

PLACE NAMES ON OCRACOKE ISLAND

By C. A. WESLAGER

Until recent years, the fishing community of 500 to 600 people occupying the southwest end of Ocracoke Island, a twelve-mile ribbon of sand between Pamlico Sound and the Atlantic Ocean, had little direct contact with the outside world. Now the modern forces of radio, an occasional motion picture, parties of visiting fishermen, and jeeps left by the U. S. Navy during the war on a previously motorless island have stimulated acculturation. Nevertheless, as recent as the summer of 1949 the inhabitants still had no doctor, dentist, undertaker, jail, police officers, paved streets, or local government.

Part of the present population is descended from the so-called "bankers" whose livelihood was partially dependent upon the spoils of the sea.¹ This segment of the population still speaks a language which in idiom and accent is unlike that heard on the Virginia or Carolina mainland. Popular writers have referred to this manner of speech loosely and perhaps inaccurately as "Elizabethan" although there can be no doubt that some of the seventeenth and eighteenth century English has survived in the speech.²

The early English influence is also very strong in the place names on Ocracoke, and this article attempts to show something of the people through the names given to places. First, let it be stressed that the majority of the place names have not been previously recorded, either on maps or state docu-

¹"Bankers" were notorious spoilers who salvaged cargoes from wrecked ships and pillaged vessels anchored off the island. William B. Marye has brought to my attention a number of references in the *Colonial Records of N. C.*, one of which under date of April 4, 1749, is pertinent: "Information he received on his way to Newbern gave him reason to suspect that the Bankers (a set of people who live on certain sandy islands lying between the Sound and the Ocean, and who are very wild and ungovernable, so that it is seldom possible to excite any Civil or Criminal Writs among them) would come in a body and pillage the ships, etc." William L. Saunders, compiler. *The Colonial Records of North Carolina*, IV (Raleigh, 1886), 1305. See also Volume XII, 140, 488 for additional reference to wrecks and wreckers on Ocracoke.

²A. Brown, "Cape Stormy; Carolina Outer Banks," *The Saturday Evening Post* (August 3, 1940).

ments. For example, the Geological Survey Map of North Carolina (Washington, D. C., April, 1942) shows the island, but "Ocracoke" is the only place name given. *The United States Coast and Geodetic Survey*, published in 1928 and re-issued in 1939, gives for Ocracoke and surrounding waters only thirteen place name entries, two of which are indicated simply as "hill."³

With the cooperation of local informants, the writer has compiled a list of place names on the island and in the surrounding waters. These names have been passed down orally as a sort of cultural heritage from one generation to the next. Since many of them have never before been written, the spellings are the writer's interpretation of the local pronunciation. The names have been classified according to physical features to which they apply and in the few instances where "(m)" appears opposite a name it indicates that there is a prior recording on the 1939 *Geodetic Survey* referred to above.

The chief interest in these names is from the point of view of their relationship to history, folklore and linguistics. It is the task of the geographer to project them on a map, if such can be accomplished for so small an area. The ever-changing land features represent problems to the cartographer; for example, two inlets on the ocean side called "Northern Pond" and "Southern Pond" were obliterated in a storm several years ago, and an islet called "Negro Island" was similarly destroyed.

The list follows:⁴

REEFS AND SHOALS

Legged Lump (m)	Cockle Shoal
Clark Reef (m)	Beacon Island Shoal
Terrapin Shoal (m)	Buoy Shoal
Howard Reef (m)	Long Rocks

³ The most recent *U. S. Coast Geodetic Survey* 6th edition, Oct., 1942, does not even show the designation "hill," although a point on the middle of the island is given as "The Knoll." This and "Silver Lake" are the only topographical entries on the map for Ocracoke Island.

⁴ I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Needham Simpson, Howard O'Neal, George O'Neal, John O'Neal, Horace Gaskin and Jane Bryant. My companions during this study were Dr. Clement Cobb and Dr. Millard Squires, whose advice and cooperation is also appreciated.

Ocracoke Bar	Six Mile Hammock Reef
Green Island Shoal	Western Reef
Diamond Shoal	Drum Shoal
Hog Shoal	Mullett Shoal
Austin's Reef	
Guess's Reef	

FLATLANDS

Great Swash
 Little Swash
 Bitter Swash
 Scrag Cedars
 Tar Hole Plain

BEACHES

Piney Beach
 "the beach"

HILL, KNOLLS AND HAMMOCKS

The Knoll (m)	Kwawk Hammock
Goat Hill	Styron's Hill
Look Shack Hill (also called Loop Shack Hill)	Scrag Cedar Hill
First Hammock	Parker's Hill
Second Hammock	Six Mile Hammock
First Grass	Kent's Castle
Second Grass	Teach's Castle
Little Grass	
Big Grass	

POINTS

Gap Point (m)
 Blackbeard's Point (known also as Springer's Point)
 Kwawk Point
 Stone Rock
 Horse Pen Point

WOODS

Hammock Woods	Knoll Woods
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CREEKS

Cockle Creek (or simply "the creek")	Shingle Creek
"The Ditch"	Pilinterry Creek
"The Gut"	Island Creek
Big Gut	Hammock Creek
Little Gut	Old Slew Drain
Middle Creek	"The Wells"
Molasses Creek	
Big Oyster Creek	
Little Oyster Creek	
John Gaskin's Creek	
Jack Brandy's Creek	

ISLANDS

Green Island (m) (also called "Outer Green Island")
 Little Green Island (m) (also called "Inner Green Island")
 Knoll Island
 Cockle Creek Island

LAKES

Silver Lake (m) (recent name given to artificial harbor—formerly called Ocracoke Creek or Cockle Creek)

MISCELLANEOUS NAMES AND EXPRESSIONS

"down the banks" (used loosely for area north of Ocracoke Village in the direction of Hatteras Inlet)
 "round creek")
 "down point") (places near Ocracoke Village)
 "up Trent")
 Teach's Hole
 Wahab Village (village is locally pronounced "willage;" it is named for Stanley Wahab, a prominent islander who is allegedly descended from an Arab sailor who washed ashore many years ago)
 Cupola (m)
 "this side of creek")
 "that side of creek") (places in Ocracoke Village)
 "the plains")
 "point of the beach") (places along the ocean side of the island)

The names on the foregoing list can be broadly classified as (a) self-descriptive topographical terms; (b) names of birds, fishes, and animals followed by a qualifying topographical term; (c) personal names similarly qualified; (d) places named for happenings, and (e) miscellaneous general terms.

All are so-called "little" names which originated with unlettered people, not the government, and became established through folk usage. Perhaps there is no better example in America of the place name pattern of the earliest English settlers which, due to the isolation of Ocracoke Island, escaped mainland political influences for more than 200 years and still survives. Here we find such simple, unimaginative terms as "big" and "little," "down" and "up," "first" and "second"; names which are a gauge of distance from a given point, i.e.,

"Six Mile Hammock"; names typical of the homely practice of using a river or creek as a natural dividing line, e.g., "this side of [the] creek" versus "that side of [the] creek"; or simply "round [the] creek."

The personal names attached to places (Parker, Styron, Austin, Howard, Clark, Guess, John Gaskin, Jack Brandy) also hearken back to an English custom of acknowledging the individual and his property in place names.⁵ These persons have long since been dead, but their names live on in the folk toponymy through periods of changing land ownership. It is significant that the names were those of ordinary landowners and fishermen—not heroes or historical figures.

"Hog Shoal" illustrates the island practice of naming a place after an event which happened on the spot. It was, so the story goes, because hogs were once found stranded there. "Tar Hole Plains" and "Molasses Creek" are said to have received their names from ships carrying cargoes of tar and molasses that washed ashore during storms. In these instances, events in the unwritten history of Ocracoke are preserved in the place names.

The Ocracoke place name list abounds in old and middle English words; many of these still apply in their oldest meanings, as given in the *Oxford Dictionary*. For example, there are no fresh water streams on the island, and the occupants are dependent upon the rain for their needs. A "creek," therefore, is truly a "tidal channel" and the term is used in a very specific way, as it was in early England. The word "scrag" in eighteenth century England referred to a stumpy tree; thus "Scrag Cedars" is self explanatory. "Shingle," to the former bankers of Ocracoke, referred both to a thin piece of wood and to a specialized physical feature. "Shingle Creek," apparently deriving from the latter, was once used in the sense of a beach covered with loose pebbles.⁶

⁵ George Stewart, *Names On the Land* (N. Y., 1945), comments on this practice as applied to other areas where English influence was strong.

⁶ Allen Mawer, edition, *The Chief Element Used in English Place-Names* (Cambridge, 1924). Folk etymology at Ocracoke has it that a vessel loaded with shingles was once wrecked there which gave the creek its name. Along the ocean beach to the north may be seen the timbers from wrecked vessels. One whose prow is still discernible is called "the ghost ship."

"The Wells" describes a place where fresh water, after a rain, rises to the surface, corresponding to the early English concept of a natural well as an issue of water from the earth.

"Great Swash" and "Bitter Swash" are also of interest; a swash was once a body of water moving forcibly or dashing against something, the word being onomatopoeic. Today both names are applied to areas on the narrowest part of the island, although the stranger viewing the expanse of sand would have difficulty finding where "Great Swash" ends and "Bitter Swash" begins.

In "First Grass," "Second Grass," "Big Grass," and "Little Grass" the word grass is applied in the obsolete meaning of herbage in general, and not in the modern restrictive sense of the true grass family (*Poaceae*).

"Reef" is used in the limited sense of a long, narrow ridge of sand or rock in the water, whereas "Shoal" means a place where the water is shallow. The words "hammock" (hum-muck), "gut," "point," "hole," and "knoll" further attest to early English origins of topographical terms rarely applied today.

With two exceptions Indian words are absent from the list, although place names from Indian languages are well represented at nearby places in North Carolina.⁷ The name of the island itself is a modification of *Wocokon*, first so recorded in 1585 by Grenville.⁸ Later spellings were given as *Woccocon*, *Woccock*, *Ocacoc*, *Occocock*, *Ocacock*, and finally *Ocracoke*.⁹ *Wocokon* is probably derived from the Algonkian *wakauan*, meaning "curve" or "bend," perhaps from the shape of the island. The other Indian word is *terrapin*, which occurs in "Terrapin Shoal," but this is a transfer word that cannot necessarily be attributed to local Indians. The writer made an

⁷ It is well known that Hatteras is from the native word *Hatorask*, and Manteo was a helpful Indian who was one of the first native "Virginians" to be Christianized. See *Travels & Works of Captain John Smith*, Bradley-Arber edition (Edinburgh, 1910), 310; and Robert Beverley, *History of Virginia* (Richmond, 1855), 14. Other Carolina Indian Place-names are found on John White's map, reproduced in H. S. Burrage edition, *Early English and French Voyages* (N. Y., 1906), 248.

⁸ "The volage made by Sir Richard Greenville" in *Hakluyt's Voyages*. Everyman's Library Edition (New York, 1926) VI, 132-139. "The 26 we came to anker at Wocokon, etc."

⁹ These names are discussed in the undated pamphlet: Alice K. Rondthaler, *The Story of Ocracoke* (Channel Press, Ocracoke Island).

archaeological reconnaissance of Ocracoke, and was unable to find any evidence of a former Indian occupation. This doubtless explains the paucity of Indian place name survivals, and also confirms Mook's opinion, based on historical data, that Ocracoke was never inhabited by Indians.¹⁰

Blackbeard the pirate (Edward Teach) holds a cherished position in Ocracoke tradition and folklore, reflected in the place names "Blackbeard's Point," "Teach's Castle," and "Teach's Hole." It will be remembered that on November 22, 1717, Lieutenant Maynard captured the pirate's vessel, the *Adventurer* off Ocracoke, and there slew him. "Teach's Hole" refers to the alleged site of the combat in Pamlico Sound, and "Blackbeard's Point" and "Teach's Castle" are names given to the place on Ocracoke where the pirate is supposed to have lived. Folk etymology has it that on the night preceding his capture Blackbeard, impatient for dawn, cried out, "O crow cock! O crow cock!" which gave the island its name. This belief persists even though Ocracoke was so called a century before Blackbeard's time.

Among the other place name oddities worthy of comment are the following:

"Legged Lump" refers to two sandy reefs off the island in Pamlico Sound. They formerly had the appearance of a pair of gigantic human legs, which resulted in the name "Two Legged Lump," later contracted to "Legged Lump" or simply "Leggedy Lump."

"Kwawk Hammock" and "Kwawk Point" derive from the breeding places of the black-crowned night heron, the word "kwawk" referring to the bird's shrill cry.

"Goat Hill" is a sandy promontory resembling the shape of a goat.

"Horse Pen Point" is a place where formerly wild horses were corralled. There are still a few wild horses on the island, which are rounded up each year on the Fourth of July.

"Look Shack Hill" is a modern name originating during the last war when the United States Navy erected a radar

¹⁰ Maurice A. Mook, "Algonkian Ethnohistory of the Carolina Sound," in two parts, *Journal, Washington Academy of Sciences*, XXXIV (1944), No. 6, 182-197; XXXIV (1944), No. 7, 214-228.

station on one of the sand knolls on the ocean side of Ocracoke. Although this station has since been dismantled, a designation persists, in which the Anglo-Saxon "look" is combined with an American colloquialism, resulting in an interesting synthesis.

"Old Slew Drain" employs "slew" or "slue" (from the middle English "slogh" or "slough") in the sense of mud or mire.

"Pilinterry Creek" is spelled as the name registered on the writer's ears, the term originating with a briar bush growing on the island. It may be the corruption of an old word used by Captain John Smith in describing Virginia herbs: "There is also *Pellitory of Spaine*, Sasafrage and divers other simples which the Apothecaries gathered and commended to be good and medicinal."¹¹ "Pellitory" today is used botanically for a genus of low herbs of the nettle family entirely unlike the pilinterry bush of Ocracoke.¹² The latter has been identified as *Zanthoxylum Clava-Herculis* L., commonly called the Toothache Tree from the folk belief that chewing the fresh leaves will cure toothache. This practice is not prevalent today at Ocracoke, although other native plants, such as the Eupon, are used medicinally.¹³

In summarizing this study, it may be said that the uncomplicated, unromantic place names on Ocracoke Island constitute a folk glossary that is exclusively the product of the island population. Every section of the island, from sandy waste to an old slew, has a specific designation known to the occupants, which has been perpetuated by word of mouth. All of the names have topographical applications and the majority of them had their origins with earlier generations having an English background. The names, in many ways, reflect the simplicity of the living pattern of an unsophisticated fishing community and, as we have seen, they give us

¹¹ *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith*, 59.

¹² Julius Bryant, a member of Ocracoke's only colored family, pointed out the bush to me. A clipping was obtained, and later identified by Dr. Robert R. Tatnall.

¹³ An unidentified plant, bearing a small pink flower, is locally known as "snake flower." Ocracokians say that if a person steps on it a snake will bite him. The wild gailardia is known as the "Joe Bell" flower, named for the person who first brought it from the mainland.

clues to events in the island history. Regardless of the social evolution that is taking place, the place name pattern has stubbornly resisted change, and will doubtless persist until stronger influences are brought into play. When this takes place—if we may be permitted to speculate—we may expect the older place names to be blotted out and supplanted by newer ones. It would be highly interesting to compile a list of the Ocracoke place names twenty to fifty years hence for comparison with those of today.¹⁴

¹⁴ I am indebted to Mr. Ben Dixon MacNeill for bringing to my attention the following additional Ocracoke names which were not communicated by my informants: Cuttin' Sage Lake, Upper Road Shoal, Blair Channel Reef, Shell Castle Reef, Big Foot Slue, and Nine Foot Shoal.