

Last month a visitor to the Ocracoke Preservation Society museum wondered aloud about the name “Portsmouth Island.” As many of our readers know, Portsmouth lies just southwest of Ocracoke, across Ocracoke Inlet.

The visitor wanted to know why and when the name had been changed from “Croatoan” to “Portsmouth.” This question took the museum staff by surprise. No one there had heard this claim.

“Oh yes,” he said. He had read that Portsmouth was called Croatoan in the sixteenth century. Julie, OPS’s museum manager, called me (as well as a number of other island historians) and asked us to research this question.

Immediately I consulted Dot Willis and Ben Salter’s fascinating little book, “Portsmouth Island Short Stories & History” (first published in 1972). There it was on page 9: “Portsmouth Island, North Carolina, was first settled by white people in the year 1700. Before then,” the second chapter continues, “it was called ‘Croatan,’ [sic] home of the Indians.”

I had never heard that before (or, at least, I hadn’t paid any attention on other occasions when I had read that passage). I had always been under the impression that Croatoan was the early name given to that part of the Outer Banks that included what is now the northern end of Ocracoke Island and the southern end of Hatteras Island (the inlets are constantly opening and closing along this fragile chain of sandy islets).

So I consulted another book, Clarence L. Robinson’s 1970 collection of his memories, “The Core Sounder.” Sure enough, in his last chapter he comments, “According to an old map of Lane’s Expedition, Portsmouth was called ‘Croatoan,’ the home of the Indians Manteo and Wanchese, who sailed to England with some of the Colonists in 1584 and returned the next year.”

Now this was fascinating. And it challenged what I’d always thought about Croatoan. Could it really be, I wondered, that Croatoan was Portsmouth? Luckily, I have in my possession a copy of the White-De Bry map of 1590. This is the map of Lane’s expedition, referred to by Robinson. In fact Robinson includes a copy of this map on the last page of his book.

Below is a detail of the White-De Bry map. You can click on the map to view a larger image.

(Need Photo)

You will notice in the lower right hand corner a compass rose. To fit the map into my scanner I had to cut off the extreme right hand edge, but you can still see the fleur-de-lis. On the map this is designated as "Septentrio." According to dictionary.com "Septentrion" (designating the seven stars of the constellation Ursa major) was the more common spelling, but, though obsolete, they both mean "north."

"Occidens," "Oriens," and "Meridies" (West, East, & South, respectively) are clearly visible on the map.

This map, then, is oriented differently than most modern-day maps. North is to the right, rather than to the top of the map. Obviously this caused some confusion.

If you look carefully at the map you will see that I have underlined, from north to south, "Hatorask" (Hatteras), "Croatoan," and "Wokokon" (Ocracoke). Portsmouth remains unnamed, although I have indicated it with an arrow, just to the south of Wokokon.

As I had always understood, Croatoan is in fact the north end of present-day Ocracoke and the south end of present-day Hatteras. It is not Portsmouth Island. Unfortunately the White-De Bry map had been misread.

The islands of the Outer Banks are constantly shifting and changing. It is their nature. Also, early explorers lacked the technology to produce highly accurate maps. Nevertheless, they did provide valuable evidence for the shape of our coast, location of native settlements, and place names of numerous landmarks during the Age of Discovery. But some features of the early coastline remain a mystery.

One thing that has puzzled me for several years is the sixteenth century shape & configuration of Ocracoke Island. In August of 2003 I wrote a Newsletter documenting the more than fifty different names for our beloved island. In the process of doing my research I came across a 1795 map of "Occacock" produced by Johathan Price.

Price's map is accompanied by a document entitled "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, by Jonathan Price."

1795 Map by Jonathan Price:

(Need Photo)

As I noted three year's ago, Price's "Description of Occacock Inlet" is noteworthy for a number of reasons.

In the third paragraph he states:

"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."

You might want to re-read the above passage. Occacock, Price states, is no longer an island, though it is still called an island. He claims Occacock is a peninsula, now connected to the sandy banks. Whatever could he mean?

Price states that Occacock is three miles long by two and one half miles wide. In addition, Price describes Occacock's vegetation — live oaks & cedars, swamps, and rich marshes. This matches our historical understanding of the area surrounding Silver Lake harbor. The "banks" on the other hand, are "strikingly" different, and, like today, little more than narrow ribbons of sand.

Geologists have long speculated that the area of Ocracoke Island which includes the present-day village was originally an island separate from the "banks." much like Roanoke Island is today. Price's description bears this out. Although the present area of Ocracoke village is approximately two miles by two miles, slightly smaller than Price's description suggests, there are several factors that could account for this. Price's calculations might not be accurate, or the area of the village might have been that much larger two hundred years ago. We know that significant erosion has reduced the shoreline near the Visitor's Center and at Springer's Point.

Surprisingly, none of the early maps that I am familiar with unequivocally confirms Price's "separate island" observation. I am guessing that as early as 1585 the process of joining "Ocracoke" with the Outer Banks had already begun. It could be that natural forces ebbed and flowed like the tides and that the connection was sometimes more obvious, and sometimes less so.

The recent history of Ocracoke bears witness to this process. Even though the village and the banks had been viewed as one entity for as long as anyone can remember, as late as the 1970's the area between the edge of the village and the airstrip was often underwater, especially during periods of high tide.

Today's visitor to Ocracoke Island is usually amazed to learn that in times past the "bald beach" extended much closer to the village. My father often remarked that islanders shook their heads in disbelief when Thurston Gaskill built his home (now the Thurston House Bed & Breakfast) "on the edge of the beach" in the 1930's.

The following photos, from the 1950's document the fluid nature of this area.

In this aerial view of Ocracoke village you can clearly see the the tidal flats (in the forefront) with a line of trees separating them from the village (and Silver Lake Harbor). The flats are covered with tidewater.

(Need Photo)

This 1950s photo of an airplane landing on the newly-constructed NC Highway 12 near the present-day South Point Road (Ocracoke village is in the distance) shows tidewater covering the flats on the right (in front of Loop Shack Hill). Water lay on the other side of the roadway, as well.

(Need Photo)

Some older residents remember hearing tales of fishermen mullet-fishing in this area. Blanche Styron (born 1922) recalls fishing there as a young girl.

Today the area between the village and the NPS campground is thickly covered with cedars, myrtles, yaupon, and other vegetation. Only fifty years ago there was hardly a sea oat to be seen there. It was (and still is) called "The Plains" and had the appearance of a vast wasteland or desert. It is only because of the continuous row of man-made dunes (constructed by the National Park Service in the 1950's) that protect the island from frequent overwash that trees and shrubs are so abundant today.