collonys it would be proper to joyn the same again to Virginia.”⁴⁰

The colonists of North Carolina would not have responded well to the suggestion that they should just be absorbed into the colony of Virginia; that would have been a detestable suggestion to those independent individuals, who either left another colony to ensure their personal freedoms or were political dissenters who had had to rebuild their lives in a wilderness with few governmental restrictions. Under Proprietary rule, North

³⁷ Alexander Spotswood, “Letter from Alexander Spotswood to James Craggs [May 26, 1719],” *The Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, vol. 2 (2010): 335, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr02-0178>.

³⁸ Ibid., “Minutes [May 27, 1719],” 341.

³⁹ Barth, “The Sinke,” 1, 8, 27. Simon, “The Social Construction,” 78.

⁴⁰ Boone and Barnwell, “Report,” 396.

Carolinians had values and norms that differed greatly from those of the other established colonies, and their relaxed society seemed just as threatening to Virginia, in particular, as the acts of piracy that occurred along the colonial coastlines. As Jonathan Barth states eloquently, “The combination of an unintrusive and more populist government, weak church establishment, hostile physical environment, and a more equal distribution of land and wealth created the conditions for an individualistic society anomalous from the rest of British America.”⁴¹ Those factors, plus the geographical difficulties that hindered Atlantic trade, allowed for a mutually beneficial relationship to develop with pirates. The pirates could deliver to North Carolinians the luxury items that they wanted at reasonable prices, plus enable colonial producers to liquidate some of their exports with ease, and North Carolinians could provide pirates with a safe harbor in which to find temporary respite from persecution.

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⁴¹ Barth, “The Sinke,” 3.

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