Of the inlets and havens of this country

WITH COMMENTARY BY DAVID WALBERT

John Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina; Containing the Exact Description and Natural History of That Country: Together with the Present State Thereof. And a Journal of a Thousand Miles, Travel'd Thro' Several Nations of Indians. Giving a Particular Account of Their Customs, Manners, &c.* (London, 1709).

As you read...

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRADE

The first European settlers in North Carolina couldn't find what they needed on Google, pay by Visa, and have it shipped UPS. With no manufacturing and no local markets for agricultural products, trade was critical to the colony's survival — but it was not at all easy. Goods from England and elsewhere had to be brought by ship. And without roads, inland trade was only practical along waterways. In 17th-century Virginia, as a result, settlements were clustered along rivers, where boats bringing supplies could dock directly at plantations.

In North Carolina, trade was even more difficult. Ships had to get through the barrier islands before they could reach the coast — which is why Lawson carefully notes the locations of the best inlets. Because the first successful English settlers in North Carolina arrived in the 1600s from Virginia and not directly from England, colonization, didn't begin with an organized port settlement like Jamestown or Plymouth. The Pamlico River port of Bath, North Carolina's first town, was not incorporated until 1705. (John Lawson was one of Bath's first residents and commissioners.)

So trade was both critical and difficult. To promote North Carolina, Lawson had to promote trade, and to promote trade, he had to make sure everyone knew how to negotiate the treacherous barrier islands — and where to land afterwards.

SHIFTING SANDS

Lawson describes several inlets through the barrier islands that have since been closed by storms. North Carolina's barrier islands are in a constant state of change, as powerful storms erode sand from some places and deposit it in others. Lawson gives us a snapshot of what the coast and Outer Banks looked like in 1700.

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The links below will point you to more resources about how environmental processes have changed the Outer Banks over time and continue to change them today. Modern readers, though, can safely skim over the details of nautical navigation.

CURRITUCK INLET.[1]

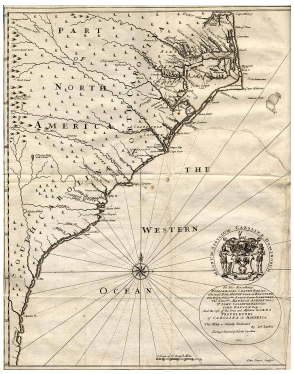

Figure 1. Detail of map from Lawson's original volume.

The Bar[2] of Currituck being the Northermost of this Country, presents itself first to be treated of. It lies in 36 deg. 30 min. and the Course over is S. W. by W. having not above seven or eight Foot on the Bar, tho' a good Harbour, when you are over, where you may ride safe, and deep enough; but this Part of the Sound is so full of Shoals, as not to suffer any thing to trade thro' it, that draws above three Foot Water, which renders it very incommodious. However, this affects but some part of the Country, and may be easily remedied, by carrying their Produce, in small Craft, down to the Vessels, which ride near the Inlet.

RONOAK INLET.[3]

Ronoak Inlet has Ten Foot Water, the Course over the Bar is almost W. which leads you thro' the best of the Channel. This Bar, as well as Currituck, often shifts by the Violence of the N. E. Storms, both lying expos'd to those Winds. Notwithstanding which, a considerable Trade might be carry'd on, provided there was a Pilot to bring them in; for it lies convenient for a large Part of this Colony, whose Product would very easily allow of that Charge; Lat. 35 deg. 50 min.

Figure 2. This satellite photograph of North Carolina's barrier islands makes clear how important a good map was (and is) to shipping — and how much the islands and inlets have changed in the past 300 years.

HATTERAS INLET.[4]

The Inlet of Hatteras lies to the Westward of the Cape, round which is an excellent Harbour. When the Wind blows hard at N. or N. E. if you keep a small League from the Cape-Point, you will have 3, 4, and 5 Fathom, the outer-most Shoals lying about 7 or 8 Leagues from Shoar. As you come into the Inlet, keep close to the South Breakers, till you are over the Bar, where you will have two Fathom at Low-Water. You may come to an Anchor in two Fathom and a Half when you are over, then steer over close aboard the North Shoar, where is four Fathom, close to a Point of Marsh; then steer up the Sound a long League, till you bring the North Cape of the Inlet to bear S. S. E. half E. then steer W. N. W. the East-point of Bluff-Land at Hatteras bearing E. N. E. the Southermost large Hammock towards Ocacock, bearing S. S. W. half S. then you are in the Sound, over the Bar of Sand, whereon is but 6 Foot Water; then your Course to Pampticough is almost West. It flows on these three Bars S. E. by E. ¼ E. about Eight of the Clock, unless there is a hard Gale of Wind at N. E. which will make it flow two hours longer; but as soon as the Wind is down, the Tides will have their natural Course: A hard Gale at N. or N. W. will make the Water ebb sometimes 24 hours, but still the Tide will ebb and flow, tho' not seen by the turning thereof, but may be seen by the Rising of the Water, and Falling of the same, Lat. 35° 20?.

OCACOCK[5] INLET.

Figure 3. The view across Ocracoke Inlet today.

Ocacock is the best Inlet and Harbour yet in this Country; and has 13 Foot at Low-water upon the Bar. There are two Channels; one is but narrow, and lies close aboard the South Cape; the other in the Middle, viz. between the Middle Ground, and the South Shoar, and is above half a Mile wide. The Bar itself is but half a Cables Length over, and then you are in 7 or 8 Fathom Water; a good Harbour. The Course into the Sound is N. N. W. At High-water, and Neap-tides, here is 18 Foot Water. It lies S. W. from Hatteras Inlet. Lat. 35° 8?.

TOPSAIL INLET.[6]

Topsail Inlet is above two Leagues to the Westward of Cape Look-out. You have a fair Channel over the Bar, and two Fathom thereon, and a good Harbour in five or six Fathom to come to an Anchor. Your Course over this Bar is almost N. W. Lat. 34° 44?.

ALBEMARL SOUND AND RIVERS.

The Sound of Albemarl, with the Rivers and Creeks of that Country, afford a very rich and durable Soil. The Land, in most Places, lies indifferent low, (except in Chuwon, and high up the Rivers) but bears an incredible Burden of Timber; the Low-Grounds being cover'd with Beech; and the High-Land yielding lofty Oaks, Walnut-Trees, and other useful Timber. The Country, in some Plantations, has yearly produc'd Indian Corn, or some other Grain, ever since this Country was first seated, without the Trouble of Manuring or Dressing; and yet (to all appearance) it seems not to be, in the least, impoverish'd, neither do the Planters ever miss of a good Crop, unless a very unnatural Season visits them, which seldom happens.[7]

On the web

John Lawson

http://learnnc.org/lp/pages/4901

John Lawson (1674? – 1711) was a British explorer, naturalist and writer. He played an important role in the history of colonial North Carolina. Little is known definitively about his early life...

Large sand volume barrier islands: Environmental processes and development risks

http://learnnc.org/lp/editions/cede_lgsandvol/

This Carolina Environmental Diversity Explorations "virtual field trip" explores the nature and structure of barrier islands with large sand volume, on which built structures are relatively well insulated from hurricane damage.

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A Carolina Environmental Diversity Explorations "virtual field trip" that examines the sand sharing system of sedimentary coastlines and the impact of hurricanes on those coastlines and on human development.

Small sand volume barrier islands: Environmental processes and development risks

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This Carolina Environmental Diversity Explorations "virtual field trip" explores the nature and structure of barrier islands with small sand volume, on which built structures are highly susceptible to damage from hurricanes.

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Notes

1. Currituck Inlet no longer exists. It was an inlet through Currituck Banks (which Lawson refers to as the "bar of Currituck) in what is now eastern Currituck County. According to William Powell's *North Carolina Gazetteer*, the inlet was closed by a storm in 1828.

2. In this context, a "bar" is a bank of sand or silt across the mouth of a river or harbor, which obstructs navigation.

3. Like Currituck Inlet, Roanoake Inlet no longer exists. According to the *North Carolina Gazetteer*, it was opened sometime before 1657 and closed by a storm in 1795.

4. The Hatteras Inlet that today separates Hatteras Island from Ocracoke Island did not exist in Lawson's time — it was opened in 1846. The Hatteras Inlet Lawson describes here was closer to today's Ocracoke Inlet and was closed by a storm in the 1760s. (Between the 1760s and 1846, Cape Hatteras and Ocracoke Island were joined. See William Powell, *The North Carolina Gazetteer*.)

5. Ocracoke.

6. Topsail Inlet is now called Beaufort Inlet; it separates Bogue Banks from Shackleford Banks.

7. In one of many comments on the remarkable fertility of North Carolina soil, Lawson notes the ability of the land to produce crops year after year, without the necessity of "manuring or dressing," by which he means applying manure or other fertilizer.

About the author

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David holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America*, published in 2002 by Oxford University Press. With LEARN NC, he has written numerous articles for K–12 teachers on topics such as historical education, visual literacy, writing instruction, and technology integration.

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Figure 1 (page 2)

John Lawson, A New Voyage to Carolina (London, 1709). This image is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/.

Figure 2 (page 2)

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Figure 3 (page 3)

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