"Papa was always proud that none of his forebears owned slaves," cousin Blanche Howard told me. "Only after he died did we discover that Daniel Tolson had 22 slaves!"

Daniel Tolson (1816-1879), Blanche's great-great-uncle, purchased Howard's Point (originally called Williams' Point and today known as Springer's Point) in 1855, and lived there with his family and his contingent of slaves.

Daniel Tolson's Gravemarker at Springer's Point:

Daniel Tolson, of course, was not the only Ocracoker to own slaves, nor the only ancestor of the Howards to own slaves. Although there are some difficulties in determining accurate numbers, the Federal Censuses for Ocracoke (from 1790 until 1860) show that the island's slave population hovered between 16 and 156 individuals.

In 1790, the first year of the Federal Census, 31 slaves were living on Ocracoke. This amounted to almost 20% of the total population of 157 people. Ten years later slaves declined to 11 % of the population (16 of 137 people). Thereafter the number of slaves increased steadily until shortly before the Civil War when approximately 30% of the population (156 blacks) were in bondage to their white masters.

Ocracoke residents had a conflicted relationship with slavery. As on other islands of the Outer Banks and in coastal areas of the mainland, the institution of slavery on Ocracoke Island was somewhat different from slavery on large southern plantations.

Ocracoke's colonial and antebellum economy revolved around shipping and commerce, not farming. Until 1846, when both Hatteras and Oregon Inlets opened during a major hurricane, Ocracoke Inlet was the primary gateway for commercial vessels heading to mainland North Carolina ports, bringing goods from other colonies and from across the Atlantic.

The inlet was treacherous. Sailing vessels crossing the bar were in danger of foundering on

the shoals and being beaten to pieces by the unforgiving breakers.  As early as 1715 the North Carolina General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the settlement of pilots on Ocracoke Island. Residents with local knowledge of the changing channels were necessary to help guide ships safely through the inlet, and across Pamlico Sound.

Ship captains would tack back and forth just outside the inlet, waiting for a pilot boat to appear. Many vessels, drawing too much water for safe passage, needed to be'lightered" (much or all of the cargo would be transferred to lighter vessels) before crossing the bar. Once inside the protection of the islands the cargo would sometimes be loaded back onto the ship. Frequently, however, lightering boats would carry the cargo across the sound to Bath, New Bern, Washington, and other ports.

Most of Ocracoke's first European settlers were pilots. From the earliest days free men of color and slaves also worked as pilots, lighterers, and stevedores.

In 1783 John Blount and his brothers founded a trading and shipping company in the port town of Washington, North Carolina, just across Pamlico Sound from Ocracoke. Eventually, the Blounts' commercial enterprises (grist mills, lumber mills, cotton and tobacco plantations, a tannery, real estate speculation, and much more) extended from Boston to Tennessee, and from Alabama to the West Indies. Slaves provided much of their labor. John Blount owned 74 slaves; his brothers, more than one hundred.

John Blount (1752-1833)

Shipping to and from Washington passed through Ocracoke Inlet. By 1789, John Blount, along with his new partner, John Wallace, saw the need for a commercial enterprise near Ocracoke Inlet to provide pilots and lighterers for incoming and outgoing vessels. The villages of Ocracoke and Portsmouth were too far from the main shipping channels, so Blount chose a twenty-five acre island of oyster shells near deep water channels which he stabilized, enlarged, and named Shell Castle.

Shell Castle grew steadily. At one point more than forty people lived there. Blount and Wallace established wharves and warehouses, a ship's chandlery, and a tavern, as well as several dwellings for the owners, servants, and slaves. Mullet and porpoise fisheries were initiated, as well as occasional ship building, salvage operations, and storage services.

By 1798 Shell Castle even boasted Ocracoke Inlet's first lighthouse, a 65 foot pyramid shaped wooden structure covered with cedar shakes. Agreements negotiated between the federal government and Blount and Wallace stipulated that no other piloting, lightering, storage, or other commercial enterprises could be carried out at the lighthouse.

Pitcher with Depiction of Shell Castle Island:

The smaller number of Ocracoke slaves in the early decades of the nineteenth century undoubtedly reflects the growing importance of Shell Castle. By 1800 Wallace had fifteen slaves living there. In 1810 19 whites and 22 slaves called Shell Castle home. In addition to serving as pilots and lighterers, the Shell Castle slaves worked as clerks, stevedores, laborers, sailors, fishermen, and domestics. Shell Castle was an interracial community.

It is clear that piloting and lightering of seagoing vessels through Ocracoke Inlet depended on the slave populations of Ocracoke, Portsmouth, and Shell Castle. But several features of maritime slavery stand out as distinct from plantation slavery.  Slaves on the Outer Banks, especially pilots and lighterers, were often in contact with sailors, both black and white, from northern cities. Life at sea routinely blurred racial boundaries, which led to looser relations between slaves and masters on the sandy banks. And maritime slaves (pilots, fishermen, oystermen, and sailors) were frequently allowed a degree of freedom and

independence unheard of on plantations. Close supervision was often impossible, allowing slaves to labor unwatched for many days, or even weeks. Some slaves on Shell Castle traveled as far as Cape Lookout, 60 miles distant, to fish for mullet and porpoise.

Still, the institution of slavery all too often led to particularly cruel and inhumane treatment of blacks on Ocracoke and elsewhere on the Outer Banks. Severe and harsh punishments for minor infractions were sometimes imposed by owners, and tales have been passed down of children taken from their mothers' arms and sold to buyers on the mainland. One heartbreaking story is told of Phyllis, a domestic slave who walked the shoreline for days crying and wailing after her child was removed and sold to work on a plantation.

Ironically, the relaxation of control and the development of a degree of egalitarianism, coupled with the basic injustice of slavery itself, sometimes led to threats of insurrection, rebellion, and anti-slavery activities. This was heightened by contacts with radical politics of the Caribbean via the West Indies trade.  As David Cecelski writes in *The Waterman's Song…Slavery and Freedon in Maritime North Carolina*, "black maritime laborers…were among the most independent and worldly in the South."

As illustration, in 1773 the white pilots at Ocracoke Inlet complained to the legislature that unlicensed slaves and free blacks were illegally piloting vessels from Ocracoke bar to mainland ports. The situation had not changed dramatically as late as 1835.

Interbreeding added to the confusion of race relations on the coast. Masters and crews of sailing vessels occasionally made alliances with black women in port, or on board their ships. Their mulatto offspring kept race relations on shore fluid and ambiguous.

In 1813 British troops invaded Portsmouth Island, terrorized its inhabitants, plundered homes and businesses, and blockaded the port. For a while seagoing trade at Ocracoke Inlet came to a standstill. In 1818 the lighthouse on Shell Castle Island was struck by lightning and burned down. Deepwater channels had already shifted. Most piloting and lightering operations moved to Portsmouth. When a powerful hurricane opened more navigable channels at Hatteras and Oregon Inlets in 1846 many Ocracoke pilots soon moved to Hatteras. By 1855 storms and tides had reduced Shell Castle to barely one half acre.

With the decline of piloting and lightering at Ocracoke Inlet in the mid-nineteenth century many Ocracoke men turned to seafaring careers, serving as owners, captains, and sailors aboard schooners that traveled between New England and the West Indies. Because of the coastal schooner trade, Ocracoke islanders developed strong ties to many northern cities, especially Philadelphia and New York. Commercial contacts in the North, as well as cultural

and personal connections, led to new ways of thinking, and helped weaken the traditional boundaries between whites and blacks.

The federal government had also favored the Outer Banks with lighthouses, aids to navigation, and other services. The original Hatteras Light was built in 1803; Ocracoke Light in 1823. A customs house was built on Portsmouth in 1806. Post offices were established at Portsmouth and at Ocracoke in 1840, and the first designated hospital in North Carolina was built at Portsmouth between 1846 and 1847 pursuant to an 1842 Act of Congress. As a result, at the beginning of the Civil War, although as many as 100 slaves lived on Ocracoke, many residents harbored northern sympathies.

By the end of the war in 1865 all of Ocracoke's former slaves had fled the island. Interestingly, two former slaves, Winnie Blount ("Aunt Winnie") and her husband Harkus (Hercules) Blount, moved to Ocracoke from Bount's Creek, NC with a Williams family in 1866/1867. Harkus was a boat builder and carpenter; Aunt Winnie (ca. 1825 – 1925), worked as a domestic. The Blounts were the only post-Civil War black family to call Ocracoke home for more than one hundred years.

Aunt Winnie:

"Aunt Winnie" Blount

Aunt Winnie and Harkus had 12 children, but only two, Annie Laura and Elsie Jane (born 1880), survived to adulthood. Annie Laura married and moved to Belhaven, but Jane remained on Ocracoke and worked at the Doxsee Clam Factory at the mouth of Cockle Creek (Silver Lake). She married Leonard Bryant, another Blount's Creek native who found work at Doxsee's. Leonard later worked as a carpenter and barber, and sold vegetables he grew in his small garden.

Jane & Leonard Bryant:

Leonard
Bryant

The Bryants raised 13 children on Ocracoke. Most of Leonard and Jane's children moved off the island, but Julius, Mildred, Anna Laura, and Muzel moved back home for considerable periods of time. Julius was a local fisherman who worked alongside his neighbors most of his life, and was a regular at weekly poker games. Mildred and Muzel made their livings as domestics and caregivers for island children. Anna Laura moved back to the island in her later years.

Muzel was the last of her family to live on Ocracoke. She died on the island in 2008, just shy of her 104th birthday.

Muzel Bryant

Because North Carolina public schools were segregated in the first half of the twentieth century the Bryant children were forbidden by law to attend Ocracoke School during regular hours. However, dedicated teachers and older students made time after the end of the normal school day to teach the Bryants reading, writing, and other lessons.

As Walt Wolfram, Kirk Hazen, and Jennifer Tamburro write in *Isolation within Isolation: A Solitary Century of African-American Vernacular English*, “[b]oth Muzel Bryant and the Anglo-American island residents reported to us that everybody treated the Bryants ‘just like family.’ We believe this situation to be true to the extent that the Bryants knew their place in the family.”

In spite of Ocracokers’ attitudes, which were more tolerant than much of the South, race relations were still rather unenlightened when the Bryant children were growing up. Although Muzel occasionally attended the Methodist Church (her father was the sexton and a member in good standing), and went to the Saturday night dances (as a spectator, not a dancer), she played mostly with her brothers and sisters.

Wolfram, Hazen, and Tamburro point out that, although they “heard or read about no overt, racially motivated acts of aggression against the Bryants,….[o]ur information and observations lead us to conclude that Muzel Bryant has lived her life socially separated from other Ocracokers in a number of important ways, even though she interacted on a daily basis with islanders through her work and other selected social activities for over a half century.”

With the passing of time and the raising of consciences, attitudes about race began changing throughout the United States. Ocracoke was no exception. As the last half of her life progressed Muzel was increasingly recognized for her contributions to her island home and community.

Reticent and reserved, Muze nevertheless regularly entertained visitors at the home she shared with Kenny Ballance, one of the grown children she cared for years ago, and who now cared for her. When asked, she would tell stories of growing up on the island in the early 1900s. Muze also kept up with current events, and acted as Kenny’s social secretary. It was not unusual for friends, neighbors, and off-island acquaintances to stop by for a chat. North Carolina state senator, Marc Basnight, became a personal friend who visited periodically.

In 2004 several hundred Ocracokers turned out to celebrate Muzel's 100th birthday. The party was held in the Ocracoke School, which, as a child, she was not allowed to attend. She was honored, not only for her longevity, but for her gracious hospitality, her kind and generous nature, and her friendly disposition.

After almost a century and a half, Muzel, granddaughter of slaves, simply by being herself, reminded us all of the great injustices her enslaved forebears endured. Her story challenges us to resist prejudice wherever and whenever we encounter it.

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