

The present state of Carolina [people, climate]

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...

ADVERTISING THE NEW WORLD

John Lawson's main reason for writing *A New Voyage to Carolina* was to promote the colony to Englishmen who might cross the sea in search of a better life. We can learn a lot about early colonial North Carolina from Lawson's writing, but it's important to remember that he wasn't simply writing an objective description of the colony. After all, he was surveyor general — in charge of surveying plots of land — and more settlers meant more business!

Some questions to consider:

- What can you guess about his audience? What kinds of people were they? What kinds of things did Lawson think would attract their interest?
- Where might Lawson not be entirely truthful?
- Was Lawson justified in exaggerating the colony's positive qualities or smoothing over the negative ones?

NECESSARIES FOR CAROLINA

At the end of this page, Lawson lists “necessaries for Carolina” — things that settlers should bring with them, because they won't be able to obtain them easily once in America. What does this list tell you about the “present state of Carolina” that Lawson's previous descriptions don't?

Planters.

As for those of our own Country¹ in Carolina, some of the Men are very laborious, and make great Improvements in their Way; but I dare hardly give 'em that Character in general. The easy Way of living in that plentiful Country, makes a great many Planters very negligent², which, were they otherwise, that Colony might now have been in a far better Condition than it is, (as to Trade, and other Advantages) which an universal Industry would have led them into.

Women good Houswives.

The Women are the most industrious Sex in that Place³, and, by their good Houswifry, make a great deal of Cloath of their own Cotton, Wool and Flax; some of them keeping their Families (though large) very decently apparel'd, both with Linnens and Woollens, so that they have no occasion to run into the Merchant's Debt, or lay their Money out on Stores for Cloathing.

Natives of Carolina.

BEAUTIFUL.

NOT PASSIONATE.

GOOD WIVES.⁴

NATIVES ARE DOCILE.

NO PRODIGALS.

GREAT AGE OF AMERICANS.

The Christian Natives⁵ of Carolina are a straight, clean-limb'd People; the Children being seldom or never troubled with Rickets, or those other Distempers, that the Europeans are visited withal. 'Tis next to a Miracle, to see one of them deform'd in Body. The Vicinity of the Sun⁶ makes Impression on the Men, who labour out of doors, or use the Water. As for those Women, that do not expose themselves to the Weather, they are often very fair, and generally as well featurd, as you will see any where, and have very brisk charming Eyes, which sets them off to Advantage. They marry very young; some at Thirteen or Fourteen; and She that stays till Twenty, is reckon'd a stale Maid⁷; which is a very indifferent Character in that warm Country.

The Women are very fruitful; most Houses being full of Little Ones. It has been observ'd, that Women long marry'd, and without Children, in other Places, have remov'd to

Carolina, and become joyful Mothers.⁸ They have very easy Travail in their Child-bearing, in which they are so happy, as seldom to miscarry⁹. Both Sexes are generally spare of Body, and not Cholerick, nor easily cast down at Disappointments and Losses, seldom immoderately grieving at Misfortunes, unless for the Loss of their nearest Relations and Friends, which seems to make a more than ordinary Impression upon them.

Many of the Women are very handy in Canoes, and will manage them with great Dexterity and Skill, which they become accustomed to in this watry Country. They are ready to help their Husbands in any servile Work, as Planting, when the Season of the Weather requires Expedition; Pride seldom banishing good Houswifery.¹⁰ The Girls are not bred up to the Wheel¹¹, and Sewing only; but the Dairy and Affairs of the House they are very well acquainted withal; so that you shall see them, whilst very young, manage their Business with a great deal of Conduct and Alacrity. The Children of both Sexes are very docile, and learn any thing with a great deal of Ease and Method; and those that have the Advantages of Education, write good Hands, and prove good Accountants, which is most coveted, and indeed most necessary in these Parts. The young Men are commonly of a bashful, sober Behaviour; few proving Prodigals, to consume what the Industry of their Parents has left them, but commonly improve it.¹² The marrying so young, carries a double Advantage with it, and that is, that the Parents see their Children provided for in Marriage, and the young married People are taught by their Parents, how to get their Living; for their Admonitions make great Impressions on their Children.

I had heard (before I knew this new World) that the Natives of America were a short-liv'd People, which, by all the Observations I could ever make, proves quite contrary; for those who are born here, and in other Colonies, live to as great Ages as any of the Europeans, the Climate being free from Consumptions¹³, which Distemper, fatal to England, they are Strangers to. And as the Country becomes more clear'd of Wood, it still becomes more healthful to the Inhabitants, and less addicted to the Ague; which is incident to most new Comers into America from Europe, yet not mortal. A gentle Emetick seldom misses of driving it away, but if it is not too troublesome, 'tis better to let the Seasoning have its own Course¹⁴, in which case, the Party is commonly free from it ever after, and very healthful.

Collections.

PROVISIONS VERY CHEAP.

INDIANS HUNTERS.



Figure 1. Fishing weir in Maine.
The Indians Lawson
encountered used weirs to catch
fish.

And now, as to the other Advantages the Country affords, we cannot guess at them at present, because, as I said before, the best Part of this Country is not inhabited by the English, from whence probably will here after spring Productions that this Age does not dream of, and of much more Advantage to the Inhabitants than any things we are yet acquainted withal: And as for several Productions of other Countries, much in the same Latitude, we may expect, with good Management, they will become familiar to us, as Wine, Oil, Fruit, Silk, and other profitable Commodities, such as Drugs, Dyes, &c. And at present the Curious may have a large Field to satisfy and divert themselves in, as Collections of strange Beasts, Birds, Insects, Reptiles, Shells, Fishes, Minerals, Herbs, Flowers, Plants, Shrubs, intricate Roots, Gums, Tears, Rozins, Dyes, and Stones, with several other that yield Satisfaction and Profit to those, whose Inclinations tend that Way.

And as for what may be hop'd for, towards a happy Life and Being, by such as design to remove thither, I shall add this; That with prudent Management, I can affirm, by Experience, not by Hear-say, That any Person, with a small Beginning, may live very comfortably, and not only provide for the Necessaries of Life, but likewise for those that are to succeed him¹⁵; Provisions being very plentiful, and of good Variety, to accommodate genteel House-keeping; and the neighbouring Indians are friendly, and in many Cases serviceable to us¹⁶, in making us Weirs to catch Fish in, for a small matter, which proves of great Advantage to large Families, because those Engines take great Quantities of many Sorts of Fish, that are very good and nourishing¹⁷: Some of them hunt and fowl for us at reasonable Rates, the Country being as plentifully provided with all Sorts of Game, as any Part of America; the poorer Sort of Planters often get them to plant for them, by hiring them for that Season, or for so much Work, which commonly comes very reasonable. Moreover, it is remarkable, That no Place on the Continent of America, has seated an English Colony so free from Blood-shed, as Carolina; but all the others have been more damag'd and disturb'd by the Indians, than they have; which is worthy Notice, when we consider how oddly it was first planted with Inhabitants¹⁸.

Fishing-Trade.

WHALE-FISHING.

INDIAN-TRADE.

The Fishing-Trade in Carolina might be carried on to great Advantage¹⁹, considering how many Sorts of excellent Fish our Sound and Rivers afford, which cure very well with Salt, as has been experienced by some small Quantities, which have been sent abroad, and yielded a good Price. As for the Whale-fishing, it is no otherwise regarded than by a few People who live on the Sand-Banks; and those only work on dead Fish cast on shoar, none

being struck on our Coast, as they are to the Northward; altho' we have Plenty of Whales there.

Great Plenty is generally the Ruin of Industry.²⁰ Thus our Merchants are not many, nor have those few there be, apply'd themselves to the European Trade. The Planter sits contented at home, whilst his Oxen thrive and grow fat, and his Stocks daily increase; The fatted Porkets and Poultry are easily rais'd to his Table, and his Orchard affords him Liquor, so that he eats, and drinks away the Cares of the World, and desires no greater Happiness, than that which he daily enjoys. Whereas, not only the European, but also the Indian-Trade, might be carried on to a great Profit, because we lie as fairly for the Body of Indians, as any Settlement in English-America; And for the small Trade that has been carried on in that Way, the Dealers therein have thrived as fast as any Men, and the soonest rais'd themselves of any People I have known in Carolina.

Climate.

SUMMER.

NO EARTHQUAKES.

SERENE.

SPRING. FALL.

Lastly, As to the Climate, it is very healthful²¹; our Summer is not so hot as in other places to the Eastward in the same Latitude; neither are we ever visited by Earthquakes, as many places in Italy and other Summer-Countries are. Our Northerly Winds, in Summer, cool the Air, and free us from pestilential Fevers, which Spain, Barbary, and the neighbouring Countries in Europe, &c. are visited withal. Our Sky is generally serene and clear, and the Air very thin, in comparison of many Parts of Europe²², where Consumptions and Catarrhs reign amongst the Inhabitants.

The Winter has several Fitts of sharp Weather, especially when the Wind is at N. W. which always clears the Sky, though never so thick before. However, such Weather is very agreeable to European Bodies, and makes them healthy. The N. E. Winds blowing in Winter, bring with them thick Weather, and, in the Spring, sometimes, blight the Fruits; but they very seldom endure long, being blown away by Westerly Winds, and then all becomes fair and clear again. Our Spring, in Carolina, is very beautiful, and the most pleasant Weather a Country can enjoy. The Fall is accompanied with cool Mornings, which come in towards the latter end of August, and so continue (most commonly) very moderate Weather till about Christmas; then Winter comes on apace.

Tho' these Seasons are very piercing, yet the Cold is of no continuance. Perhaps, you will have cold Weather for three or four days at a time; then pleasant warm Weather follows, such as you have in England, about the latter end of April or beginning of May. In the Year 1707. we had the severest Winter in Carolina, that ever was known since the English came to settle there; for our Rivers, that were not above half a Mile wide, and fresh

Water, were frozen over; and some of them, in the North-part of this Country, were passable for People to walk over.

No Frontier.

NEAR VIRGINIA.

MARILAND.

One great Advantage of North-Carolina is, That we are not a Frontier, and near the Enemy; which proves very chargeable and troublesome, in time of War²³, to those Colonies that are so seated. Another great Advantage comes from its being near Virginia, where we come often to a good Market, at the Return of the Guinea-Ships for Negro's, and the Remnant of their Stores, which is very commodious for the Indian-Trade²⁴; besides, in War-time, we lie near at hand to go under their Convoy, and to sell our Provisions to the Tobacco-fleets; for the Planting of Tobacco generally in those Colonies, prevents their being supplied with Stores, sufficient for victualling their Ships²⁵.

Necessaries for Carolina.

As for the Commodities, which are necessary to carry over to this Plantation, for Use and Merchandize, and are, therefore, requisite for those to have along with them, that intend to transport themselves thither²⁶; they are Guns, Powder and Shot, Flints, Linnens of all sorts, but chiefly ordinary Blues, Osnabrugs, Scotch and Irish Linnen, and some fine: Mens and Womens Cloaths ready made up, some few Broad-Cloaths, Kerseys and Druggets; to which you must add Haberdashers-Wares, Hats about Five or Six Shillings apiece, and a few finer; a few Wiggs, not long, and pretty thin of Hair; thin Stuffs for Women; Iron-Work, as Nails, Spades, Axes, broad and narrow Hoes, Frows, Wedges, and Saws of all sorts, with other Tools for Carpenters, Joiners, Coopers, Shoemakers, Shave-locks, &c. all which, and others which are necessary for the Plantations, you may be inform'd of, and buy at very reasonable Rates, of Mr. James Gilbert, Ironmonger, in Mitre-Tavern-Yard, near Aldgate. You may also be used very kindly, for your Cuttlery-Ware, and other advantageous Merchandizes, and your Cargo's well sorted, by Capt. Sharp, at the Blue gate in Cannon-street; and for Earthen-Ware, Window-Glass, Grind-Stones, Mill-Stones, Paper, Ink-Powder, Saddles, Bridles, and what other things you are minded to take with you, for Pleasure or Ornament.

And now, I shall proceed to the rest of the Vegetables, that are common in Carolina, in reference to the Place where I left off, which is the Natural History of that Country.

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...

A Brief Description of the Province of Carolina

<http://learnnc.org/lp/pages/2043>

A pamphlet produced in 1660s London at the request of the Lords Proprietors described the economic opportunity and religious freedom available to settlers in Carolina. Includes historical commentary.

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Notes

1. Englishmen.
2. Lawson wasn't the first or the last writer to suggest that North Carolinians were lazy. The Virginian William Byrd, who surveyed the border between Virginia and North Carolina in 1728, was so unimpressed by what he found to the south that he called North Carolina "Lubberland"!
3. Why might Lawson be more inclined to praise women's "industry" (hard work) than men's? Certainly a backwoods farmer's wife would have had a lot of work to do, including making clothes — manufactured clothes, shipped from England, were very expensive. But Lawson was writing for potential male settlers, and he may have wanted to imply that a man who moved to Carolina would find a good wife.
4. By emphasizing that native women who have converted to Christianity make good wives, Lawson seems to be taking more than an anthropological interest. An Englishman considering settling in North Carolina might well have been enticed by the idea of taking a native woman as a wife. What qualities does Lawson associate, or think his readers would associate, with a "good wife"?
5. Europeans typically distinguished between Indians who had assimilated into colonial society and converted to Christianity and those who remained "heathens" and "savages."
6. Meaning that North Carolina being closer to the equator than Europe gets more sunlight. Rickets, which Lawson mentions earlier in this paragraph, is a disease caused by a deficiency in Vitamin D, which the human body metabolizes directly from sunlight.
7. Lawson seems to suggest that English men settling in North Carolina would want to take a young wife — as young as her mid-teens. We might think of all kinds of reasons for that preference, but part of it was economic.

In England in 1700, women married at an average age of about 25 and men at an average age of about 27. In societies where people marry relatively late, it is usually because they don't want many (or any) children. In England, where land was scarce and economic opportunities limited, children would have been an economic burden to most families, and so most people waited to marry until they could afford to support children — and until the woman was old enough that she wouldn't have too many. People who had more children than they could support would be doomed to a lifetime of poverty.

In America, though, where land was cheap and most settlers farmed, children could be an asset rather than a burden — they could be supported relatively easily, and could provide labor on a farm. It therefore made sense for people to marry younger, and in particular for men to marry younger women who could bear more children.

In northeastern North Carolina in 1700, men married for the first time at an average age of about 24, and women at an average age of about 22. Men also tended to marry very soon after they acquired land — as soon as they could afford a family, and when they needed help in keeping a household. As land became scarcer in America in the 1700s, the average age at marriage rose. (See James M. Gallman, “Determinants of Age at Marriage in Colonial Perquimans County, North Carolina,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, vol. 39, no. 1, *The Family in Early American History and Culture* (Jan. 1982), pp. 176–191.)

In the United States today, men marry for the first time at an average age of 27 and women at an average age of 25 — about the same as in England of 300 years ago. Those ages have steadily risen since the 1950s, and the size of families has fallen. Most people today would resist the idea that they are delaying marriage for economic reasons, but economists might disagree!

8. Lawson suggests that childless women who move to Carolina will conceive! This seems unlikely, but it certainly fits with Lawson’s description of the colony as fruitful and prosperous. A farming family needed children for labor, and a house full of children was considered a blessing.
9. Lawson may mean “happy” to suggest physical health as well as emotional happiness, but he seems to be implying that a woman who miscarries was unhappy in her pregnancy — to be blaming the mother, in other words. Women in European culture were typically blamed for a childless marriage, as well — as the story of Henry VIII (see <http://www.learnnc.orghttp://www.britannia.com/history/monarchs/mon41.html>) will tell you.
10. In English society, for a woman to be forced to work outside on a farm was considered demeaning. No true lady would work in the fields! But to American Indians in North Carolina, agriculture was women’s work. Although men did the heavy labor of preparing the soil, women planted, weeded, and harvested the crops. The “pride” of an English woman would have been irrelevant to a native North Carolinian.
11. They were not taught to use a spinning wheel to spin thread from raw wool or linen fiber.
12. By “sober” Lawson means not necessarily that the young men don’t drink alcohol but that they are thoughtful and careful. By “bashful” he means not that they are shy, but that they aren’t big spenders, fancy dressers, or inclined to draw attention to themselves. And a *prodigal* is someone (like the prodigal son of the Bible) who wastes money and disobeys his parents. So the kind of person Lawson describes is not a teetotaling wallflower but a hardworking, cautious, frugal (careful with money), and sensible farmer.
13. Generally speaking, consumptions are diseases that cause weakening in the body. The word “consumption” is most often used specifically to refer to tuberculosis, a disease that attacks the lungs.
14. The “ague” Lawson refers to was a high fever produced by a disease most likely carried by mosquitoes, possibly malaria. Children who live where malaria is endemic (constantly present) develop an immunity to it by the time they are four or five years old — if they survive that long. Adults exposed to malaria for the first time who contract the disease and survive may also develop an immunity to it.

By “seasoning” Lawson means the body’s process of growing accustomed to a new climate. Europeans in 1700 blamed diseases like malaria on hot, humid weather — which, since mosquitoes are more common in tropical and subtropical regions than in northern Europe, was a reasonable assumption. Not until the 19th and 20th centuries did scientists begin to understand the role of insects and parasites in causing human disease.

15. His children and descendants who will inherit his land.
16. Indians are available for labor — presumably cheap labor, if poor settlers can afford to hire them.
17. A weir is a traditional American Indian fishing device, consisting of a trap made of sticks or brush with a large basket in the middle. Weir designs vary according to the location and waters being fished. Typically, setting up a weir involved creating a fence-like structure of reeds, stretching it across a stream, and anchoring it to the bottom by sticking poles into the ground below the water. The reeds were tied together tightly so that fish could swim in, but couldn’t swim out.
18. Lawson acknowledges that the first contacts between Europeans and Indians in North Carolina were not always friendly. When he says that the colony was first settled “oddly,” he seems to be implying that he blames the settlers for the early conflicts. As much as his descriptions of the Indians sound racist to us today, Lawson had a higher opinion of them than most of his fellow Englishmen, and regretted their treatment by the worst of his countrymen.
19. Fishing was important to North Carolina Indians and would become an important colonial industry later in the 1700s, but although early colonists fished for their own tables, they hadn’t yet begun fishing in large quantities for market.
20. Again, Lawson remarks that because the land is so rich and farming so easy, the settlers have not pursued other kinds of production and trade. Clearly he saw America’s bounty from two sides. On the one hand, he praises the natural bounty of North Carolina and makes it a selling point for settlers; on the other hand, he bemoans the lazy farmers and the lack of production and trade.
21. What do you think of Lawson’s description of North Carolina’s climate and seasons? How does it compare with what you know from experience?
22. By “thin air” Lawson means that the air is less damp and humid and the sky less cloudy than in Europe. As far as the humidity goes, he must not have been referring to eastern North Carolina!
23. The “enemy” along the “frontier” was the French, who controlled most of Canada and the land west of the Mississippi, and their allies among North American Indians. Britain and France fought four wars between 1689 and 1763, which involved colonists on both sides and were known collectively in the English colonies as the French and Indian Wars.

During King William’s War (1689–1697), New England colonists had fought French Canadians, with the French invading New York but failing to capture Boston, and the English colonists winning battles in Nova Scotia but failing to take Quebec. The war ended by treaty in 1697, but Queen Anne’s War (1702–1713) quickly ensued. In this second war, Britain won Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and the Hudson Bay region from France, and New England colonists were again heavily involved in the fighting.

North Carolina was far from the action in these first two wars, and colonists there were spared attacks and the necessity of fighting. But troops from North Carolina would fight in later colonial wars between Britain and France.

24. By “Guinea-ships” Lawson means ships carrying enslaved Africans bound for Virginia plantations. Apparently the “remnant of their stores” — leftover goods and provisions — could be bought cheaply and then sold to the Indians for a profit.
25. Because Virginia shipped so much tobacco to England, its trade was important enough to be protected in time of war, and North Carolina ships could go along with convoys from Virginia. Tobacco ships also presented a market for North Carolina farms. Because tobacco was so valuable, Virginia plantations did not grow more food than necessary to feed Virginians (and often not even that much!). North Carolina farmers could sell their produce to Virginians to feed crews of merchant ships.

Victualling means providing food for their ships. (*Victuals* is an old term for food.)

26. Here Lawson lists *commodities* things that settlers need to bring with them — things that won’t be available to them in North Carolina. The list suggests that there were few or no blacksmiths, gunsmiths, or tailors — craftsmen who might have set up shop in towns, but in 1709 there was only one town (Bath) in North Carolina, and it was only three years old. Other goods not available in the colony were paper, glass, metal cutlery (knives), grindstones, and saddles.

Some of these goods would soon be produced in the colonies, and others would be imported from England until the Revolution. The economic thinking of this time, based on a theory called *mercantilism*, was that a nation should export as much as possible and import as little as possible, and England wanted its colonies to import as much as possible from the mother country. That relationship also kept the colonies dependent on England. British laws therefore discouraged or prohibited various kinds of manufacturing in America.

In 1709, though, British law had little to do with discouraging industry in North Carolina. There simply were not enough settlers for various crafts and industries to have developed, and so a colonist needed to bring manufactured goods with him — or pay high prices to import them later.

About the author

DAVID WALBERT

David Walbert is Editorial and Web Director for LEARN NC in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education. He is responsible for all of LEARN NC’s educational publications, oversees development of various web applications including LEARN NC’s website and content management systems, and is the organization’s primary web, information, and visual designer. He has worked with LEARN NC since August 1997.

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 4)

T. W. Smillie. Shore herring weir near Eastport, Maine; the common form of brush weir
Original image available from NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service
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