

Sometime between 1000 and 500 years ago, Native Americans settled in what is now eastern North Carolina, and began frequenting Ocracoke to fish and gather shellfish in the waters of Pamlico Sound, especially near Springer's Point. In 1607, the English monarchy ignored the original inhabitants, and laid claim to "Virginia" (originally much of the east coast of North America, including what is now North Carolina) with the establishment of the Jamestown colony.

In the mid-1660s, King Charles II granted the territory of Carolina, including Ocracoke Island, to eight Lords Proprietors, supporters who had remained loyal to the crown during the English Civil War.

In 1719, the Lords Proprietors, none of whom ever set foot on Ocracoke, granted the island to John Lovick, Secretary of the Colony of North Carolina. Within just a few years, Lovick sold "Ye Island of Ocrecock," consisting of 2,110 acres, to Richard Sanderson, a North Carolina councilman and justice, who utilized the island to graze a considerable "stock of horses, sheep, cattle and hogs." At Sanderson's death in 1733 ownership of the island passed to another Richard Sanderson (the elder Sanderson's son or nephew) who sold his holding to William Howard, Sr. in 1759. Howard and his family, who were probably already living on the island with a dozen or so other families, none of whom were originally land owners, was the first owner to make his home on the island, and the last of the colonial owners to own the entire island (or what was considered the entire island in 1759).

William Howard paid £105 (equivalent to about \$185, or about \$7,000 of buying power in 2022) for the 2,110 acres of Ocracoke Island.

Less than two months after he bought Ocracoke, Howard sold ½ of the island (including the Point, today known as Springer's Point, a heavily wooded point of land on the western edge of Ocracoke village) to his friend, John Williams.



Springer's Point

The Outer Banks (including Ocracoke Island) has always been a dynamic, evolving place. As testimony, Ocracoke Inlet is the only Outer Banks inlet that has been continuously open since Europeans began keeping records. Since the 1580s, storms and hurricanes have routinely opened and closed other inlets, and with every storm the islands of the Outer Banks changed size and shape.

In 1795, Jonathan Price, an early cartographer who surveyed Ocracoke Inlet wrote that "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 [about 7.5 square miles, or 4,800 acres]."

Clearly, Price is using "Occacock" to describe, not the entire island we know today, but a separate, smaller island that includes the present-day village of Ocracoke. As the Outer Banks migrated to the west with rising sea levels, the banks bumped up against this small island, and fused the two, creating what Price referred to as a peninsula attached to the sandy banks. Interestingly, in 1719, "Ye Island of Ocreecock" consisted of only 2,110 acres (just over three square miles). This must have been that separate inside island (including the "Point"), a geological formation distinct from the "sandy banks." The modern village of Ocracoke comprises about 2,500 acres (just under 4 square miles), while the entire island as we know it today is about 9.6 square miles (over 6,000 acres).

The Point has played a significant role in the history of Ocracoke Island since the early 1700s. Although many people imagine Ocracoke as originally a traditional fishing village, the reality is much more complex. Trade and commerce brought the first settlers to the island.

In 1715 the North Carolina Colonial Assembly passed an act to settle inlet pilots at Ocracoke. The pilots' task was to guide ships through Ocracoke Inlet and across the bar in order to bring vessels safely into Pamlico Sound, and across to mainland North Carolina ports, including Bath, Washington, Plymouth, Belhaven, and New Bern. Individuals who knew the waters well were granted licenses or certificates of competency, known as branches. These individuals (there was at least one female pilot, Patsey Caraway) were known as Branch Pilots, and were situated at the Point (originally called Williams' Point.).

In spite of the act of 1715, there is no record of settlement on the island until the mid-1730s. Presumably, the periodic presence of sea dogs, buccaneers, and pirates, including the notorious Blackbeard, kept law-abiding citizens at bay. Ocracoke, in fact, was one of Blackbeard's favorite anchorages. In the fall of 1718, he hosted a memorable gathering of buccaneers on the beach, and soon after was killed in a naval battle with the British Royal Navy just offshore of the Point.

With the eventual settlement of pilots at the Point, public land there came to be known as Pilot Town. By the end of the 18th century, much of this public land had eroded away. In 1801 another 6 ½ acres of the Point was set aside to expand Pilot Town. The pilots were permitted to build houses and other structures, but the land was not privately owned. Eventually, storehouses, kitchens, smoke houses, wharves, warehouses, a store, a blacksmith shop, and a windmill, as well as private homes, were constructed on the Point.

At this time only one public road had been laid out on the island. This sandy path went from the Point to approximately where the Methodist Church is today, and from there continued

to Hatteras Inlet. This road was said to have “served the purpose of all the inhabitants” of Ocracoke village. However, by 1835 the population of Ocracoke had increased to almost 500 people, many of whom were now living on the northeast side of Cockle Creek (today known as Silver Lake Harbor). A new road was laid out, connecting the area of the present-day Methodist Church to the shoreline of Pamlico Sound. This road, the eastern end of which was later dubbed “East Howard Street” (now, just “Howard Street”), became the main thoroughfare through the village.

Two small tidal streams (the “Big Gut” and the “Little Gut”) flowed from Cockle Creek. They effectively divided the growing village into two sections. “Creekers” lived “around creek”, along the northeast side of the harbor, while “Pointers” lived “down point,” on the southwest side of the harbor. A friendly rivalry developed, and has persisted even after the two guts were filled in when the Navy dredged the harbor during World War II.



Bridge over the Gut

By 1840, more than 1,400 sailing vessels were passing through Ocracoke Inlet annually, aided by more than 40 or 50 pilots, most living on the Point. In 1846 a violent hurricane opened both Oregon Inlet and Hatteras Inlet. As it turned out, Hatteras Inlet was now much more navigable than Ocracoke Inlet. Over the next decade or so most of the ships sailing to and from mainland North Carolina opted to use Hatteras Inlet, and piloting became a dying enterprise on Ocracoke. By 1850, the number of pilots working at Ocracoke had declined to 27. In 1860, there were only 13. By 1870 the number was reduced to four, and only one pilot remained in 1880.

After Hatteras Inlet opened, a few Ocracoke pilots moved to Hatteras, but most young men who remained at Ocracoke shipped out on 2, 3, or 4-masted coastal schooners carrying

lumber, shingles, cotton, molasses, rum, and other goods between Nova Scotia, and the West Indies. The census record of 1880 lists 66 mariners based on Ocracoke.

In 1855, nine years after Hatteras Inlet opened, the Point was sold to Daniel Tolson, who moved into a large house with an observation tower. This house, which may have been built by John Williams or another of the early pilots, was one of the oldest houses on the island, and had been used to look for ships waiting to cross the bar at Ocracoke Inlet.



House at Springer's Point

In 1882, three years after Daniel Tolson died, his widow sold the Point and house to E.D. and Clara Springer, of South Creek, NC. Although the Springers enjoyed spending summers on Ocracoke, they never made it their permanent home. The Springers maintained the house as well as they were able, even constructing a new round brick cistern in 1899.



Springers Cistern

In 1923 the Springers sold the property, including the house which by then was badly in need of repair, to their son, Wallace Springer. In 1941 Wallace Springer sold the Point to the wealthy and mercurial entrepreneur, Sam Jones. Although Sam embarked on major development projects on Ocracoke in the 1950s (including Berkley Castle, Berkley Manor, the Homeplace, and the Whittlers' Gathering Place), he never developed Springer's Point. Sam died in 1977, and was buried on the property alongside his favorite horse, Ikey D. Daniel Tolson is buried some distance away, surrounded by a tangle of cedars, vines, shrubs, and briars.

By the mid-1800s, railroads were replacing schooners for transporting goods up and down the east coast. Recognizing that their livelihoods were threatened, many young Ocracoke seafarers moved north looking for work, and many others followed. Several dozen ended up working on dredges and tugboats with the US Army Corps of Engineers in the Philadelphia area. Others who remained on the island enlisted in the United States Life Saving Service, the precursor to the US Coast Guard, which established a station on Ocracoke in 1883. This began a long and meritorious tradition of islanders' service, especially to mariners shipwrecked along our coast.

During this time, railroads in eastern North Carolina began partnering with steamship companies to take visitors to the developing tourist destinations in Nags Head. Enterprising businessmen from near Morehead City, North Carolina, recognized Ocracoke's potential,

and built a large Victorian hotel where the old US Coast Guard Station/NC Center for the Advancement of Teaching building stands today. From 1885 until 1900, the Ponder Hotel hosted well-heeled eastern North Carolinians with lavish seafood dinners, parties, and square dances nearly every evening. When the hotel burned down in 1900, elite tourism came to an end. Islanders continued to cater to visitors, but now as guides for hunters and fishermen who stayed in modest rooming houses or in one or two small hotels.

At about this same time, the New York-based Doxsee Clam Company built a plant on the southwest side of the Ditch (the opening that connects Pamlico Sound to Silver Lake harbor). For several years, island men harvested clams while many of the island women worked opening the clams and processing them. After the Doxsee Clam Company depleted most of the clams in Pamlico Sound and moved to Florida, islanders who remained made their livings as life-savers, hunting and fishing guides, or by selling a few fish or home-grown vegetables to neighbors.

In 1938, a community electric generator was installed in the building that today houses Kitty Hawk Kites. Ocracokers could now illuminate their homes with incandescent lights and purchase newfangled electric gadgets like washing machines and vacuum cleaners. The generating plant served also as the island's ice plant. Ice meant fishermen could now easily preserve fish long enough to transport them to markets on the mainland. By replacing masts and sails in their skiffs with engines from old Model T's it meant they could also transport their fish to markets on the mainland more quickly, more safely, and more conveniently.

Electricity was just the beginning of major change on the island. During WWII, the Navy built a 600-personnel Base along the shore of the newly dredged harbor. While many island men found wives while working up north, the new pool of Navy and Coast Guard sailors provided husbands for a number of young island ladies left behind. Ocracoke's concentrated gene pool was much enriched.

Ferries and hard-surface roads followed in the 1950s, along with the creation of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore. Increased visitation followed a 1969 issue of "National Geographic" magazine that featured an article about Ocracoke with beautiful color photographs. A municipal water system was established in the 1970s. By the latter part of the 20th century, new hotels, restaurants, bars, and shops were opening every year. Modern tourism was off and running, and the population of the island steadily increased.

At the turn of the 21st century, a number of far-sighted individuals, including Camilla Herlevich, Executive Director and Founder of the North Carolina Coastal Land Trust, recognized the cultural, historical, and environmental significance of Springer's Point. No

one had lived on the Point for more than half a century, and stately old live oaks, red cedars, yaupons, birds and other wildlife were flourishing there in one of the last remaining areas in Ocracoke village untouched by modern development.

In 2002, the North Carolina Coast Land Trust, with help from individuals and organizations, purchased the first 31 acres of Springer's Point. Another 91 acres was added in 2006, the year Springer's Point Nature Preserve was officially opened to the public. Today, the Preserve includes more than 130 acres of maritime forest, tidal red cedar forest, salt marsh, wet grasslands and a sound-front beach. The only remaining artifact from the Point's human inhabitants is the brick cistern built by E. D. Springer in 1899. Just offshore is Teach's Hole, where the pirate Blackbeard was killed in November, 1718.

Residents and visitors alike, all value the pristine natural beauty of the forest, the tranquil waters gently lapping at the beach, and the rich cultural significance of Springer's Point.