

Harkers Island, NC Brief History

An Historical Overview of Harkers Island

Wilson Angley

Current archaeological evidence indicates that aboriginal peoples inhabited the general area of Harkers Island at least as early as a thousand years ago. Indeed, one isolated site at Wreck Point on Cape Lookout seems to indicate a much earlier occupation. Since the Late Woodland Period, occupation and use of the area seem to have been more or less continuous until European contact and settlement.

Prior to and during the early stages of white settlement, the area was inhabited by Coree Indians. These people seem to have occupied Harkers Island and the nearby shores of Core Sound, and to have been a frequent visitors to Cape Lookout. In the early years of the eighteenth century it was reported that one of the Coree's two principal villages was located just north of The Straits which separate Harkers Island from the mainland. In 1713 acting governor Thomas Pollock (who later owned Harkers Island) found it necessary to station a garrison in the Core Sound area "to guard the people there from some few of the Corees that lurk thereabout." During the course of the Tuscarora War (1711-1715) the Corees came very near to extinction. The few remaining representatives of the tribe appear to have had little or no impact on the subsequent history and development of the area, but they lent their name permanently to Core Banks and Core Sound. It is virtually certain that both Westmouth and Eastmouth Bays were used for fishing and shell gathering by the Corees and their predecessors.

Originally known as Craney Island or Crane Island, Harkers Island was first granted to Farnifold Green in the very early years of the eighteenth century. On 25 June 1709 Green conveyed the island to William Brice, who on the same day sold it to Thomas Sparrow. The absence of substantial improvements is indicated by the fact that Sparrow paid only L10 for the island, thought at the time to contain 2,400 acres. Sparrow, however, soon sold the island to Thomas Pollock, and it is clear that the island was improved at least to some extent during Pollock's ownership. In 1720 Pollock wrote to his business agent from "Chowan," instructing him to make arrangements for a tenant:

If you have any correspondence at Core Sound, I would entreat the favor of you to receive three pounds of widow Stone which is due to me for the rent of Craney Island, Capt Stone having taken it of me last fall at that rent, having allowed me for what time he had it before 100 weight of cocoa. And if she do not keep it any longer, I understand that one Simpson that lives at Core Sound is willing to take it.....As soon as I hear that he is settled I will send [a]round nails,

and satisfy any carpenter for building him a dwelling house.

Maritime activity on the island during Pollock's ownership is implied by the fact that the widow Stone's deceased husband had apparently been a seafaring man, and by the fact that Pollock offered to pay the prospective new tenant, Simpson, "either in bills or pitch" for any livestock he might purchase to graze on the island.

In his will of 1721, Thomas Pollock bequeathed what was then Craney Island to his son George. The younger Pollock retained ownership until 1730 when he sold it to **Ebenezer Harker**, whose name the island bears today. By the time of Harker's purchase the value of the island had increased dramatically to "400 pounds current money of Boston." It is evident that the island contained substantial improvements at this time, but the records give no indication as to their locations. In 1733 Ebenezer Harker, now clearly residing on the island, sold half of it (i.e., 1,200 acres) to one John Stevens for L300 good and lawful money of Boston"; but Harker attached so many stipulations to the sale that Stevens subsequently resold his half interest in the island to Harker for L180, half what he had earlier paid for it.

By 1752, if not much earlier, **Ebenezer Harker** had established a shipbuilding facility on his island. This is revealed in a deed of that year in which he conveyed ten acres to his daughter and her husband:

To all people to whom these presents shall come greetings. Know ye that I Ebenezer Harker of Carteret County, shipwright, out of the parental love and affection which I have and do bear unto my daughter, Hepsobeth the now wife of Nathan Yeomans....doth give....unto my son in law Nathan Yeomans and Hepsobeth his wife...one piece and parcel of land on Craney Island....beginning at a small creek at the south end of the said Craney Island and near to the place called the Ship Yard and not far from the house the sd Nathan built in the point and from thence up the sd creek and thence by a line of marked trees to the sound on the North side of the sd Island which sd line is to run clear of the cleared land and orchard belonging unto the sd Ebenezer containing by estimation ten acres....with all houses woods timber....(etc.)

The location of this shipyard and Harker's nearby residence is difficult to determine with certainty. The above deed located then near "the south end of...Craney Island," possibly meaning the Shell Point area (or east end) of the island. The Moseley map of 1733, however, seems to locate "Harker: at the opposite or west end, where a jut of land still bears the name "Harkers Point." Where ever Harker's mid-eighteenth century shipyard might have been, it is fairly clear that it was not located on the shores of Eastmouth or Westmouth Bay.

Ebenezer Harker apparently continued in the shipbuilding business until his death in 1765. His estate included six slaves, a goodly number of horses, cattle, swine, and sheep, farming implements and household furniture; but it also included tools and supplies of the shipwrights' trade:

two narrow axes, one cross cut saw, two hand saws, two ship saws, one plain, one chisel, six orger {augers}, seven corkinirons, one mallet, two king bolts, one box of old iron, {and} two pen {?} malls.

In his will Harker left "all the lands that I possess on this island, commonly known by the name Craney Island" to his three sons: **Ebenezer, James and Zachariah**, with Zachariah inheriting his father's dwelling house.

During the closing stages of the American Revolution, Harkers Island was at least briefly involved in the so-called "Battle of Beaufort." It is also apparent that warehouse facilities were established on the island at some point during the Revolution, in order to help supply the Patriot cause in the Beaufort area.

In April of 1782 a small British force of regulars and loyalist privateers entered Topsail (now Beaufort) Inlet and began a short-lived but destructive occupation of Beaufort. During this brief occupation, lasting about one week, the British troops ransacked the town and fanned out into the surrounding countryside in search of valuables and sorely needed provisions. Some of these provisions were apparently being housed in facilities on Harkers Island. On 6 April "A guard of thirteen men was established at Harkers Island to observe the enemy's actions there and guard the storehouses." Two days later, word was received that the enemy had attempted to land at Harkers Island, but were repulsed by the men stationed there." In the end, local troops were successful in protecting the Harkers Island storehouses and in driving the British force out of the area. On 17 April the intruders ended their occupation of Beaufort and cleared the bar at Topsail Inlet, bound southward for Charleston. The records do not indicate the location of the storehouses on Harkers Island, but circumstantial evidence would seem to indicate that they were located near the west end of the island.

During the early stages of the Revolution, in 1776, **Zachariah Harker** was engaged in the manufacture of salt, presumably somewhere on Harkers Island. His brothers, meanwhile, appear to have worked their plantation on the island during roughly the same period. Tax records of 1779 listed **James Harker** with 800 acres of land on the west end of the island and Ebenezer Harker with an equal amount of land on the east end. In addition, both men possessed a few slaves and a modest amount of assorted livestock. When surveyed in 1783, at the close of the Revolution, Harkers Island (including Browns Island) was found to contain 1,950 acres. It remained under the ownership of the three Harker brothers. **Ebenezer, James, and Zachariah Harker** died in 1803, 1814, and 1824, respectively. Their wills give no indication as to whether they had made

any improvements along the marsh shorelines of Eastmouth and Westmouth Bays.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, The Straits and Core Sound provided a passageway for small shallow-draft vessels between Beaufort and points northward; but the waters along this route were treacherous and shallow, providing no more than four or five feet in places. Although Harkers Island was mentioned specifically in at least one colonial statute regulating navigation (that of 1766), it was never made an inspection point and was apparently of only limited, local significance in the overall context of maritime activity.

In 1838 a number of Carteret County citizens presented a memorial to the United States Congress, requesting an improvement of Core Sound from Harbor Island to Beaufort. This, they claimed, would:

...enable loaded vessels from Newbern, Washington, Plymouth, Edenton, and Elizabeth City to come to this port [Beaufort] and go to sea without the expense and detention of lightening.

Approximately eighty years were to pass, however, before significant improvements were made in the navigation of Core Sound.

As during the Revolution, Harkers Island became involved to some extent in the Civil War, especially in actions relating to the fall of nearby Fort Macon into Union hands in April of 1862. Prior to the actual siege of Fort Macon, a Union gunboat and one or two smaller vessels took up positions well inside Beaufort inlet, controlling the approaches and exits to both Bogue and Core Sounds. On 22 April several Union vessels dropped anchor near Harkers Island, including the steamer Alice Price which served as General Burnside's temporary headquarters. Four days later, on 26 April, the vanquished commander of Fort Macon, Colonel Moses J. White, met with generals Parke and Burnside on Shackleford Bank, where the terms of the fort's surrender were arranged. The official records give no indication that Harkers Island or its surrounding waters saw significant military action during the course of the Civil War; but one source states that a company of soldiers was stationed at least temporarily at the east end of the island, near Shell Point.

A U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey map of 1864 does not indicate structures which may have existed at the time on Harkers Island, but it does provide detailed navigational information regarding the channel from Core Sound through the Straits to Beaufort. Depths indicated for Westmouth Bay ranged from one to five feet; those for Eastmouth Bay are not provided. It is clear from this map that the normal route for waterborne commerce through The Straits lay approximately 1/2 mile distant from the mouth of Westmouth Bay and an even greater distance from Eastmouth Bay, which, in addition, was separated from

the channel by Browns Island.

During the decades just following the Civil War, menhaden fishing became an important source of income in the Beaufort and Core Sound areas. Indeed, the first proceeding plant in North Carolina was established on Harkers Island at the close of the Civil War. In 1887 the federal government published the following account of this early facility:

It is said that the first oil and guano factory in the state was built on Harper's {sic} Island, in Core Sound, in 1865. It was supplied with kettles, and hand-presses were used for pressing the fish that were taken in gill nets. Later a steam boiler was secured, and both hand and purse-seines were used in the fishery. The business was continued at this point till 1873, when the apparatus, valued at \$3,000 was removed to Cape Lookout as a more desirable location, but the machinery was never set up and the business was discontinued.

Unfortunately, there are no indications in the sources as to where on Harkers Island this plant was located.

With the increase in fishing activity came an increase in overall commerce in the Beaufort area in the late nineteenth century, including commerce through Core Sound and The Straits lying along the northern side of Harkers Island. In 1895 a preliminary examination of Core Sound by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers produced the following description:

The Sound...is separated from the ocean by a narrow strip of beach and sand dunes, and is 25 miles long between Pamlico Sound to the northeast and "The Straits" to the southwest.

Through these straits, by a route about 11 miles long and having a depth nowhere less than 8 feet at low water, the sound is connected with the main channel of Beaufort Harbor, where is the terminus of the Atlantic and North Carolina Railroad. The traffic on Core Sound is principally in oysters, clams, and fish to Beaufort and Newbern...There is also an exchange by the sound of merchandise and country produce between Beaufort and the sparsely settled shore of the sound. It is not apparent that this traffic is hampered in boats of the draft that can now navigate the sound, but citizens of Beaufort desire increased depth through Core Sound, hoping that a steamer would then ply between Beaufort and Elizabeth City and lead to the growth of truck crops along the shore of the sound.

Several years ago a steamer that plied through the sound was destroyed and has not been succeeded by another.

Settlement and use of Harkers Island remained extremely limited until the very

end of the nineteenth century. In 1899 the island was home to only about thirteen families, all apparently residing at the west end of the island or along the Back Sound side. A U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey map of 1899 locates each of the structures then standing on the island. The only apparent shipping facility was a dock jutting out into the waters of Back Sound, approximately midway the length of the island. The construction of small fishing vessels called "sharpies", which developed on Harkers Island in the late nineteenth century, was almost certainly confined to this side of the island. No development whatsoever had taken place on the north side, which is shown on the 1899 map to have been covered by brush and marshland.

Between 1899 and 1902 the population of Harkers Island was augmented by an influx of residents from Diamond City, a whaling community on nearby Shackleford Banks. In the late 1890's there had been several storms which caused considerable wind and water damage at Diamond City; and many residents had begun to talk seriously of moving. Previous damage, however, was nothing compared to that wrought by the great hurricane of 1899. This storm completely destroyed numerous homes and buildings and inundated virtually the entire community. Residents now began to move away in large numbers, some of them across Back Sound to Harkers Island, taking their houses with them. Once begun, the moving did not stop. By 1902 Diamond City was completely abandoned.

Wilson Angley. An Historical Overview of Harkers Island, with special emphasis on Westmouth and Eastmouth Bays. Raleigh, N.C.: N C. Division of Archives and History, 1983.

[Source: http://www.downeasttour.com/harkers_is/hist-overview.htm]