

In New Bern, North Carolina, in 1795, Francois-X Martin published an eight-page pamphlet by Jonathan Price titled A DESCRIPTION OF OCCACOCK INLET*.

Jonathan Price, a Quaker who had settled in North Carolina's Pasquotank County soon after the American Revolution, had little formal education, but developed an interest in geography, surveying, navigation, and astronomy. He became a gifted cartographer, and in March, 1789, was named Pasquotank County surveyor. At that time Price envisioned creating a map of North Carolina based on actual surveys. He borrowed money from the state treasury for his project, and presumably generated additional income from the sale of the pamphlet, or portolano, mentioned above. (See

<https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/price-jonathan> for more information about Jonathan Price.)

The third paragraph in Price's pamphlet provides a concise description of Ocracoke...and a puzzle. He writes, "Occacock was heretofore, and still retains the name of, an island. It is now a peninsula; a heap of sand having gradually filled up the space which divided it from the bank. It continues to have its former appearance from the sea; the green trees, that cover it, strikingly distinguishing it from the sandy bank to which it has been joined. Its length is three miles, and its breadth two and one half. Small live oak and cedar grow abundantly over it, and it contains several swamps and rich marshes, which might be cultivated to great advantage; but its inhabitants, depending on another element for their support, suffer the earth to remain in its natural state. They are all pilots; and their number of head of families is about thirty."

I wondered what Price meant when he wrote that Occacock (Ocracoke) was previously an island, but had recently become a peninsula attached to the sandy bank.

All but one of the Outer Banks' inlets have changed over the last 425 years, some closing, others opening, generally during gales and hurricanes. The lone exception is Ocracoke Inlet which has been continuously open since Europeans began keeping records. Some readers of Price's Description have concluded that Ocracoke Island, having once been a separate island, had now connected to Hatteras with the recent closing of an inlet. But that did not sound right to me. That explanation would make more sense if Price had written that Ocracoke had become an "extension" of Hatteras Island, not a "peninsula" attached to the banks.

Careful reading of Price's Description yields more insight. He writes that Ocracoke is covered with swamps and rich marshes, and green trees which "strikingly [distinguish] it from the sandy bank." This sounds like a description, not of the entire present-day Ocracoke

Island, but just of the area of the island where the village is located. This must have been at one time an “inside island” much like Roanoke Island is today, separated from the “sandy banks” by a narrow channel of water.

Price provides further support for this view. He writes that Occacock is three miles long and two and one-half miles wide, and that live oaks and cedars grow “abundantly over it,” and about thirty families live there. This is very close to the size of Ocracoke village today, and in 1795 all of the inlet pilots and their families lived in this general area, as residents still do.



(Ocracoke, 1936, illustrating the contrast between the village and the sandy banks in the background. Photo from Open Parks Network.)

A field trip guide to the Outer Banks (The North Carolina Outer Banks Barrier Islands: A Field Trip Guide to the Geology, Geomorphology, and Processes [http://core.ecu.edu/geology/mallinsond/IGCP_NC_Field_Trip_Guide_rev1.pdf]) yields further insights.

The document contains this statement about complex barrier islands: “These occur when a simple barrier segment migrates into and welds onto an older barrier island segment that

formed in response to a different set of conditions (e.g., western Ocracoke Island)....”

The paper goes on to say ” Ocracoke Village area is a complex barrier island, consisting of multiple sets of regressive beach ridges. No dates yet exist from this complex, but by comparison with other progradational components of the Outer Banks, we can speculate that this section began to form ca. 3000 yBP [year before the present], at the same time as the Kitty Hawk beach ridges ... The remainder of the island is <1000 years old, having reformed following the Medieval Warm Period collapse.”

I conclude that Price is using “Ocracoke” to describe, not the entire island as we know it today, but only the area of the present-day village which is of a different geological formation, as the field guide points out. So “Ocracoke” (the village area) was “heretofore a [separate] island” which, as sea levels rose, became joined to the “sandy banks” as the banks migrated to the west when sand was swept over them during storms. The more stable inside islands do not migrate. The “sandy banks” bump up against them, and merge with them. In geologic time those more stable islands eventually become capes as the sandy banks “wrap around” them, and ultimately they become shoals projecting into the Atlantic Ocean.

*The full title of Price’s pamphlet is A DESCRIPTION OF OCCACOCK INLET; and of its COASTS, ISLANDS, SHOALS, and ANCHORAGES: With the COURSES and DISTANCES to and from the most Remarkable Places, And DIRECTIONS to sail over the BAR and thro’ the CHANNELS Adorned with a M A P, taken by actual survey.