

The following article by Ralph Pool was published in *The Virginian-Pilot*, Sunday, July 3, 1960:

The Lost Colony never was lost. When Governor John White searched abandoned Fort Raleigh in 1590, his missing settlers were safe, well fed and presumably happy, scarcely a dozen miles away.

This is the theory brought to light last week by Marshall Layton Twiford, 83, of Norfolk, in a story by Victor Meekins in the *Coastal Times* published in Manteo, N.C.

The theory isn't Twiford's. Rather, it is a tradition stemming from the remote past in the East Lake section of Dare County, a region of woodlands and tangled marshes and sluggish creeks, which won wide recognition for the high quality of the corn liquor it produced in prohibition days.

Not many miles from East Lake, and some 10 miles up Milltail Creek from Alligator River, is a wooded area of some 5,000 acres known as Beechland. This land is rich and somewhat higher than the surrounding marshes. For many generations, until about a century ago, it was the abiding place for a thriving community. Then plague struck, many died, and the frightened survivors fled.

Twiford grew up in the river community at East Lake, where his father, M.D. Twiford, a "hard-shell" Baptist preacher, was also a fisherman, farmer, postmaster and merchant. From his father, he learned the story of Beechland's link with the Lost Colony.

When the English Colonist built Fort Raleigh, the Indians had a settlement at Beechland, with a woodland trail leading to the shore of Croatan Sound opposite Roanoke Island, the tradition says. They made friends with the whites.

John White left Fort Raleigh in August 1587 to bring back needed supplies from England. A year elapsed. With no sign of White, their fears of a Spanish attack from the sea increasing, and supplies doubtless at the vanishing point, the settlers abandoned Fort Raleigh and joined their Indian friends at Beechland, so the story goes.

When White finally returned in the summer of 1590, misfortune dogged him. The weather turned foul, and seven Englishmen drowned when their small boat capsized as they tried to land on Roanoke Island.

Finally reaching shore, White found Fort Raleigh far different from the settlement he had left three years before. He recounts that the houses had been pulled down and a strong

enclosure built, with a high palisade of large trees. The place was deserted, but there was no sign of violence or of hurried departure. By agreement, the settlers were to have left crosses marked about the place if threat of danger forced them to abandon the area. There were no crosses. On a tree at the fort's entrance, he found the word "CROATOAN" carved in "Roman letters". Also, the letters "CRO" had been carved on a tree on the brow of a nearby cliff.



Croatoan, 1870 Etching

White believed "Croatoan" to mean an island to the south, possibly the present Ocracoke. He planned to go there to continue his search, but the stormy weather continued and the expedition had to scurry out to the open sea to escape destruction.

White's next idea was to sail to the West Indies, spend the winter, and return the following spring for further search. But the weather continued bad, the idea was dropped, and the expedition returned to England. There ends the recorded history of the Raleigh settlements.

One tradition holds that the John White colony journeyed many miles to the south and finally settled in what is now Robeson County, on the South Carolina border. And now there is Beechland.

According to the legend related by Twiford, the word "Croatoan" actually referred to the mainland district across Croatan Sound from Roanoke Island, now known as Manns Harbor.

Marshy islands dotted the sound and it was almost possible to cross from island to mainland on foot until about 150 years ago. Then an inlet at the present Nags Head filled up, the flow of water from Albemarle Sound was diverted, and strong currents washed the islands away.

Croatoan, Twiford said, was named for an Indian woman who lived and died there and who must have been in some way notable, though only her name comes down to us.

Beechland was a fair, fruitful and happy land, the story goes. Its deep, black loam produced a bounty of corn, cotton and other crops. Its orchards yielded abundant fruit, its hives produced plenty of golden honey, its herds grazing in the reedy marshlands supplied hides, meat and milk. The sounds and rivers offered fish and oysters for the taking.

In time, the Indian trail of Croatan faded away and the inhabitants of Beechland came to depend on stout boats of their own making for contact with the outside world. They built up a brisk trade with the West Indies, exchanging drawn cypress shingles and farm produce for sugar, spices, rum, salt and other products.

In this prosperous community, neighbors came to the rescue of anyone whom misfortune struck. None were permitted to go in want; and in time of death, neighbors hewed a coffin out of the rot-resistant cypress, dug the grave and otherwise ministered to the bereaved. There was no thought of taking pay. Graves were marked with rocks from ballast dumped by ships returned from the West Indies. Many of these graves are to be found in Beechland today, and it is possible that archaeological investigation might turn up new evidence of Beechland's links from the far past.

"I saw one of those coffins opened," Twiford recalled. "It had been dug up accidentally by a bulldozer. The top and bottom halves had been fitted closely together and fastened with pegs. All I saw inside was a little ashes or dust. It ought to have been examined for buttons or other objects, but it wasn't. The men reburied it, and the bulldozer crew circled around the graveyard."

For many generations, Beechland flourished. At long last, tradition says, there came a day when the people paid little heed to spiritual things, refused to listen to the pleadings of a minister in their midst to humble themselves before God. When they failed to build a church and meet for worship, he warned them to expect catastrophe. Not long after, the minister's warning was fulfilled.

Calamity struck in the form of a plague, likely cholera brought from the West Indies. Scores died. A few packed their belongings in their boats and escaped to Currituck and elsewhere.

Beechland vanished as a settled, prosperous community a few years before the Civil War. In later years, a few families trickled back. Twiford remembers as a small boy accompanying his father to the district, not many miles from East Lake. Three families then lived there, he says, named Smith, Basnight, and Stokes. "After a few years, these families disappeared too," Twiford added. "I guess they just moved away."

A check of John White's roster of the Lost Colony reveals a Thomas Smith, but the link to Beechland is tenuous, to say the least, in view of the multiplicity of Smith's.

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