

Do a Google search for “Wahab,” and the Internet’s most comprehensive search engine returns more than thirteen million results. A cursory glance at the list reveals a plethora of Arabic connections. For example, every one of the first two dozen entries is paired with an Arabic name such as Hussein, Abdul, Mohammad, Omar, or Adnan.

Curiously, the apparently non-Western surname, Wahab, has also been associated with Ocracoke Island since the 18th century.

James Wahab appears to be the first of this family to live in coastal North Carolina. He received two land grants on Hatteras Banks in 1755. In 1825 James’ great grandson, Job Wahab (1802-1860) married Eliza Bradley Howard (1808- 1870). Together they had fifteen children. Many of them and their descendants are buried in the large George Howard cemetery (sometimes referred to as the Howard-Wahab cemetery) on British Cemetery Road.

Job Wahab:



Eliza Bradley Howard Wahab:



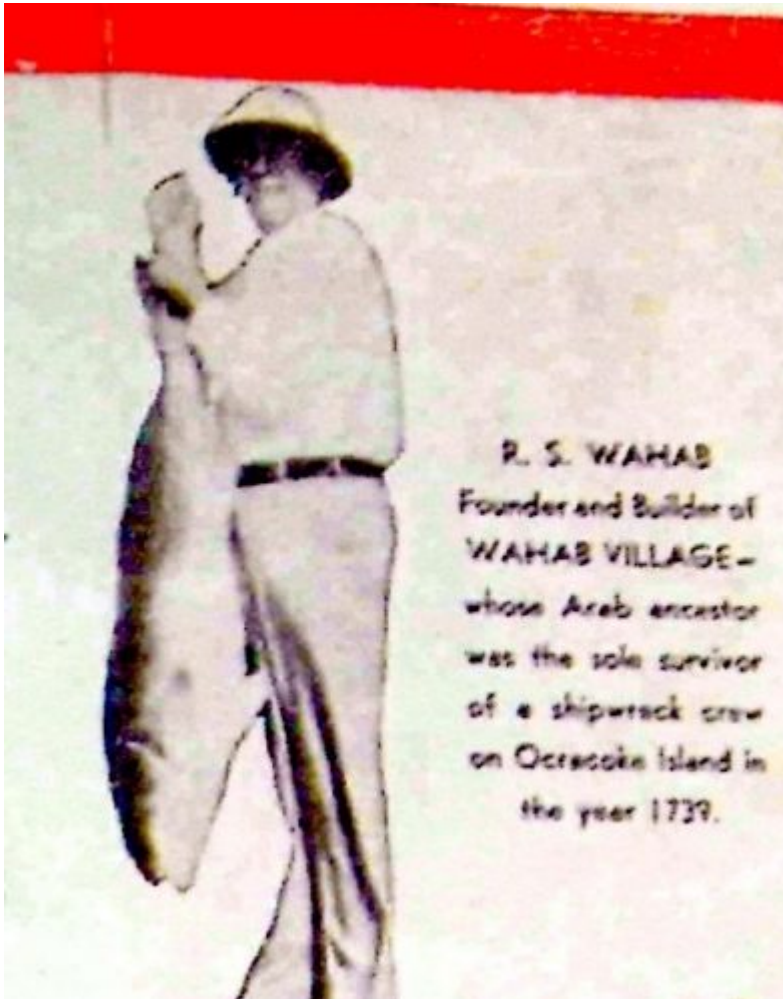
In 1936, Ocracoke native and entrepreneur, Robert Stanley Wahab, grandson of Job and Eliza, built the Wahab Village Hotel (now Blackbeard's Lodge), the focal point of a commercial venture he dubbed "Wahab Village" that eventually included a dance hall, apartments, a movie theater, and a roller rink.

Wahab Village Hotel (Blackbeard's Lodge):



By the mid-1950s Stanley Wahab was advertising “The Isle of Ocracoke” as the “Bermuda of the U.S.A.” His brochure promoted Ocracoke as the destination for a “Glorious Vacation...30 miles out in the Atlantic Ocean” and included a photo of Stanley holding a large channel bass. He was described as the descendant of an “Arab ancestor [who] was the sole survivor of a shipwreck crew on Ocracoke Island in the year 1739.”

Advertising Brochure:



Stanley Wahab's alleged Arabic ancestry is not unique on the Outer Banks. Farrow is another prominent name among the first families of Hatteras Island. In 1990 Christine Rollinson Dickson taped an interview with her father, Alonzo Milton Rollinson I. In a brief conversation about Miss Fanny Farrow, he says, "There was a man who came ashore there. They all called him Pharaoh. I don't know whether that was his right name or not. The family name became Farrow. In the marriages over the generations the family lost their Egyptian look."*

Three of the early keepers of the Cape Hatteras lighthouse had that distinctive Arabic-sounding surname: Joseph Farrow, Pharoah [sic] Farrow, and Isaac Farrow.

Charles T. Williams, II in his 1975 book, *The Kinnakeeter* (Kinnakeet is the original name of the Hatteras Island village of Avon), mentions Pharaoh Farrow, though Williams refers to him as an English squire: "Kinnakeet ...became the most aristocratic, populous and

wealthiest village on the colonial Outer Banks of North Carolina.

“The wealth was controlled by an English squire named Pharaoh Farrow who had at his command hundreds of slaves and was the largest real estate owner on the Outer Banks.”

A 2005 National Park Service publication, *Ethnohistorical Description of the Eight Villages adjoining Cape Hatteras National Seashore and Interpretive Themes of History and Heritage*, addresses the legends about the Outer Banks Arabic heritage:

“Another famous castaway was known as ‘Pharaoh Pharaoh,’ ‘Pharaoh Farrow,’ or simply, ‘that A-rab.’ This man was the founder of the ‘Farrow family’ who emerged from the wreck of the *Prince of India* in 1737 (MacNeill 1958, 67). Although there is ‘no documented record that the *Prince of India* ever existed,’ it held as its cargo an archetype of Outer Bank origins: Arabian horses (MacNeill 1958, 65). The horses and ‘two Arabian youths’ are said to have washed ashore on the north end of Ocracoke, giving Bankers their first wild ponies. One of the youths ‘must have been Egyptian,’ as an itinerant clergyman named him ‘Pharaoh.’ This youth was later known as ‘King Pharaoh,’ as he came to own much land and numerous slaves, ‘all of whom had been brought here by storms’ (MacNeill 1958, 67). The other youth, simply known as ‘A-rab,’ ‘A-hab,’ and later ‘Wahab,’ is cited as the founder of the Wahab family of Ocracoke.

“Nathaniel Jackson of Ocracoke refers to these origins in describing his wife’s family. ‘I married a Wahab. That’s Arabian. I always told my wife she come here on an Arabian horse.’

However, Ben Dixon MacNeill, cited above in his 1958 book, *The Hatterasman*, has been widely discredited. As enjoyable as his book is, MacNeill was not an accurate chronicler of the Outer Banks. The Foreword to his book explicitly warns the reader with these words: “This is not a history. I am not a historian....”

Nevertheless, regardless of how fanciful MacNeill’s stories are, it remains a fact that Farrow (with at least one Pharaoh Farrow) and Wahab have been prominent names on Hatteras and Ocracoke islands for many generations.

Furthermore, in 2011, a distant cousin provided me with this statement gleaned from a hand written document written by Eugenia Bishop (1899-1986) about her great aunt, Eugenia Wahab Hill (March 28, 1838 - February 27, 1926), entitled “My Most Unforgettable Character:

“On her father’s side, several generations back, the first Wahab (so the story goes) was supposed to have been sent from Arabia by the reigning monarch to establish Mohammedanism in the country. The boat was wrecked in a storm off Ocracoke, where he was washed ashore on a piece of the wrecked ship.”

The writer goes on to say that Eugenia Wahab Hill’s” mother was a Howard [Eliza Bradley Howard], of English descent.” Stanley Wahab was Eugenia Bishop’s second cousin; and Eugenia Wahab Hill was Stanley’s great aunt.

The story of the Ocracoke Wahab connection with Arabia has fascinated and intrigued several generations of islanders and visitors. However, a number of scholars, researchers and even some Wahab family members question the colorful story.

Several years ago my friend, Dr. James Zogby, Director of the Arab American Institute, and a descendant of Lebanese immigrants, paid a visit to Stanley Wahab’s wife, Myra. Jim was hoping to confirm the Wahab connection between Ocracoke Island and the Middle East. Myra was also Stanley’s second cousin, a great grandchild of Job Wahab and Eliza Bradley Howard, as was her husband.

Myra Wahab:



During Dr. Zogby’s conversation, Myra mentioned that several academics had visited her and tried to explain that Wahab is actually a Scotch-Irish name (sometimes spelled Wauchope, Wauchop, or Waughop). Myra, Zogby says, would have none of this, and saw the

professors to the door. She explained to him that the Ocracoke Wahabs were “Ay-rab and proud of it.” Dr. Zogby laughed, explaining that this was the first and only time he’s ever heard the pronunciation “Ay-rab” and the phrase “proud of it” in the same sentence.

After I published a brief account of Dr. Zogby’s visit with Myra on my Blog, a reader left the following comment:

“The surname Wahab is, indeed, a Scotch-Irish name. The same surname occurs in the Waxhaws area of North Carolina, though it has been altered to “Walkup”. This is simply a case of trying to capture the spelling of a certain pronunciation. It shows up as Wahob, Wahop, Whahoop, Waughup, all variations of the Scottish surname Wauchope. A bit of a shame that this family cares little for their true heritage...”

Perhaps not surprisingly, that comment elicited a passionate rebuttal from one of the Wahabs:

“Our last name isn’t of Celtic origin, but Arab! Shame you assume to know more about our heritage than we do.”

However, researcher and genealogist, Dora Adele Padgett, author of the 1974 book *William Howard, Last Colonial Owner of Ocracoke Island, His Family and Descendants*, writes that “[G]enerations of the Wahab Family lived in St. Mary’s County, Maryland in 1651 and also in Charles County, Maryland.

“Much that is fictitious has appeared concerning the origin of the Wahab family in North Carolina. One legend is that this family originated in North Carolina with a ship-wrecked Arabian sailor. This folklore is without proof and completely disregards the fact that the Wahab Family is a distinguished Scottish family with records extending back to the 14th century. The family is also to be found in Ireland, with settlers in County Down at the time of the establishment of Ulster in 1610. A branch remains in County Cavan. Spelling of the name includes many variants such as Wauchope, Wauchop and Waughop.”

Interestingly, a direct descendant of the Ocracoke Island clan, Nielson Wahab, wanting “to provide some public clarification for all the researchers out there” posted this announcement on a genealogy web site:

“In response to the ‘ARAB’ Origins:

“My father, Thomas Wahab, is second cousin to Robert Stanley Wahab, and second cousin to

his 3rd wife, Myra Wahab of Ocracoke. According to my relatives, Stanley Wahab promoted the 'Arab' story in 1955 to bring business and tourism to Ocracoke Island. This upset many Wahab family members.

"In the late 1990s my father and I visited Myra Wahab on Ocracoke (she was in her 90s at the time). Myra claimed to us that there was proof of our Arab origins. We have never found any proof.

"On the contrary, only by coincidence does the current family spelling match the 'English spelling of an Arabic/Muslim pronunciation'. The Christian first names (James, Thomas, Job, etc.), original pronunciation, and DNA testing of the Outer Banks Wahabs all indicate Scotch-Irish Origins.

"In the middle east, "Wahab" is not just Arabic, but Muslim (one of the 99 names of God). Accordingly we would expect to see Muslim first names such as Abraham [or] Mohommed. That is not the case as the family frequently uses 'James' or 'Thomas', and 'Job', which is consistent with our Scottish, Christian Origin.

"As for pronunciation, English administrators frequently struggled to spell the gaelic or Ocracoke-brogue accents of the family. I have found the spellings "Wawhob, Worhob, Wahob" (to name a few) among the Outer Banks Wahabs. For DNA, SNP testing of the family Y Chromosome is 'R1b1a2a1a1b4 R-L21', Ireland/Scotland in origin. This DNA testing is confirmed by several branches of Ocracoke Wahabs, to include Robert Stanley Wahab's decedents.

"I hope this clears up some of the rumors and legends running around out there."

I doubt that Nielson Wahab's explanation will put an end to the "rumors and legends." As we all know, stories posted on the Internet have a disturbing habit of persisting whether they are accurate or not.

Although Dr. Zogby acknowledges that the story of Ocracoke Island's Wahab connection to the Middle East is not entirely secure, he published a delightful article, "Looking for the Wahabs" on his web site. He wrote:

"The owners of the most beautiful house on Ocracoke were Stanley and Myra Wahab - the last of the family on the island. Stanley, I learned, was on the mainland, but Myra - the island's grande dame - agreed to meet with me.

"She was, as I had been warned, a formidable presence. Imperious in her bearing and yet

gracious in her manner, she welcomed me into her home for tea and conversation. For over an hour she regaled me with island lore and the many accomplishments of her husband. And then to the family history. According to her, the earliest Wahab was an itinerant merchant shipwrecked on the island, she believed, in the latter part of the 17th century. The family, she said, had always understood their ancestor to be an Arab, making him the earliest Arab immigrant to these shores.

“She became quite animated when she told me that a few years earlier some researchers from Duke University had come to interview her. They claimed the family was probably ‘originally Scottish and named “Wachob “ or something like that’. She scoffed at this, telling me that she had dismissed them replying ‘We are Ay-rabs and proud of it. And you can’t take that from us’. Formidable and feisty, imperious and a presence - and well worth the visit.

“Stanley died in 1988. Myra lived to 99, passing away in 2002. One nephew, Larry Williams, who also proudly claimed Arab ancestry (he was featured in a special issue of ARAMCO World Magazine highlighting Arab Americans from each of the 50 states), inherited the Wahab properties (we stayed in his guest house and visited with him before he died in 2008). But he too is gone, leaving Ocracoke, for the first time in maybe a few hundred years, without a Wahab.”***

Robert Stanley Wahab:



The short sketch of Larry Williams in the ARAMCO World Magazine (September-October, 1986), states that Larry is “convinced he descends from Algerian traders who, in the 18th century, ran aground on the shoals of the Outer Banks of North Carolina with a boatload of Arabian horses.... Williams directs the curious to the island cemetery, which is filled with Wahab tombstones dating back to the early 19th century. Many Wahabs intermarried with the Williams and Howard families. One headstone of a Salina Ballance Williams has an Arab term of endearment carved in it, ‘Baba.’... [Larry Williams then points to] ‘a daguerreotype of his Wahab grandmother - a dark-eyed, dark-skinned woman with a beak of a nose.’”

I also discovered this paragraph on the web site, *Arabs in America*, about the Wahab family of Ocracoke Island:

“The first Wahab was an emissary of a ‘King of Arabia’ who was sent to establish Islam in the New World. He was shipwrecked at the coast of Ocracoke with a load of Arabian horses.

Even today, some wild horses run in various sections of the island. James Wahab purchased land on colonial Ocracoke and established a Wahab village. Today, the Island Inn, the oldest hotel on the Island, stands at the site of the Wahab Village. It has remained in the hands of the Wahab family ever since. Larry William, whose mother was a Wahab, is the current owner of the Inn." ****

Now let's sort out the evidence, and see where it leads.

- According to my research, Haplogroup R1b1a2a1a1b4 R-L21 (Y-DNA) is the dominant paternal lineage of Western Europe. Up to 50% of the entire male population of England, Ireland & Scotland carry this genetic sequence. According to a geneticist I spoke with, any individual with this genetic marker is not of Arabic descent. Given the definitive DNA evidence, what accounts for the persistent legend that the Wahabs of Ocracoke are descendants of a shipwrecked Arab sailor?
- The earliest published account of a connection between the Wahabs of Ocracoke Island and the Middle East that I am aware of is Stanley Wahab's mid-1950s brochure advertising Ocracoke Island and his Wahab Village.
 - Did Stanley Wahab, indeed, concoct the story for promotional purposes. In the mid-20th century, stories of shipwrecked Arab sailors would have been considered exotic and fascinating.
 - Or, equally likely, perhaps the story of Ocracoke Island's Arab heritage is oral history, presumed from the similarity of names, that was passed down in Stanley Wahab's immediate family.
- Nielson Wahab is correct that Ocracoke Island Wahabs have never used Muslim given names, another indication of Scotch-Irish descent.
- There is significant documentation that Wahab is an alternate spelling of a traditional Scotch-Irish surname. According to the web site, http://www.carolana.com/SC/Revolution/revolution_wahabs_plantation.html, in reference to the Battle of Wahab's Plantation during the American Revolution in South Carolina, "The correct spelling is Wauchope. This is the plantation of one of Col. William Richardson Davie's men - Capt. James Wauchope, often misspelled as Wahab since it was pronounced similarly to Wahab." According to Wikipedia, "The owner of the plantation was militia Captain James A. Walkup who served as a guide for Davie prior to the attack. Confusion has arisen over the spelling of the name Wahab as there are many spellings of the surname including, Walkup/Wahab/Wauchope/Waughup."
- Ocracoke native, Blanche Howard Jolliff (born 1921) remembers that older islanders in past years pronounced the name as "Wah-hahb" (with the same vowel sounds as in the name Wauchope), not "Way-hab."

- Much misinformation about the Wahabs has been published on the Internet. For example, there is no credible evidence that the “King of Arabia” sent an emissary to this continent to establish Islam. Nor did James Wahab establish a “Wahab Village” on Ocracoke. “Wahab Village” was a much later, small commercial area of Ocracoke Village developed by Robert Stanley Wahab in the late 1940s. The Island Inn is not located in that area.
- According to the National Park Service, “The idea that island ponies are descendants of Arabian horses...is widespread. The real explanation is that the horses and other stock were purposely placed on the islands by stock raisers in colonial days.”
- Salina Ballance Williams, as far as I can determine, was not a direct descendant of the Wahabs, although she married into the family. “Baba,” the name her oldest grandson called her, is an Arab term of endearment, but in Arabic it means “father,” not “grandmother.” Baba is composed of some of the earliest sounds uttered in infancy, and is common in many cultures throughout the world
- How about the Farrows? Could they be an Arab family on the Outer Banks? According to <https://www.houseofnames.com/farrow-family-crest>, “The saga of the name Farrow follows a line reaching back through history to the days of the Anglo-Saxon tribes in Britain. It was a name for someone who worked as a shoer of horses, or a farrier.”

So, DNA evidence, the Wahab family’s non-Arabic given names, alternate spellings of the surname, and the history of immigration to Eastern North Carolina from the British Isles, all point to Scotch-Irish origin of the Ocracoke Wahab family.

As much as I’d like to believe the colorful story of the shipwrecked Arab sailor (my great-great-great-great-grandmother was Barbara Wahab, daughter of James Wahab), I must admit that the credible evidence all points to descent from Irish or Scottish ancestors.

* <http://personal.cfw.com/~rollinso/AMR1Memories.html>

** http://www.nps.gov/ethnography/research/docs/caha_ethno_v2.pdf, pages 501-503

*** <http://www.aaiusa.org/dr-zogby/entry/looking-for-the-wahabs/>

*** <http://arabsinamerica.unc.edu/history/arab-immigration/>