

Ocracoke's first residents were Native Americans, members of the Wocon tribe. Some of the earliest recorded names for the island (Wococon, Wokokon) reflect this history. Eventually the "W" was dropped and spellings such as 'Ocock' and "Ocrkok" evolved into the present "Ocracoke."

On November 11, 1719 John Lovick, Secretary of the Colony of North Carolina and a Deputy of the Lords Proprietors, was granted the island of Ocracoke, containing 2,110 acres, by the Crown. On or before 1733 Richard Sanderson acquired Ocracoke Island from John Lovick. He died in that same year and bequeathed the island to his son, also named Richard Sanderson. The island stayed in the Sanderson family for another 25 years. During this time Ocracoke was used chiefly for raising cattle and sheep. It was also a settlement for the pilots who transported goods to ports on the mainland. Larger vessels were unable to navigate the shallow Pamlico Sound.

Pirates continued to use the island as a temporary campsite even after the infamous Blackbeard was killed here on November 22, 1718. His quartermaster, William Howard, was not with Blackbeard and so escaped capture and/or death at that time. There is no definitive record of Howard's whereabouts for at least another 40 years.

On July 30, 1759 a William Howard, of the Province of North Carolina, bought Ocracoke Island for £105. He was the first European owner to make his home on the island, and may already have been living here at the time of the purchase. Howard was born about 1700 and died in 1794 or 1795. Although there is no proof that William Howard the pirate was the same person as William Howard of Ocracoke, family tradition suggests that this is the case.

The Howard family has lived on Ocracoke Island continuously since at least 1759. Members of the 10th generation of the family reside here today.

For £52 10 shillings William Howard sold one half of the island to his friend John Williams, pilot, in September, 1759. Subsequently more parcels were sold and the village grew.

Before 1835 island homes and businesses were concentrated on the southern (or Lighthouse) side of Cackle Creek (now called Silver Lake). Early in its development a public road had been laid out on that side of the village. This was the only road on the island and it passed from the Sound, north towards Hatteras Inlet.

According to a legal petition of 1835 this public road "served the purpose of all the inhabitants since [its establishment], however the population of Ocracoke have greatly increased."

The petitioners were requesting permission to lay out a public road on the North side of Cockle Creek, from “just North of Thomas Bragg’s House” to “John Pike’s garden” and then all the way to the Sound, about a half mile. Originally this was merely a foot path, but now it was to be widened and would include what became historic Howard Street.

Apparently the Northern side of Cockle Creek had, by that time, “become thickly settled and the business of the Island both Public and Private have become much divided and where formerly there was no store, there is now three.”

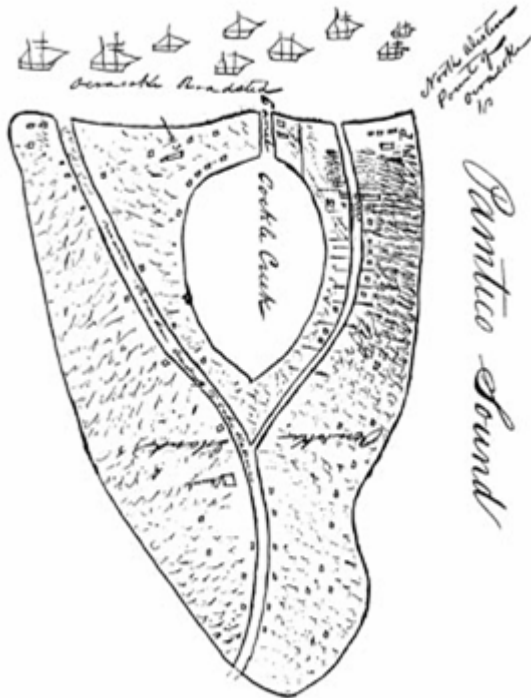
Howard Street, ca. 2000:



It seems that there was some strife surrounding the “passing and repassing” on this footpath, for James Taylor the attorney for the petitioners notes that “This track passes through the lands of not less than ten or twelve private persons who have it in their power at any time either for convenience, intrest or spite to stop all communication to the business part of this side of the Island and even to deprive those settled near this path from a pass way to the nabourhood church.....Unfortunately in most communitys there are to be found evil dispoed persons who are always ready to meddle with every persons business but there own (which is generally neglected altogether).”

Only one of the petitioners is a Howard, one Simon Howard who signed with an “X.” This is likely the son of William Howard, Sr., who remained unmarried and died without heirs. It seems that the “evil dispoed persons” referred to in the petition probably included some of my own Howard ancestors who owned property along this footpath.

Ocracoke Map, ca. 1835:



In due time, the court, recognizing the importance of a public conveyance on the North side of Cockle Creek, ordered the road to be laid out. At one time it was known as the Main Road. When the State of North Carolina paved most of the roads in the village in the mid 1950's a section of this street was also paved (and is now that part of Highway 12 which passes in front of the Community Store and towards the Cedar Island/Swan Quarter ferry terminal). The East end of of the street was left unpaved, and remains as a privately maintained, though public, road. Shortly thereafter Stacy Howard nailed a wooden sign on a tree in front of his home that declared this road "East Howard Street," the name by which it is still known today.

At the time Stacy posted his sign no fewer than eight families of Howards lived on or owned property along this street. In addition, numerous small Howard family cemeteries line the road, surrounded by moss-covered wooden fences and gnarled old live oak trees. Although no one knows were William Howard, Sr. is buried, his son, William, Jr., and many of his descendants are buried along Howard Street.

Until recently, Howard Street was deep, soft sand in many places. Residents would walk barefoot through the ruts left by horse-drawn carts, and later, automobiles. Today it has been stabilized with shells and gravel.

Howard Street is a North Carolina treasure. No other street has the history and charm it boasts. When visiting the island be sure to include a stroll down historic Howard Street.