

A part of Ocracoke's history little remarked on is the War of 1812. In fact this is sometimes referred to as America's "forgotten war." In the 1783 "Treaty of Paris" which concluded the War of Independence Great Britain agreed to abandon forts on the western frontier. By 1812 Britain still persisted in maintaining these outposts. In addition there were reports that Britain had persuaded various Native American tribes to fight against the former colonists.

Along the Atlantic coast the Royal Navy was intent on terrorizing American shipping. Vessels were stopped and searched, and sailors were all too often forcibly impressed into service as British seamen. In addition hundreds of U.S. merchant ships were seized and their cargoes confiscated. The United States declared war on June 12, 1812.

Throughout this period Ocracoke was one of the busiest inlets on the east coast. The only consistently deep water, navigable inlet along the Outer Banks, Ocracoke saw as many sailing vessels pass through the area as did New York harbor. Not only was Ocracoke Inlet an important base of operations for privateers, but it also served as the principle route for bringing supplies to ports on the mainland of North Carolina and Virginia.

Because of Ocracoke's prominence, the people of eastern North Carolina as well as military and government officials had feared an attack since America declared war on Britain. They anticipated nothing less than a blockade of the inlet. According to "[The Story of Ocracoke Island](#)" British landing raids had "caused alarm and panic among the inhabitants of the coastal regions."

The inevitable occurred in July of 1813 when the enemy appeared off the coast of North Carolina. An account of the invasion appeared in the "Raleigh Register, Extra" of July 17, 1813, entitled "The Enemy in North-Carolina." Other contemporary accounts differ slightly from the Raleigh report. Herewith a transcript from the Raleigh Register with **red notes** in brackets:

"From the importance of the following letter, which the editor has just received from Newbern, he is induced immediately to lay it before the public:-

"NEWBERN, July 14,

"DEAR SIR—The British are in possession of Ocracock [an early spelling for the island] and Portsmouth [they arrived at 9 o'clock on the night of July 11 and remained for five days] — Beaufort, also, must inevitably fall into their hands.

“Information of the presence of the enemy in the two former places was received here on the afternoon of Monday last, by the revenue cutter [the New Bern-built “Mercury,” a two-masted topsail schooner, 80’ on deck with 6-10 guns, used in the Revenue Cutter Service, a maritime law enforcement agency established in 1790. This was not the typical “cutter,” which is a small, lightly armed sailing vessel with a single mast.], which was so fortunate as to escape the pursuit of several barges [according Thomas S. Singleton, legislator, lawyer, and customs collector of New Bern and Ocracoke, the “revenue cutter got underway with the money and customhouse bonds belonging to the office” — the office was on Portsmouth or Shell Castle Island; a barge is a small sailing boat]. Their force consists of two 74s [74 refers to the number of guns aboard the vessel — some say the British had only one 74], three frigates, three brigs [one report said only one brig], and three schooners, 15 barges [another report counted “nineteen barges, each carrying forty men”] from which made an attack on two vessels then lying at Portsmouth.

One of these was the private armed brig Anaconda, of New-York [the Anaconda was a privateer, a ship privately owned and crewed, but authorized by the government to attack and capture enemy vessels], and the other the letter of marque Atlas, late from France, with a cargo of silks, &c [according to Wikipedia.com a “Letter of Marque and Reprisal” was “an official warrant or commission from a national government authorizing the designated agent to search, seize, or destroy specified assets or personnel belonging to a party which had committed some offense under the laws of nations against the assets or citizens of the issuing nation, and was usually used to authorize private parties to raid and capture merchant shipping of an enemy nation.” A private ship and its captain and crew operating under a Letter of Marque and Reprisal was also deemed a privateer.]. The former had lately returned from a successful cruise, having taken from one prize between 60 and 70,000 dollars, which the captain last week deposited in the State Bank of this place.

She resisted the barges for several minutes [one report says the British approached the privateers firing 12-lb. carronades. According to dictionary.com, a carronade is “a kind of short cannon, formerly in use, designed to throw a large projectile with small velocity, used for the purpose of breaking or smashing in, rather than piercing, the object aimed at, as the side of a ship. It has no trunnions, but is supported on its carriage by a bolt passing through a loop on its under side. According to a letter from Thomas S. Singleton, the “captain of the Atlas kept on board and continued firing at the enemy after all his men had left him.”], until, finding them gaining upon her, her guns were discharged in her hull, and she immediately sunk [another report indicates that the Atlas was “captured” though the

combatants may have considered “sunk” and “captured” equivalent] . **We expect they will visit us in Newbern** [The British abandoned their plan to capture New Bern once the revenue cutter escaped and warned the citizenry of New Bern, since the element of surprise was then lost.]. **From the number of vessels, it is supposed they can send nearly one thousand men in barges, which, with a fair wind, may reach this place in six or eight hours. We are under arms; and, unless greatly overpowered by numbers, we form a band that will fight to a man. In the course of to-day, our force will consist of about 800 men.**

“Mrs Gaston (lady of the representative in Congress) could not sustain the shock - The alarm produced on her mind by a report that the enemy had actually landed in town, threw her into convulsive fits, and she expired in six or eight hours

“Yours respectfully,

“THOMAS WATSON.”

“Postscript:-Some of the crew of the Anaconda have just arrived: they state that the force landed at Portsmouth was 750 men; that 13 vessels, several of which were ships of the line [a warship powerful enough to take a place in the “battle line,” a naval tactic developed in the 17th century in which battle ships formed a line to maximize the effect of their attack], **were off the bar. They behaved better than we supposed** [although some accounts indicate that they “collected hundreds of cattle and sheep”]. **Centinels [sic] were placed at the different doors, and money was offered by the admiral [Admiral Cockburn] for the provisions. They say they will come here [New Bern]. One man, in attempting [sic] to escape with his family, was killed.”**

Jim Goodwin, creator of Village Craftsmen’s [Ships in Bottles](#), shares this quotation from Irving King’s [The Coast Guard Under Sail](#), (1989), p.55:

“The Mercury (Captain William H. Wallace) made her mark in the war in quite a different fashion. Built at New Bern, NC, she sailed out of Ocracoke with a captain, three mates, and a crew of twenty-five. At about 9 o’clock on the evening of 11 July 1813, the Mercury appeared off Ocracoke Bar and anchored about a mile from the inlet. That night a fleet under Admiral Cockburn was discovered nearby and reported to Thomas Singleton, collector of customs at Portsmouth. Singleton packed the port’s money and customhouse bonds into a trunk, which he placed aboard the Mercury for safekeeping. As dawn broke, Capt. Wallace set sail. At about the same time the vessels of Cockburn’s fleet, consisting of one 74, three frigates, one brig, and three schooners, got under way. The Mercury cleared

the wash a mile and a half ahead of the fleet, which captured the brig Anacosta of New York and the letter-of-marque schooner Atlas of Philadelphia. Several of Cockburn's ships passed up the prizes for the cutter, because the admiral was anxious to stop her before she could carry word of his fleet to New Bern. After an eight-to-ten mile race through the sound, the Mercury made her escape by crowding on all sails and cutting away her long boat. Thus the cutter both saved the custom receipts and prevented Cockburn from proceeding to New Bern with his fleet"

Jim adds, "Another source I read states that Wallace also pitched the cannons in that chase. It is a marvelous tale of heroism and sailing skill. Also, C. S. Forester modeled his Hornblower character after Admiral Cockburn."

"[The Story of Ocracoke Island](#)," from which a portion of the commentary above comes, includes the following paragraph:

"A North Carolina privateer who used Beaufort and Occacock Inlets during the War of 1812 and British Invasion of 1813 was Capt. Otway Burns. Burns was a native of Onslow County from near Swansboro [on the coast, southwest of Morehead City]. Before the War of 1812 he had been given command of a merchantman sailing between New Bern and Portland, Maine. During the War he operated the Snap-Dragon."

A Model of Burns' Ship, the "Snap-Dragon":



The Snap-Dragon carried four 12-lb guns and a pivot gun and at Ocracoke and Beaufort Inlets Burns took a big toll of British shipping during the War. Without pilotage he one time made it across the bar at Ocracoke Inlet and up to Shell Castle anchorage where his ship was lightered and from thence up the Neuse River to New Bern. He married a Portsmouth girl and they moved to Portsmouth in 1842, where he live until his death about 1850. From 1821 to 1834 Otway Burns served in the North Carolina Assembly, and was instrumental in the forming of Yancey County in the western part of the state. Its county seat, Burnsville, is named after Captain Otway Burns."

Residents and visitors to Ocracoke today are most often struck by the island's beauty and

serenity. It takes a bit of imagination and attention to history to picture the heady days of the early nineteenth century when commerce and war and national and international politics played such a prominent role in this small, isolated community in one of the most strategic locations in the growing republic.