

A Pirate's LIFE

The Atlantic's most notorious buccaneers once plied the waters off our coast and hunkered down in our mainland cities. From the fearsome Blackbeard to the "gentleman pirate" Stede Bonnet, they left behind an aura of mystery and a spirit of daring and adventure.

written by REBECCA WOLTZ
introduction by BILLY WARDEN

Ahoy mateys! Each fall, Carl Cannon Jr., aka Blackbeard (at the helm), leads his motley crew — including his wife, Jo — in a mock attack on the Beaufort waterfront.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES HARRIS



BECOMING BLACKBEARD

How a jack-of-all-trades from Carteret County found his calling and shored up a Crystal Coast tradition.

written by BILLY WARDEN

THE WILD-MANED MAN now preparing to rain down cannon fire on a nearby hotel hadn't been able to figure out what he wanted to do in life — until he became someone else.

He tried shrimping, boatbuilding, mechanical engineering, nursing; he enlisted in the U.S. Army. Right now, he's perched on the deck of a black-and-red ship, handcrafting aluminum foil tubes that his crew will soon pack with gunpowder. "That's been one of my problems," Carl Cannon Jr. says with a growl. "I couldn't decide."

And yet, the answer was right here in his hometown all along. In the maritime pursuits of his father. In the wanderlust of his mother. In the wind-lashed shores and history-haunted boardwalks of Beaufort. The 61-year-old Cannon found his destiny when he became Blackbeard.

CANNON'S 46-FOOT SHIP, THE ADVENTURE, SLIPS OUT of Gallants Point at 6:07 on this balmy evening, skull-and-bones banner flapping in the wind. Clocking eight knots and carrying five crew members and

six cannons, the vessel is headed southeast for battle. Its name is a nod to the ship that Blackbeard sailed after grounding and possibly scuttling the *Queen Anne's Revenge* just two miles from here in Pamlico Sound. The *Adventure* was the ship that the notorious pirate died defending — hacked, shot, and beheaded by a British navy force sent from Virginia. But Blackbeard didn't *really* die on November 22, 1718. That was just his send-off into the realm of dubious legend and a kind of reincarnation. A cycle that would eventually lead to Cannon's attack tonight on the Beaufort Hotel.

Standing at the helm in a tricorn hat, black tunic, and crimson sash, Cannon lights a Cheyenne cigar and fixes his flinty gaze on the distance. Before him lies downtown Beaufort, with its hundreds of tourists — as well as a handful of locals who, like Cannon, wear pirate garb to entertain the crowds.

Cannon is leading Beaufort's annual Pirate Invasion, a September festival dating back to 1960, when local firemen donned eye-patches, bandanas, and grease-painted beards to stage an amphibious assault followed by an all-hands town party.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES HARRIS; ILLUSTRATION BY NORTH WIND PICTURE ARCHIVES/ALAMY

Cannon spent most of his adult life wandering the globe — living in Japan and New York, hitchhiking to California — in search of an identity. He eventually found it back home in Beaufort, where he plays the fearsome Blackbeard during the town's annual Pirate Invasion.



Tourists dine on the Beaufort waterfront as Blackbeard's ship prepares its attack. It's all in good fun, though. That mean-looking pirate (opposite) is actually an actor with a spectacular beard.



The festival evolved in fits and starts, but in the 21st century, it was in danger of foundering — until Cannon made a deal with another legendary seaman to take up the Blackbeard torch.

Cannon's pirate persona fits him snugly, like Jack Sparrow's bandana. This isn't a plastic-grinned Disney buccaneer. His hide is deep-fried, his stare resolute, his manner serious. His unruly mane and beard are real, albeit dyed at this point — because no kid is lining up to meet Graybeard. When he leads his pirate crew to festivals and special events around the region, Cannon and company set up a tent camp where they not only welcome visitors but also roast pork over an open flame, braid rope out of coconut fiber, and, naturally, fire their beloved cannons.

And, perhaps most convincingly, this Blackbeard is a creature of the water. Beaufort's waters. The original Blackbeard's waters.

THE ORIGINS OF EDWARD TEACH — LATER KNOWN as Blackbeard — are as murky as the Beaufort Inlet

after an angry storm. Cannon subscribes to the theory that the pirate must have spent a good while on the North Carolina coast. How, other than through hard-won experience, could he have so adroitly navigated the region's treacherous waterways?

Cannon, too, put in the time and sweat to know the place. "I grew up here like Huck Finn," he says. "Making rafts and sailing them. Skin diving, scuba diving, and treasure hunting. I was a water monkey." Gesturing to a weather-beaten two-story building across the harbor, he notes, "That used to be my dad's fish house. I was over there from the time I was 2 to 18. That's where I learned to shuck oysters, clean fish, work a shrimp boat, everything."

He describes his father, Carl Cannon Sr., as a "bearish, good-hearted Sunday school teacher" reputed to have once killed an alligator with nothing but a stick. Cannon's mother, Linda, also a shrimper, was a romantic — struck, he says, by a dash of pirate's wanderlust. "She wanted to see the

"I grew up here like Huck Finn, making rafts and sailing them. I was a water monkey."

world," he says. When he was still a lad, his mom left with another man and moved to Cocoa Beach, Florida. "God, I wanted to go with her so bad. I was close to my mom," Cannon says as he glances up from his preparations to attack the hotel. "But Dad would never allow it."

Instead, the boy connected with his absent mother through books, especially novels about adventures on the seas — *Treasure Island*, *Robinson Crusoe*. When he was done with work at the fish house, he'd tramp over to the makeshift maritime museum run by celebrated local historian Grayden Paul Jr. There, he'd sweep up while soaking in the old man's tales of pirates and high adventure on these shores. "I thought [that] if I had lived 300 years ago, I'd have a ship and a crew, and I'd be out looking for resources and opportunities. I'd be in the same boat as him" — Blackbeard.

APPROACHING THE BEAUFORT HOTEL, CANNON EYES the waiting civilians lining the wide patios and balconies on the water's edge. "Prepare to fire," he commands the colorful crew, including wife Jo, his lieutenant and head gunner. The imminent attack

won't be a surprise to the hotel and guests. It's part of the raucous tradition of pirate theatrics that stretches back more than 60 years to the first Pirate Invasion festival. Cannon recalls ogling those early reenactments and being awed to know that "pirates had been here before — and would be back."

Likewise, no matter where he wandered in his adult life, Cannon always returned to Beaufort. The tides of life sometimes left him low. Three marriages sank. As he sailed into middle age, he wondered, *What am I going to be when I grow up?* Cultivating his Blackbeard persona, he started going to events in pirate garb and volunteered for the Pirate Invasion, by then a nonprofit led by the white-bearded Capt. Horatio Sinbad.

Cannon's decades of maritime adventures and fascination with the outlaws of the sea made him a standout among the scoundrels. Sinbad, who'd been piloting the Invasion since the early '70s, took note, and in 2017, when the local icon tired of doing the big event every year, the helm was passed to Cannon, who captained his first Invasion in 2018. "He's done a very, very good job," says Sinbad, puffing a cigar. "I rate him the best."

Back on the *Adventure*, Cannon orders his crew to fire a full barrage of cannon blanks at the hotel. The explosions shake the ship's walls and put smiles on the faces of the guests. As gun smoke, cheers, and whoops of "Aaargh, matey!" trail in his wake, this latest Blackbeard slips back up the inlet. Unlike his ruthless namesake, Cannon sails away a hero. **Os**

Billy Warden is a Raleigh writer, musician, and marketing executive at GBW Strategies.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES HARRIS; ILLUSTRATION BY BARKS_JAPAN/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES PLUS



A PROUD PIRATE

Take to the high seas — er, Taylor's Creek in Beaufort, that is — with Carl Cannon to see his portrayal of Blackbeard, and learn more about North Carolina's most infamous pirate. Visit ourstate.com/blackbeard101.

ECU's Treasure Chest

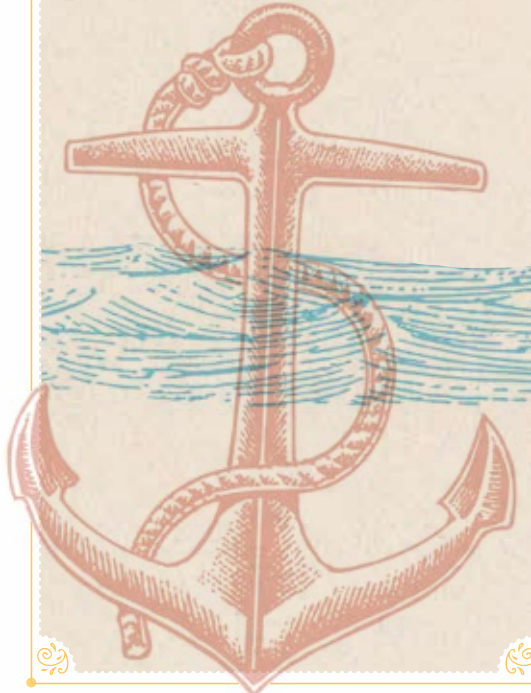
See firsthand how the university's QAR Lab preserves and investigates artifacts from Blackbeard's flagship.

Roughly half a million objects — ranging in size from gold dust to a nearly 2,000-pound anchor — have been excavated from Blackbeard's famous flagship, the *Queen Anne's Revenge*, since its discovery in Beaufort Inlet in 1996. Housed on East Carolina University's West Research Campus and operated by the Office of State Archaeology, the QAR Lab recovers, conserves, and catalogs the artifacts, using them to understand how the ship was constructed and operated.

Objects are dated using several methods — the number 713 on the trunnion of a cannon indicates that it was made in 1713, while bottles can be dated by their shape, and timber by its tree rings. Once recovered, artifacts are stored in a wet environment while encrustation is removed with a tiny jackhammer — about the size of a pencil — called an air scribe. Next, salt is removed using an electrical current and positively charged metal plates. Finally, the objects are dried before being sent to the North Carolina Maritime Museum in Beaufort for display.

The entire process takes about 10 years for a large cannon. Although the wreckage was found more than a quarter-century ago, there's still much beneath the water, waiting to be discovered.

For information about free tours of the QAR Lab, call (252) 744-6721 or visit qaronline.org.



ECU's mascot was once known as PeeDee the Pirate, named for the Pee Dee River, where pirates were known to set up camps. The school officially dropped the name in 1985, but some fans still call him PeeDee.

HOME of the PIRATES

GREENVILLE

During battle, pirates raised the "No Quarter" flag — often a skull and crossbones on a red background — to indicate that they would take no prisoners. At the end of the third quarter at football games — and similarly at other sporting events — East Carolina University raises its own No Quarter flag while fans cross their arms to symbolize a skull and crossbones, signaling to their opponents that they will show no mercy. Other ECU Pirate traditions include firing a replica of an 18th-century English 32-pounder cannon after the team scores a touchdown. The Pirate became the school mascot in 1934 — replacing the previous mascot, the Teachers — and has been inspiring school spirit ever since.



PHOTOGRAPH BY CLIFF HOLLIS/ECU NEWS AND COMMUNICATION; ILLUSTRATIONS BY KEITHBISHOP AND MISHKOM/DIGITALVISION VECTORS/GETTY IMAGES



There's no evidence that Blackbeard ever set foot on land in Beaufort. Still, "Hammock House has entered this legendary status," says Mike Carraway, exhibits curator for the NC Maritime Museum.

FACT & FICTION

BEAUFORT

According to Beaufort legend, Blackbeard lived for a time in the Hammock House with one of his many wives. The story goes that he became so angry with her that he hanged her from a tree in the backyard. But, in fact, letters written by the house's first owner, Samuel Leffers, to his brother indicate that the house was built in 1800, more than 80 years after Blackbeard was killed. To sort fact from fiction, visitors can head to the North Carolina Maritime Museum, which showcases the artifacts that have been recovered from the wreckage of the *Queen Anne's Revenge* after they've been conserved at the QAR Lab.

North Carolina Maritime Museum
 315 Front Street, Beaufort, NC 28516, (252) 504-7740, ncmaritimemuseumbeaufort.com

PHOTOGRAPHY BY EMILY CHAPLIN & CHRIS COUNCIL, VISTNC.COM





ALL HANDS on DECK

BEAUFORT

Wind flutters the many pirate flags hanging from the halyards of the *Revenge* as it sails through the calm waters of Taylors Creek along the Beaufort waterfront. Built to resemble a pirate sailing vessel, the modern motorized tour boat offers a Pirate Treasure Cruise for younger children and a sunset Ghost Float that's appropriate for older kids and adults. During the Treasure Cruise, kids don pirate bandanas and tattoos, and face off against a pirate, like Kegger "Black Hat" Finney, in a battle for treasure using the high-pressure water cannons that line the side of the boat.

Young passengers on the *Revenge's* Pirate Treasure Cruise take their battle against "Black Hat" Finney (opposite) seriously. "It is just the most precious thing for them," says co-owner Lauriel Lebeau.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES HARRIS



GHOST STORIES

BEAUFORT

Along with sharing local ghost and pirate lore, the crew of the *Revenge's* sunset cruise invites passengers to participate in magic tricks and sea shanties, and points out local landmarks — like the site of the wreckage of Blackbeard's flagship, the *Queen Anne's Revenge*, which ran aground in Beaufort Inlet in 1718. "There's no better place for a pirate boat than Beaufort," says Lauriel "Fettucini" Lebeau, who owns the *Revenge* with her husband, George "Captain Spike" Aswad. "There's so much history here, and we get to tell those stories while we're sailing the same waters that Blackbeard was sailing."

Beaufort Pirates Revenge
600 Front Street, Beaufort, NC 28516, (252) 728-7827, beaufortpiratesrevenge.com



During sunset cruises, the pirate Black Hat regales new crew members with tales of North Carolina's most infamous buccaneers.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES HARRIS

PILLAGE & PLUNDER

SWANSBORO

The boom of cannon fire reverberates across downtown Swansboro as pirates invade Front Street during PirateFest each May. While musical group The Motley Tones roams the event, singing sea shanties, the *MEKA II*, a replica of a 17th-century pirate brigantine, patrols the harbor. Anywhere from 3,000 to 6,000 attendees can watch unchoreographed sword-fighting demonstrations or learn to fight with a cutlass, tie knots, or fish using 18th-century methods. Kids shoot a cannon — with a foam ball — or complete a scavenger hunt for prizes like pirate treasure. “It’s such an interactive event,” Anna Stanley, director for Swansboro Parks and Recreation, says of the joint effort between the city and Onslow County Parks and Recreation, which created PirateFest. “I love seeing everybody dressed up and having fun.”



MATT RAY PHOTOGRAPHY

At PirateFest each year, Capt. Horatio Sinbad — who has lived aboard his 54-foot brigantine, *MEKA II* (opposite), continuously for more than 50 years — leads a mock attack on Swansboro.



Legend has it that the Bonner family, who lived in the house (top left) across from Blackbeard's home on Plum Point (right of boat), would see a ball of fire the size of a man's head while sailing around on stormy nights.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS HANNANT

LAND HO!

After running the *Queen Anne's Revenge* aground in what is now known as Beaufort Inlet in 1718, Blackbeard sailed to the port town of Bath, where he accepted a pardon from Gov. Charles Eden and settled down. Many believe that he took up residence in a home on Plum Point and married his 14th bride here. But the adventuresome buccaneer could not be satisfied with the life of a land-dwelling law-abider. Just a few months after accepting his pardon, he took up pirating again, bringing his spoils back to Bath.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY EMILY CHAPLIN AND CHRIS COUNCIL;
ILLUSTRATION BY GL ARCHIVE/ALAMY



"There's a lot more fantasy than known fact about Blackbeard," says Capt. Rob Temple (left). Painter Jean Leon Gerome Ferris imagined the infamous pirate's last stand in *Capture of the Pirate, Blackbeard, 1718*.

FINAL PORT of CALL

OCRACOKE

Capt. Rob Temple sails the *Windfall II*, his schooner — an antique type of sailing vessel with two masts that became popular around 1712 — in much the same way that pirates sailed in the 18th century. He aims the boat into the wind, hoists the sails, and heads out of Ocracoke's Silver Lake harbor into Pamlico Sound. As he sails past Teach's Hole — a part of the sound just south of the village, where Blackbeard was anchored in the months leading up to his death — Temple tells passengers about the notorious pirate's final battle, in which he was beheaded by Lt. Robert Maynard of the British Royal Navy in November 1718. Legend has it that after the pirate's body was thrown overboard, it swam seven times around the ship before finally sinking.

(252) 928-7245, schoonerwindfall.com

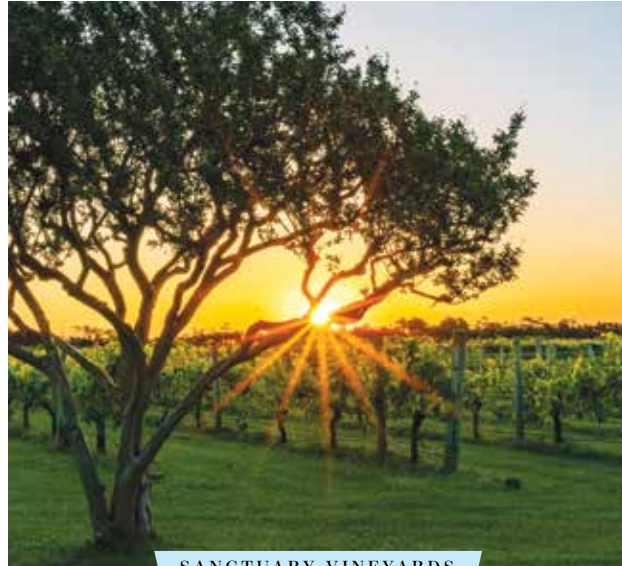




EDWARD TEACH BREWERY



OUTER BANKS DISTILLING



SANCTUARY VINEYARDS



DRINK UP, ME HEARTIES

Across the state, businesses celebrate our pirate history with drinks like Blackbeard's Breakfast, a pecan honey rum cocktail at Outer Banks Distilling in Manteo, or the Pirates Golden Ale (left) at Mooresville's Jolly Roger Brewery, named for the traditional pirate's flag. In Jarvisburg, Sanctuary Vineyards' red muscadine wine The Plank features a depiction of Blackbeard on its label, while Edward Teach Brewery in Wilmington sports what many believe to have been the pirate's real name. Blackbeard and his crew frequented the waters off our coast hundreds of years ago, but the buccaneering spirit lives on in the hearts of North Carolinians everywhere. To us, these swashbuckling seafarers have taken on legendary status — their rebellious nature continuing to inspire a thirst for adventure.



THIS PAGE: MATT RAY PHOTOGRAPHY; BAXTER MILLER; JASON DOWDY, JOLLY ROGER BREWERY; OPPOSITE: REVIVAL CREATIVES

Pirate's Landing, a steak and seafood restaurant in Elkin, was built to resemble a pirate ship, from the masts rising above the roof to the cannons stationed inside.

PIRATE'S LANDING