

Greetings from Wococon Island!

One of the more common questions visitors to Ocracoke ask is “What is the origin of the name ‘Ocracoke?’”

In spite of the legend that has Blackbeard crying out “Oh Crow Cock” on that fateful morning of November 22, 1718, when he engaged Lt. Robert Maynard in his final naval battle, the name “Ocracoke” is undoubtedly of much earlier Native American origin.

The first recorded spelling is “Wococon” on John White’s map of 1585. Although the island was uninhabited at that time, the name seems to derive from the tribe of Woccon Indians who lived in eastern North Carolina and who frequented the Outer Banks seasonally to feast on fish and shellfish that were plentiful in the area.

Roger Payne, in his book, Place Names of the Outer Banks, speculates that Wococon could be a tortured Anglicization of the Algonquian word “waxihikami” which means “enclosed place, fort, or stockade.”

David Stick has another explanation. When Walter Raleigh’s expedition set foot on Ocracoke in 1584, he suggests, they asked the natives they encountered what the name of their country was. In reply they answered “Wingandacon,” which became “Wococon.” In truth, Stick tells us, the actual reply was “You wear good clothes.”

Over the years I knew I had seen a dozen or more different spellings for the present-day Ocracoke Island. Curious, I decided to compile a list of all the variations I could document. Ultimately I discovered more than fifty distinct names and/or spellings for Ocracoke.

The following chart lists eighteen different spellings (highlighted in bright yellow), as well as a number of duplicates, from a series of early maps and other documents. The earliest record of the current “Ocracoke” that I could find was on a map dated 1852.

Date	Name	Document	Author
1585	Wococon	map	John White
1585	Wokokon	map	John White
1590	Wokokon	map	White - De Bry
1606	Wococon	map	Mercator - Hondius
1657	Wococock	map	Nicholaus Comberford
1665	Wococock	survey	T. Woodward
1665	Wococon	survey	T. Woodward

1672	Okok	map	Ogilby
1675	Okok	map	John Speed
1682	Wosoton	map	Joel Gascoyne & Robert Greene
1689	Wossoton	map	John Thorton & Will Fisher
1706	Wocoton	map	Johannes Loots
1709	Ocacok	map	John Lawson
1715	Occacock	an act of the assembly	NC Assembly
1715	Occacoke	map	Henry Mouzon
1717	Oceeh	letter	Gov. Spotswood
1718	Occocock	account of capture of Blackbeard	
1732	Ocacock	document/letter	Capt. Burrington
1733	Ocacock	map	Edward Moseley
1733	Ocrecock	deed	Richard Sanderson
1733	Oakerccok	map	James Wimble
1738	Okerccok	map	James Wimble
1770	Occacock	map	John Collet
1775	Occacoke	map	Henry Mouzon
1795	Occacock	map/description	Jonathan Price
1808	Occacock	map	Price - John Strother
1821	Ocracock	map	Leut. Strong
1833	Ocracock	map	Mac Rae - Brazier
1834	Occacock	map	H.S. Tanner
1852	Ocracoke	map	A.D. Bache
1861	Occacock	map	J.H. Colton
1861	Ocracoke	map	Bachman

In addition to the spellings listed above, I located the following 34 variations mentioned in various books and pamphlets, although no sources were indicated. These do not include other names by which Ocracoke was sometimes known, such as Pilot Town, Port Bath, Port Grenvil, and Gordons Ile.

Woccon	Oecceh	Woston
Woccocon	Okcrecock	Oa Cock
Woccocock	Okerecock	Oakocock
Occacoe	Woccock	Occacode
Ococock	Wococan	Ocrecok
Occek	Ocacok	Ocacoc
Oakacock	Ocraacocke	Sequotan
Oacock	Ocracock	Vokoton
Ocock	Okerecok	Woccock

Okercock	Onoconon	Wocotan
Ocrecock	Wakokon	Wosotan
	Wocoken	

One of the more enduring early spellings was “Occacock.”

Jonathan Price’s map of 1795 identifies Ocracoke by this name. His 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.”

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.”

Geologists have 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, though the early maps are generally not accurate enough to confirm this.

Nevertheless, even the recent history of Ocracoke bears witness to this possibility. 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 so close 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.

This 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.

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.

Immediately after his 1795 description of the island of Ocracoke, Jonathan Price goes on to comment that "this healthy spot is in autumn the resort of many of the inhabitants of the main."

So tourists have been coming to Ocracoke at least since the late 1700's! I guess things aren't so different after all.