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ADVENTURE TWENTY-EIGHT — DECEMBER 2021/JANUARY 2022



LIFE IN THE PAST LANE

Make Your Road Trip Memorable

By Jessica James

Travel isn't always about experiencing what's in front of us—it's about what's behind us, as well. When you're visiting beautiful destinations, keep in mind that there's plenty of history to discover everywhere you go.



Fort Macon—a fort on an island—offers equal parts beautiful scenery and intriguing history.

Instead of experiencing “just another day in the sun,” I discovered a unique peek into the past that led me to a treasure trove of other historic landmarks. I’m so glad I decided to follow my instincts, ignore the glitzy trappings of the usual destinations, and explore something new.

My beach getaway turned into a vacation that was educational, entertaining, and more memorable than I’d ever imagined it could be.

An Island Fort

This pre-Civil War fort is now part of Fort Macon State Park, which includes not only the massive fortress that you could spend hours exploring, but also walking trails and a beach that is great for shell hunting and ocean views.

The fort itself was constructed between 1826 and 1834 to guard against a possible raid from England or Spain, both of which had invaded this part of North Carolina in the 18th century. An assault from a foreign country never came about, but the garrison did see plenty of action during the War Between the States, the Spanish-American War, and World War II. It also served as a military prison from 1862–1877.

The first thing you notice when you walk around the five-sided fort is the craftsmanship and the number of bricks. How many bricks, you ask? Try 2,379,546 (to be exact), which is more than any other US fort.

Kids and adults alike can enjoy exploring 26 vaulted rooms (or casemates) that are enclosed by 4.5-foot-thick outer walls. Other features of the fort include powder magazines, counterfire rooms with cannon emplacements, and a wide moat, which served to protect the fort when flooded with waters from Bogue Sound.

During my tour of Fort Macon, I discovered that foreign adversaries weren’t the only entities that caused concern to the eastern North Carolina coastline. The famous pirate Blackbeard, along with other lesser-known pirates, passed through Beaufort Inlet—located right in front of the fort—throughout the 18th century.

With a little more digging, I found that not only did Blackbeard visited the area on numerous occasions, but his famous ship, the *Queen Anne’s Revenge*, hit a sandbar in June of 1718 somewhere close by, and had to be abandoned.

In a hurry to get to your destination? There’s more to a road trip than just hitting the major tourist traps. If you slow down and take the time to look around, you’ll find historic gems no matter what your destination. So, jump off the highway, take the back roads, and discover what this traveler likes to call “Life in the Past Lane.”

A Trip to the Crystal Coast

Many people have heard of the Outer Banks of North Carolina as a vacation spot, but the 85-mile stretch of sand and sunshine located just below it may be the state’s best-kept secret.

Known as the Crystal Coast (and sometimes referred to as the “southern Outer Banks”), this strip of land is made up of 11 distinct communities that offer visitors miles of shoreline, spectacular views and relaxing beaches.

But sand, surf and sun are not the only things I found during a visit to this quaint and quiet vacation retreat. Quite by accident, I came across a road sign for Fort Macon State Park.

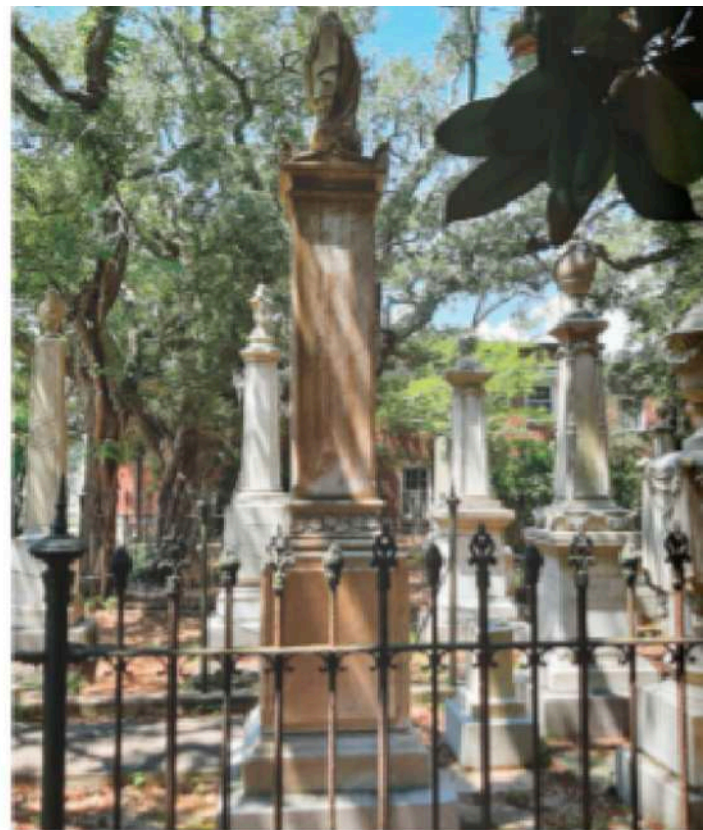
A fort? On an island? At the beach? I decided to keep driving and check it out.



Above: A statue of Blackbeard stands proudly on the outskirts of Beaufort.

Center: Beaufort's Old Burying Ground is full of fascinating historic gravesites.

Opposite: The eye-catching Cape Lookout Lighthouse.



And, guess what? In 2011, a shipwreck that had been discovered in 1996 was confirmed to be Blackbeard's ship. Now, not only can you see the excavation site from Fort Macon, but the historic artifacts removed from the site are also on display right up the road in Beaufort.

Pirate Treasure!

I do a lot of writing about the Civil War era, so learning about the pirate culture from 300 years ago was new for me. But arrgh, who doesn't love the mystique and mystery of pirates? And what could be better than getting a glimpse into the life of one of the most famous of them all?

As the crow flies, Beaufort is no more than a mile or two from Fort Macon, but it's about 10 miles by car. The North Carolina Maritime Museum in Beaufort, located on Front Street, is the official repository for the relics discovered in the wreckage of the *Queen Anne's Revenge*.

Among the findings so far are cannons, grenades, medical gear, belt buckles and beads, to name a few. An 11-foot anchor weighing 2,500 pounds is the largest find, and the smallest is about two grams of gold dust. Researchers don't expect to find any treasure chests or other bounty, because the ship merely ran aground rather than sinking, giving the pirates time to offload their treasures.

A unique aspect of visiting the museum is having a window into the lab where curators go through the painstaking process of cleaning and preserving the findings. As I learned during my tour, when a metal artifact corrodes underwater, sand, seashells and other objects adhere to its sides, and then provide attachment

points for marine life, such as barnacles. These outer layers, which grow thicker over time, are known as "concretions." Before breaking them apart, lab workers try to identify what lies beneath with X-rays.

It takes years to clean and analyze each artifact—especially the larger ones—but every clue and tidbit of information about the lives of pirates is priceless. You can see the artifacts up close at the Maritime Museum, or follow the blog of the archeologists (qaronline.org/blog).

Unfortunately, Blackbeard lived only six months after the abandonment of the *Queen Anne's Revenge*. He was ambushed at sea by a Royal Navy lieutenant from Virginia, who then sailed home with the pirate's head dangling from his bowsprit.

A Haunting Past

While I was in Beaufort—which, by the way, is one of the most quaint and picturesque seaside towns you'll ever see—I ran across another great historical find: The Old Burying Ground.

Now, I realize that most people don't go on vacation and think that ending up in a cemetery is a good thing; but as a history enthusiast, I love finding old cemeteries. Before you decide that this isn't something that interests you, consider some of the people buried there.

By far the most famous of all is the nameless little girl who is buried in a rum keg. According to local legend, this young girl died while on a ship, and her grieving father did not want to throw her body overboard, as was the custom. Instead, he bought a keg of rum, and "preserved" her body for burial when he returned to Beaufort. Her grave is among



Harkers Island

With a land area of 2.2 square miles and about 1,260 inhabitants, Harkers Island is bursting with history, and abounds with maritime legend and lore.

Harkers Island was charted by English Captain John White, who drew numerous maps of the area in the 1580s. In 1587, White permanently inked his name in the history books as the governor of the second attempt

the most famous in the centuries-old cemetery, and is decorated with shells and toys by those who visit.

Other famous gravesites located in this cemetery include a British officer who is buried standing up; a ship captain from the war of 1812, who has one of his cannons attached to the top of his headstone; and a common grave that contains the remains of the crew of the *Crisis Wright*, which ran aground during a storm in January 1886.

All of these and more can be found in the Spanish-moss-draped cemetery, which is complete with old, weathered stones and iron fencing. Walking through the gates is like taking a step back in time. Many of the graves are marked with shell, brick, or wooden slabs, because stone markers were not available unless brought by ship. Others have vaulted markers, which were covered in brick to protect them from high water and wild animals—a characteristic that is common in many historic seaport towns.

The cemetery has many unmarked graves dating from the early 18th century, thought to be the final resting places for those who perished from Indian raids.

Also Nearby...

A trip to the Crystal Coast isn't complete without a visit to the Cape Lookout National Seashore and its iconic, diamond-patterned lighthouse. Accessible only by private boat or ferry, this incredible ribbon of sand hosts unparalleled fishing and shelling, and the still-working lighthouse. The visitor center houses exhibits on lighthouse history, as well as early shipwrecks and rescues.

Ferry transportation to this 56-mile stretch of sand is available from Beaufort and Harkers Island.

to establish Roanoke Colony on the island of the same name. After White returned to England, the colonists he'd left behind vanished and became known as the Lost Colony.

Later, Harkers Island appeared on a 1624 map drawn by English Captain John Smith, the colonial governor of Jamestown, Virginia.

During the Revolutionary War, colonists moved certain provisions out of Beaufort and stored them in warehouses on Harkers Island to prevent British troops from plundering them. Thirteen men who stood guard over the stores were able to repel British troops in a brief battle on April 6th, 1782.

Between the formation of the United States and the Civil War, Harkers Island remained sparsely populated and basically untouched by progress—probably as a result of the overgrown terrain. Vegetation was so dense that any movement about the island had to be along the shore at low tide.

Harkers Island is the closest population center to the Cape Lookout National Seashore on the South Core Banks. Ferries run from the National Park Service Visitor Center at the "east" end of Harkers Island. ■

Jessica James is an award-winning author who writes historical fiction, women's fiction, and suspense/thrillers. She enjoys combining her passion for travel and history by sharing the things she sees, enjoys, and appreciates while traveling across the United States. You can find her at www.pastplanettravels.com or on Instagram @authorjessicajames.