

Island Greetings!

This month I share with you the fascinating story of the search for Blackbeard's skull. But first, two brief comments.

- Several people have wondered about the progress on the renovation of the [Homer & Aliph Howard Home](#). Because of unexpected contractor delays there has been nothing to report in the last two months. However, we expect work to begin again immediately after the July 4 holiday. Look for more photos and commentary next month. In the meanwhile, you can read the latest report [here](#).
- Fans of Molasses Creek and Fiddler Dave will be happy to hear that Dave has released his first solo CD, "Cecil Train Heads West". Click on the link to read more.

And now, the search for Blackbeard's skull:

So much has been written about Edward Teach, aka "Blackbeard," and Ocracoke, especially his bloody battle at "Teach's Hole" near Ocracoke Inlet on November 22, 1718, that I will only give a brief recount, but will share with you several other little-known, but interesting facts.

A View of Teach's Hole from Springer's Point:



As many of you know, the "Golden Age of Piracy" came to an end when Virginia's Governor Spotswood sent Lt. Robert Maynard in pursuit of the dastardly pirate. Blackbeard's fearsome head was severed from his body in that famous battle. Afterwards Maynard unceremoniously threw the headless corpse overboard where it reportedly swam around the ship seven times before sinking into the murky depths.

For some time I reported that Maynard carried Blackbeard's head back to Williamsburg, Virginia as a grim message to Teach's nefarious "Brethren of the Coast."

Recently, on one of my history/ghost walks, I was told that the gruesome trophy was actually taken to Hampton, Virginia. After checking R.E. Lee's definitive book, [Blackbeard the Pirate, A Reappraisal of His Life and Times](#), I learned that "according to the legends of Virginia and the statements of a number of writers, Blackbeard's skull dangled from a high

pole on the west side of the mouth of the Hampton River for many years as a warning to seafarers. The place is still known as 'Blackbeard's Point.'"

According to Donald W. Patterson on the web site, [Blackbeard Lives](#), Maynard's "sailors hung Blackbeard's head on the bowsprit of their sloop and headed for Bath, where Blackbeard lived. In early January of 1719, they sailed to Williamsburg, Va., still displaying their gruesome trophy. By early February, they arrived in the Norfolk, Va. area. Around the middle of the month, authorities in Hampton, Va. hanged several of Blackbeard's men. They stuck his head on a pole as a warning to potential pirates."

More interestingly, I was reminded of one colorful legend regarding Blackbeard's skull. According to Lee, "In time, someone took down the grim souvenir and fashioned it into the base of a large punch bowl." He goes on to recount that for many years the bowl rested in the Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg where it was used as a drinking vessel. This information comes from the 1898 "Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania" Volume II, by John F. Watson who states that the skull was "enlarged with silver....and I have seen those whose forefathers have spoken of their drinking punch from it; with a silver ladle appurtenant to that bowl."

Legends also suggest that for many years the skull made the rounds of coastal dinner parties as a sober reminder of the fate of lawless sailors. Other tales claim that the skull played a central role in fraternity rituals in Virginia and Connecticut.

In a footnote in Lee's 1974 book he states that the skull can no longer be located in Virginia, although "a well-known New England writer on pirates and a collector of pirate memorabilia" claimed to be in possession of the famous skull.

The New England writer and collector Lee refers to is no doubt Edward Rowe Snow (1902-1982). I have a photocopy from his out-of-print book, [Secrets of the North Atlantic Islands](#), published in 1950, that shows a picture of a skull. The caption reads, "The skull of the famous pirate Blackbeard, photographed with one of his pistols." I am told that the skull was included in several trips that Snow made in the '60's & '70's to various places of nautical interest in the New England area.

In the process of researching the legend and searching for the skull, John Walker, on his web page, [Blackbeard](#), talks about contacting, in 1990, an elderly woman in Massachusetts who claimed to be in possession of Captain Teach's skull. She said she was in the process of donating it to a museum in Salem, Massachusetts.

As of this writing, the Peabody-Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts now holds the skull from the Edward Rowe Snow collection.

On their web page, [From the Quarter Deck](#), Gena and Tom Metcalf, folklorists and historians, are shown holding the object in question.

According to some sources, officials at the museum have never put the skull on display, and refuse to claim it as Blackbeard's citing lack of proof one way or the other. Tom Metcalf, who finds no reason to doubt its authenticity, reports that the skull has been on tour, and even made it to the San Diego Maritime Museum a few years ago.

In his book, [Blackbeard's Cup](#), Charles Whedbee, North Carolina historian and collector of Outer Banks folklore, claimed to have actually drunk from the silver plated skull/punch bowl while on a visit to Ocracoke Island in the early 1930's. Although it is an entertaining story, it is unlikely to have actually happened. To my knowledge, no one on the island has heard of such an object ever being located here, nor do the tales of furtive meetings, solemn rituals, or secret passwords sound convincing. They are more likely the product of an imaginative college graduate's mind than the true account of the lives of the native Outer Bankers I know.

Furthermore, although Whedbee is reported to have seen photos of Edward Rowe Snow with his silvered skull, and to have stated that this skull was indeed the same one he was familiar with, this is difficult to believe. Whedbee, an accomplished storyteller, claimed to have drunk from a shallow bowl fashioned from the top half of a skull. He reports that the vessel bore the curse "Deth to Spotswoode" engraved on the rim. Neither the size, shape, nor details of this skull match those of the skull in the Peabody-Essex Museum.

Another View of Teach's Hole:



It is unlikely that, after 285 years, we will ever know for sure what happened to Edward Teach's skull. That he was a figure larger than life itself, however, is attested to by the fact that his story continues to fascinate us. This is especially true on Ocracoke where tales

abound of the headless pirate perpetually wandering our shoreline after dark.....searching, in vain, for his head.