Summary (not AI generated): I believe that William Howard Sr of Ocracoke Island was not the William Howard who served as Blackbeard's quartermaster in 1718. My research suggests that:

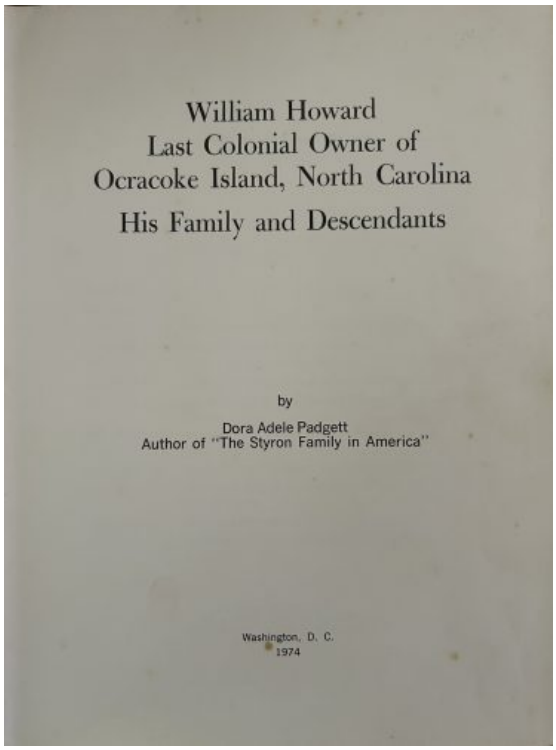
- William Howard Sr was born about 1720, not 1700 or 1686.
  - He married in about 1744, when he was 24 years old, and his first wife, Elizabeth, was 20 years old.
  - He was 25 years old when his first child, William Howard Jr, was born in 1745.
  - He purchased Ocracoke Island in 1759, when he was 39 years old.
  - His second wife, Susannah, was born about 1733 -1738.
  - When his last child, Wallace Howard, was born in 1778, William Howard was 58 years old and Susannah was 40-45 years old.
  - He died about 1795 when he was 75 years old.
- William Howard Sr was illiterate; he signed all documents with an X. Literacy would have been required of a quartermaster.

The adventures of eighteenth-century swashbuckling pirates, those seafaring rogues wielding gleaming cutlases and bedecked with bandanas, black eyepatches, and blood-stained tunics as they attacked merchant ships and plundered their cargoes of gold and silver, occupied my youthful imagination. Blackbeard, the most notorious buccaneer of them all, was my favorite. Tall, muscular, and sporting a full black beard plaited and adorned with red ribbons, he was known to wear a brace of pistols across his chest and to tuck burning tapers under his tri-corn hat.

Blackbeard was especially intriguing because in 1718 he was killed in a bloody naval battle in Pamlico Sound, just offshore of Ocracoke Island, North Carolina, which my 5th great-grandfather, William Howard Sr., purchased in 1759 for £105. For at least half a century writers and researchers have speculated that William Howard of Ocracoke might have been the same person as Blackbeard's quartermaster, also named William Howard.

To my knowledge, the first published commentary on the possible connection between the two William Howards was genealogist Dora Adele Padgett's 1974 book, *William Howard, Last Colonial Owner of Ocracoke Island, North Carolina: His Family and Descendants*.

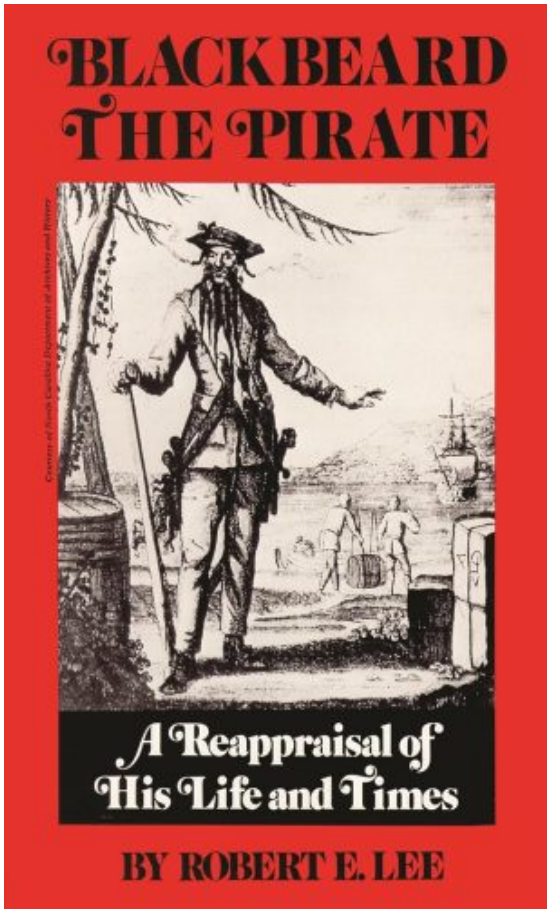
Padgett, a descendant of William Howard, found no records of his early life or parentage and dismissed the notion that he was a pirate, noting that William Howard of Ocracoke was born about 1700 and would have been too young to be a "seasoned villain" in 1718.[1]



William Howard by D. A. Padgett

Padgett mentions "old tales that William Howard, Blackbeard's quartermaster, was the same person as William Howard, who in 1759, 40 years later, purchased the Island of Ocracoke," but she does not identify any specific source for those tales. I have been unable to locate a single article or other publication prior to her 1974 book mentioning or claiming a connection between the two William Howards (a cursory internet search with AI might lead you to believe otherwise, but careful reading has yielded no sources).

In the same year that Padgett's book appeared, Robert E. Lee's book, *Blackbeard the Pirate: A Reappraisal of His Life and Times*, was published.



Blackbeard the Pirate, A Reappraisal of his Life and Times by Robert E Lee

William Howard the pirate is mentioned prominently in chapter nine where the author recounts vice admiralty court proceedings from 1718. Howard had been arrested in Virginia and was charged as a "vagrant seaman" for "not having the Fear of God before his Eyes nor Regarding the Allegiancy due to his Majesty nor the Just Obedience he Ow'd to the Laws of the Land." In addition, he was accused of associating himself "with one Edward Tach and other Wicked and desolute Persons." Howard was found guilty of "Pyracy and Robbery committed by him on the High Seas" and sentenced to be hanged by the neck. Fortunately for him the King's "Act of Grace" arrived in the Virginia Governor's office the night before his scheduled execution, and he was released.

Lee does not mention any connection to William Howard of Ocracoke.

Carl Goerch (1891-1974), a prominent North Carolina journalist, author, and broadcaster,

published the very first book about Ocracoke Island in 1956. Although his book, *Ocracoke*, documents the unique history, life, and culture of Ocracoke Island, including legends, shipwrecks, and piracy, Goerch asserts that there is nothing to substantiate the thought that some of the pirates who had frequented Ocracoke may have remained on the island. According to Goerch, "the permanent residents of Ocracoke came there from points up in Virginia."

Goerch includes a chapter on "Bloodthirsty Teache," but never mentions William Howard. Clearly, for an author who reveled in reporting the idiosyncratic and colorful stories of one of his favorite places, including mentioning numerous trivial facts, Goerch seems never to have heard the remarkable story of a connection between Ocracoke's early proprietor and his piratical namesake.

Furthermore, according to Dora Adele Padgett, Miss Lucy Howard (1868-1959) wrote in a letter dated April 14, 1946, "that she had always been told that her father's family originally came from Maryland." Lucy Howard was the granddaughter of William Hatton Howard (1812-1857), himself the great-grandson of William Howard Sr.[2] Padgett points out that Howard families had been living in St. Mary's County, Maryland, in the late 1600s and early 1700s, adding that "[h]undreds of individuals who bear the Howard surname settled in the American colonies and the Caribbean Islands in the colonial period."

Nevertheless, a quick internet search asserts that it is "family lore," "oral tradition," and a "deeply cherished family legend," that Ocracoke's patriarch was William Howard the pirate.

At this point it is appropriate that I make a full confession. Many of the references to family lore claiming that William Howard of Ocracoke was the pirate quartermaster can be traced to my own online writings. I have claimed, without proof, that "William Howard, the progenitor of our Ocracoke family…went to sea as a young man, and by early 1717 he was associating with Benjamin Hornigold, an odious Bahamian pirate captain. Just a few months later Howard was sailing with Edward Teach." [3] I have also written that "William Howard was…[the] colonial owner of Ocracoke Island and presumably quartermaster for Blackbeard the pirate."[4] In one post I wrote, "Although there is no proof that William Howard the pirate was the same person as William Howard of Ocracoke, family tradition suggests that this is the case."[5]

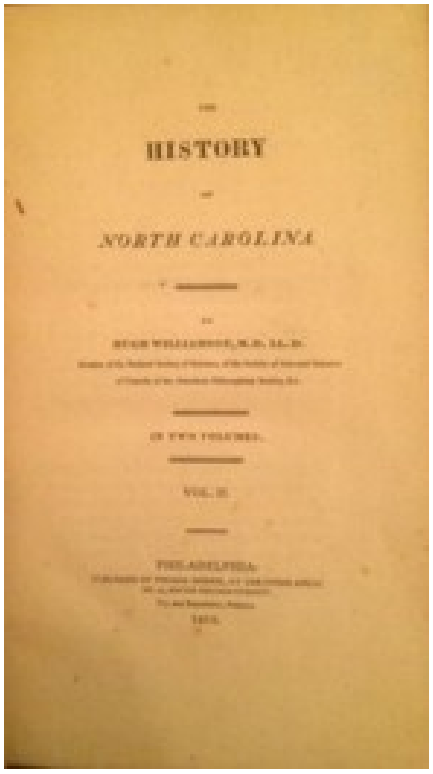
This latter claim is false. I do not remember any family members mentioning that my ancestor was one of Blackbeard's pirate crew. It was only after 1974, when Padgett's and Lee's books were published, that Ocracoke Islanders began wondering if the two William Howards could be the same person. Frankly, that idea gained traction as I promoted it

online, often confusing speculation with evidence. Pirate ancestry, after all, is a colorful story full of intrigue and romance. In a word, it makes a good story.

In 2021 a prominent and respected North Carolina historian, Kevin Duffus, wrote an article, "Island Centenarian and a Pirate Shared a Name, Maybe More," in which he concluded that "A preponderance of evidence certainly outweighs the lack of a well-supported counter argument to accept that there was just one William Howard who was 'a seafaring man of wide experience,' the Colonial owner of Ocracoke Island, and the Golden Age of Piracy's oldest surviving pirate in America."[6] However, Duffus later discovered that the estate inventory that he believed was "proof of Wm. Howard's longevity [and a key feature of his assertion about the identity of the two William Howards] turned out to belong to a different Wm. Howard," and "there seems to have been so many William Howards running around in colonial NC" that Duffus lost his enthusiasm for tracking down and identifying the pirate.[7]

It is, of course, documented that William Howard Sr. purchased Ocracoke Island in 1759. Although there is some dispute about the date of his birth, in 1795 North Carolina cartographer and surveyor, Jonathan Price, published "A Description of Occacock Inlet," in which he identified an "original island proprietor" (almost certainly William Howard Sr.[8]) who had reached his ninetieth year. This suggests a birth date of around 1700. Most researchers believe William Howard died about 1794/1795.

A different birth date (1686) comes from Hugh Williamson ("The History of North Carolina: Volume 2," 1812) who wrote, "There were living in Pitt County in the year 1794, [here he lists three individuals], each of them above one hundred years old." He then immediately adds, "William Haward, of Acacoke island, aged one hundred and eight, had lived seventy-seven years on the banks." Hugh Williamson was an educator, physician, legislator, merchant, scientist, scholar, and signer of the US Constitution for North Carolina who had settled in Edenton during the Revolution. We may wonder how Williamson obtained his information about "William Haward" and justly wonder how accurate the age of 108 years was.[9] As a professional genealogist wrote to me, there is a frequent pattern we see in the 1800s and prior, that once a person reaches about age 50 ages start to be exaggerated. That, coupled with poor record keeping and widespread illiteracy, resulted in frequent exaggeration.[10]



History of North Carolina by Hugh Williamson

However, another issue arises. If “William Haward” had been living on “the banks” for 77 years in 1794, as Williamson alleges, he would have arrived there in 1717, which suggests he could not have been the peripatetic buccaneer sailing with pirate captains Benjamin Hornigold and Edward Teach (Blackbeard) in 1716-1718, strolling the streets of southeastern Virginia prior to his arrest in the fall of 1718, spending time in the Williamsburg jail until December of that year, and, after his release, testifying during a 1721 trial in New Providence, Bahamas, on behalf of a physician named John Howell, all documented facts.

Unfortunately, we know very little about William Howard Sr. prior to 1759 when he purchased Ocracoke Island, except that he and his wife Elizabeth already had at least two children, fourteen-year-old William Jr., and ten-year-old George.

We also know nothing about William Howard the pirate after 1721.

There remains other evidence that William Howard of Ocracoke was not Blackbeard’s quartermaster. Notably, William Howard, Sr. was illiterate, always signing documents with an X. A pirate ship’s quartermaster was one of the vessels’ highest-ranking officers, whose

duties included “leading the…boarding party …[being] responsible for discipline, assessing punishments … and look[ing] after the interest of the crew,”[11] as well as dividing up plunder among the crew, and keeping records according to the number of shares each man received as his due. “. “Being able to read and write was key for a quartermaster as they were expected to keep a record of all the booty that was brought aboard the ship.”[12]

Howard genealogists have identified William Howard Sr. variously as being born in 1686 (Earl O’Neal Jr. in *Howards, Garrishes, Jacksons & Stowes of Ocracoke Island, North Carolina: Their Ancestors and Descendants*) in 1700 (Dora Adele Padgett in *William Howard, Last Colonial Owner of Ocracoke Island, North Carolina: His Family and Descendants*) or in 1720 (https://www.genealogy.com/ftm/n/i/c/Bromfield-B-Nichol/GENE3-0001.html).

Researchers are generally agreed that William Howard died about 1794/1795. Was he 108 years old, 95 years old, or 75 years old? We will probably never know exactly how old William Howard Sr. of Ocracoke Island was when he died. But we can make an informed guess.

An adult male in British colonial America might live to age 65 or 70, but the vast majority died before reaching 50. A survival age of 80-90 was extremely rare (less than 1%). Consider the following[13]:

- William Howard Sr. and his first wife, Elizabeth (perhaps Yeomans), had at least two children[14]:
    - William Howard Jr (c. 1745-1794/95)
    - George Howard (c. 1749-1806)

The average year of the birth of a first child was 12-15 months after marriage. Men typically married at age 24-27; women typically married at age 20-23. If William Howard Sr. married at about age 24, when Elizabeth was about 20, and William Jr. was born c. 1745, William Sr. would have been born about 1720 and Elizabeth in about 1724.

- William Howard Sr. and his second wife, Susannah (perhaps Smith), had at least three children (a daughter and two sons), and perhaps another daughter:
    - Abigail Howard (ca. 1773-ca. 1805)
    - Simon Howard (ca. 1774- ca. 1835)
    - Wallace Howard (1778-1796)
    - [A daughter] married to Francis O’Neal [15]

If William Howard Sr was born in 1686, he would have been 92 years old when Wallace was born in 1778. Fathering a child in one's eighties is exceptionally rare, representing a microscopic fraction of a percent of all men in that age group. Fathering a child in one's nineties is statistically near zero.

Again, being generous, if William Howard Sr.'s second wife, Susannah, was 45 years old when Wallace was born in 1778 (the average maternal age when bearing a final child in British colonial America was 40-42 years old), she would have been born in 1733. If William Howard Sr was born in 1686 there would have been a 47-year age difference between them. If William Howard Sr was born in 1700 there would have been a 33-year age difference. If William Howard Sr was born in 1720 there would have been a much more believable 13-year age difference.

If William Howard Sr's second wife, Susannah, was only 25 years old when Wallace was born, she would have been born in 1753 and between 67 (1753-1686) and 33 (1753-1720) years younger than William Howard. Again, a much more probable case is that William Howard Sr. was born about 1720 and Susannah was born about 1733.

If William Howard Sr. of Ocracoke Island was born about 1720, he could not have served as Blackbeard's quartermaster in 1718.

A puzzle remains regarding the eighteenth-century statements that by 1795 "one of the original proprietors [of Occacock] Island had attained his ninetieth year" (Jonathan Price) and that "William Haward of Acocock Island" was 108 years old in 1794 (Hugh Williamson). Men in British colonial America who survived childhood and reached age 20 might reasonably expect to live another 40 to 50 years, often surviving into their 60s or 70s, but rarely into their nineties or beyond. To repeat, there is a frequent pattern in the 1700s and 1800s when elders' ages were exaggerated because of poor record-keeping and a cultural fascination with extreme longevity. Many people during the 18th century did not know the exact date of their birth. Without birth certificates or other official documents, determining precise chronological age was difficult. Poor record keeping coupled with widespread illiteracy led to guessing and rounding up.

We know that a sailor named William Howard served aboard *Queen Anne's Revenge* as Blackbeard's quartermaster in 1718. And we know that a "planter" (colonist/pioneering settler) named William Howard bought Ocracoke Island in 1759. We may never be certain about a possible connection between the two William Howards, but I believe the available evidence, as presented above, supports the conclusion that William Howard Sr., colonial owner of Ocracoke Island, was almost certainly not the pirate quartermaster. William

Howard of Ocracoke was likely born about 1720, married his first wife when he was 24 years old, fathered his first child in 1745, purchased the island in 1759 when he was 39 years old, and died about 1794/95 when he was75 years old. Gail Garrett, in *W.H.O*. writes that "William Howard was born by 1720 and died about 1794 at Ocracoke…The few known facts and behaviors of this mysterious man fail to render a picture of someone who once held the position of quartermaster to a vile pirate."

Some of us, including myself, have sometimes been reluctant to accept that we are not descended from a colorful pirate, but we should be proud to celebrate our connection to a resourceful and law-abiding ancestor who recognized the value of this special island and who was the forebear of many prominent descendants, including the longest-serving keeper of the Ocracoke lighthouse, the brave and courageous keeper of the island's first lifesaving station, as well as numerous Coast Guardsmen, ship captains, commercial fishermen, talented musicians, and many others.

Future research may prove me wrong. I welcome anyone with a more compelling theory to supply the relevant information and a more convincing argument. Until then I stand by the claim presented here that William Howard of Ocracoke Island was not William Howard, Blackbeard's quartermaster.

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[1] Although I argue that William Howard Sr. of Ocracoke was probably born about 1720 and therefore could not have been the same person as the pirate, Padgett's reasoning is contradicted by the fact that many young boys were sent to sea in the eighteenth century and by the age of ten or twelve they were often seasoned sailors.

[2] Padgett incorrectly identified Lucy Howard as the daughter of William Hatton Howard. She was actually the daughter of George Washington Howard (1833-1895).

[3] See https://www.villagecraftsmen.com/ocracoke-life-amidst-250-years-family-history/

[4] See https://villagecraftsmen.blogspot.com/2018/07/william-howard.html

[5] See https://www.villagecraftsmen.com/howard-street/

[6] https://coastalreview.org/2021/11/island-centenarian-and-a-pirate-shared-a-name-maybe-more/

[7] Personal email correspondence, August 9, 2022

[8] The only other candidate for "original proprietor" would have been John Williams (1725-1787) to whom William Howard sold half of the island in September 1759. However, John Williams died eight years before Price's publication.

[9] When Williamson's History of North Carolina was published in 1812, he had not lived in NC for 19 years. Williamson does not state from whom he got his information about "William Haward of Acacoke island," but it was probably from William Grove, a colleague and Representative in Congress, who lived in Fayetteville, NC. The distance from Fayetteville to Cedar Island is about 200 miles; Cedar Island to Ocracoke is 20 miles across the Sound. In the eighteenth century that would have meant several days of overland travel by horse or wagon and then crossing Pamlico Sound by sailboat.

[10] For a discussion of Ann Howard of Ocracoke who was thought to be 117 years old when she died (her age is even "carved in stone") see https://www.villagecraftsmen.com/myths-and-misunderstanding-part-iii-how-old-was-she/.

[11] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quartermaster#Pirate_quartermasters

[12] https://www.pirateshipvallarta.com/en/blog/what-did-a-pirate-ship-quartermaster-do

[13] Names and dates are consistent with the 1790 census which lists William Howard Sr., William Howard Jr., and Geoge Howard as Heads of Families. William Howard Sr.'s family includes two "free white males of sixteen year and upwards, including heads of families" [William Howard Sr. and Simon], one "free white male under sixteen years" [Wallace], and two "free white females including heads of families" [Abigail and perhaps another daughter].

[14] Several researchers list a daughter, Susannah (birth date unknown), who married Francis Jackson (1723-1798). Gail Garrett, in her book, *W.H.O.*, disputes this, claiming that Susannah Jackson (b. ca. 1775) was the daughter of Francis Jackson and Ann (or Nancy Ann) Howard, probably the sister of William Howard Sr.

[15] See Garrett's book, *W.H.O.*, page 7.