

Welcome back to another edition of our island newsletter!

Some of you may have heard about the fire scare we had last month. A bottle rocket set off a blazing marsh fire just north of Jackson Dunes on June 8. The wind was exceptionally strong and pushed the flames to the edge of a stand of tinder-dry cedar trees. It was only by the quick action of local fishermen (who used their net stake pump to draw water from a nearby ditch), the Volunteer Fire Department (who responded immediately), and scores of worried citizens who struggled with hoses and shovels, that the fire was contained before it jumped the road and engulfed homes and more trees.

Everyone was concerned because the dry brush was fueling the fire and the gusty wind was driving it rapidly towards the village. Residents and business owners were warned to gather valuables together in the event that the fire became an uncontrollable inferno. And we all breathed a communal sigh of relief when the fire was finally reduced to smoke and charred vegetation.

Post-fire Marsh Scene:



One benefit of the conflagration was the passage of an island ordinance prohibiting fire crackers, bottle rockets, and other individual fireworks. The ordinance calls for criminal and civil penalties so please remember to leave your fireworks at home from now on. None of us can afford to let our beautiful village fall victim to reckless negligence.

The fire erupted late in the afternoon, during one of the final performances of the Ocracoke Music & Storytelling Festival. In spite of the distraction the festival was a huge success.

For some time I have been chronicling local island history in these pages. One of the most colorful characters to be associated with Ocracoke is Edward Teach, otherwise known as Blackbeard the Pirate. I will recount some of his history and stories in a later newsletter, but right now I want to share some thoughts about Blackbeard's quartermaster, William Howard.

As many of you know, William Howard was the fourth colonial owner of Ocracoke Island (and the first owner to make his home here). Family legend suggests that William Howard of Ocracoke is the very same William Howard, quartermaster to Blackbeard. At least that's what some of the family think. Others are not so sure. Dora Adele Padgett, herself the great-great-great-great granddaughter of William, in her book, William Howard Last Colonial Owner of Ocracoke Island, discounts this theory. She writes:

“And what of the old tales that William Howard, Blackbeard’s Quartermaster, was the same person as William Howard, who in 1759, 40 years later, purchased the Island of Ocracoke? Evidence points to the fact that in 1718 William Howard Quartermaster, was an experienced ruffian, a seasoned villain and a seafaring man of wide experience. He is described in the Virginia Court indictment against him as ‘a vagrant seaman, who did associate himself with wicked and dissolute persons.’ In 1718, William Howard who later lived on Ocracoke was a youth of about 18 years of age, hardly the seasoned villain of wide experience who had been Blackbeard’s quartermaster.”

For a different view consider the following. After my father’s death in March I was going through his papers and discovered a ten-page type-written document entitled “History of the Life of Frank Treat Fulcher.” Frank Treat, as everyone on the island called him, was a colorful character. He was a folk artist who carved a number of boat models, as well as the last supper scene that can be seen in the vestibule of the Methodist Church. His rendition of the Coast Guard vessel EAGLE is on display in the Maritime Room in the Ocracoke Preservation Society Museum. He left the island as a youth and eventually landed a job in Norfolk as a policeman. Later in life he became a Methodist minister, explaining this change in occupation with the memorable statement, “I figured if I couldn’t beat the Hell out of people, I’d try preaching the Hell out of ‘em.”

Frank Treat Fulcher (1878-1971)



According to Frank Treat's autobiography he was "born January 25, 1878, on Ocracoke Island, North Carolina." His father was in the Life Saving Service; his maternal grandfather was a merchant sea captain. He writes, "At ten years of age my mother let me sail with a friend of hers, a Mrs. Rose, who was Captain....of the schooner EMILINE and I was seaman 3rd class." This was in 1888. That is 170 years after Blackbeard was killed. And boys were still leaving home to become sailors at ten years old! Frank Treat "sailed to the various ports of Eastern Carolina" and rose to the rank of seaman first-class. He recounts rescuing the first mate, who seems to have had a habit of falling overboard, more than once. From the EMILINE he moved on to the schooner BESSIE where he learned both to cook and to "cuss a blue streak." He was not yet eleven years old.

Before Frank Treat turned thirteen years old he had sailed aboard the schooner ROBERT F. BRATTON which almost sank in the Atlantic Ocean on a trip from Charleston, SC to New Bern, NC. In his own words, "Frank Treat is now twelve years old and is a salty old

seaman.” He met a Captain John Day and sailed on the CARRIE FARSON and then Captain John Beverage who convinced him to sail on board the “UNITY R. DYER, a two topmaster.” Frank Treat reports “We were in several storms. Once we were blown off the coast in a hurricane. It took us fourteen days to sail back. We lost our deck load and we came near sinking from open seams in the deck. That was really the worst time I had ever seen.” In October of 1893 Frank Treat’s ship, the DAVIDSON “went ashore about three miles south of Cape Henry and was a total loss.” “ I was pulled ashore through the breakers on a line,” he recounts.

After chronicling several more shipwrecks Frank Treat tells of his time aboard the Barkentine HENRY NORWELL, “the hardest ship of all. The Captain was the toughest and the most ungodly man I had ever seen.” Although Frank “fared much better than the rest of the crew, because I was a better wheel man and I could steer the ship better, by the wind.....we could not endure this hardship any longer, so we all jumped ship [in Brunswick, Georgia].”

After this adventure, Frank Treat signed up as mate on the Russian ship PAULINE bound for Hamburg, Germany. He was seventeen years old, “in the possession of two good fists....and “could take care of myself.” As he relates the story, “I helped shanghai the crew and when they discovered where they were, there was trouble in the air, but by this time I had become quite a man, so I talked them out of mutiny. Fifty-seven days crossing the Atlantic.” Others would recall that he ruled his crew with “fist, marlin spikes, and boot toes.”

From Hamburg, Frank Treat made a voyage on the “full-rigged ship ACHILLES” to Sydney, Australia. It took them 120 days via Cape Good Hope, and 143 days to return (by way of Cape Horn) to Rotterdam, Holland. Off the coast of New Zealand “a storm....carried us 69 degrees south of the Equator, down in the Antarctic ice drifts. Man Alive! It was below zero.”

In 1896, when Frank was 18 years old, he was quartermaster on the steamer, NEPTUNE, which left Rotterdam for Baltimore, Maryland.

Judith Levine, in her book, Harmful to Minors, in reference to the influential French historian Philippe Aries, points out that “Until the mid-1700’s....at seven, a person might be sent off to become a scullery maid or a shoemaker’s apprentice; by fourteen, he could be a soldier or a king, a spouse and a parent; by forty, more than likely, he’d be dead.”

No one can be sure at the present time if William Howard of Ocracoke was the same person as William Howard the pirate. Family members are researching the archives for new clues.

But one thing is certain in my mind. In 1718 a young man still in his teens was no doubt capable of the seafaring experience necessary for serving as quartermaster of any vessel, let alone a pirate ship. If you have any doubt, just look at the record of Frank Treat Fulcher.

Until next time, all the best to you from the entire staff of Village Craftsmen.