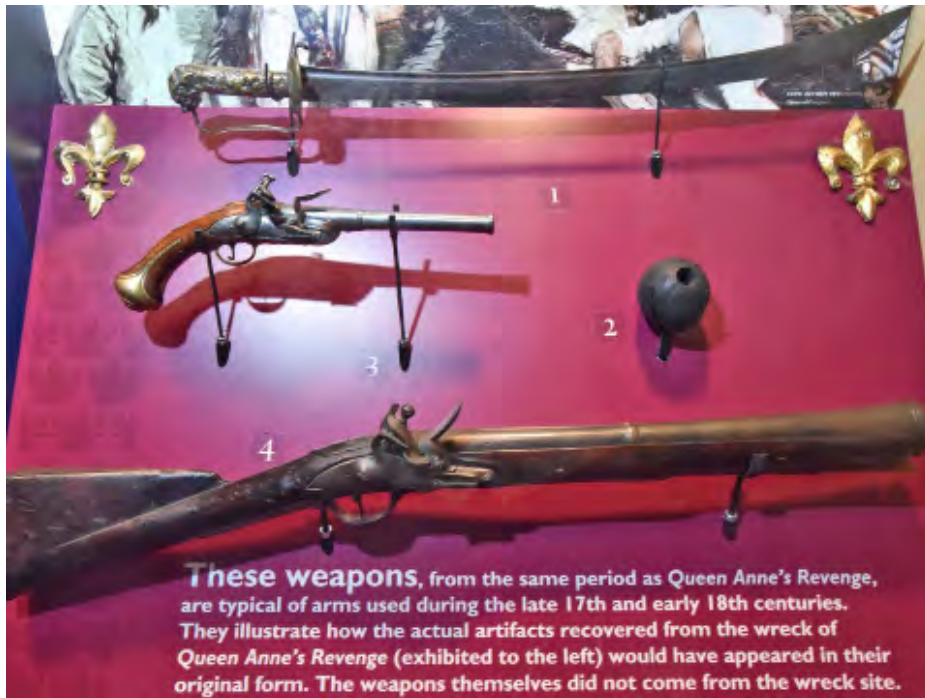


**N.C.'s haul from 'native son' Blackbeard's 300th anniversary:
Tourist gold**



This guy look familiar? Carl Cannon dresses as Blackbeard for various events in the coastal North Carolina town of Beaufort. Cannon is featured in a hologram at the NC Maritime Museum in Beaufort. He also heads a "crew" of pirate re-enactors and organizes Beaufort's annual Pirate Invasion festival, Aug. 10-11 this year. *Dylan Ray Photography*





In Beaufort, the compact, state-owned NC Maritime Museum covers coastal ecology and more, but the 400-some Blackbeard items there are the main draw.



The small-arms display at the NC Maritime Museum's Queen Anne's Revenge exhibit in Beaufort features period pieces, replicas and actual artifacts from the sunken vessel just off of the Crystal Coast of Carteret County. Dylan Ray Photography



Queen Anne's Revenge items on display at the museum range from small personal objects to a heavy bell and a cannon. John Bordsen for USA TODAY

OCRACOKE, N.C. – Say “Blackbeard” and what comes to mind may be a blood-thirsty pirate so unhinged that he tied firecrackers to his facial hair and lit them for yucks.

North Carolina begs to differ.

Along the mainland and on the Outer Banks, some view him as a gifted mariner, law-skirting entrepreneur, swashbuckling antihero and — if nothing else — a source of tourism gold because of the annual pirate festivals sparked by his notoriety.

He is considered a native son: Blackbeard kind of lived and worked in North Carolina and certainly died in the shallow waters off Ocracoke Island on Nov. 22, 1718, when his head was cut off during a battle with out-of-state authorities.

The 300th anniversary of the pirate’s heyday and demise is being marked with events ranging from educational displays and symposia to wakes. (OK, pirate-theme street festivals.)

Upping Blackbeard’s allure is the ongoing flow of items from his abandoned flagship, Queen Anne’s Revenge, discovered in 1996 some 60 miles down the North Carolina coast. The sunken wreckage found off Beaufort Inlet has yielded thousands of Blackbeard-era objects. But like that buccaneer’s life, question marks far outnumber facts and doubloons.

Arrghu-ments over Blackbeard's past

Little is known about the pirate until he burst into Colonial headlines two years before his demise. Small wonder the most current and comprehensive book about him is the accurately titled "The Last Days of Black Beard the Pirate."

According to author Kevin Duffus, Blackbeard's given name may have been Edward Teach, Thatch or Beard, and he may have been born in England, Scotland, Philadelphia or the Carolinas. Duffus postulates that Edward Beard left the settlement of Bath, North Carolina, around 1709 for bustling Philadelphia to be a sailor. He may have become a privateer — licensed by the crown to prey on ships from Colonial rivals Spain and France. Young Edward apparently fell in with pirates. (Any country's ships were fair game.) As someone who could navigate — reading, math and maps skills required — he rose through ranks of pirates who often operated in groups based out of Jamaica and the Bahamas.

According to Duffus, by 1717 Blackbeard captained a pirate fleet led by his six-cannon sloop and a crew of 70. He paired with Stede Bonnet, "The Gentleman Pirate," and led a squadron of desperados on booty heists from Panama to Delaware. What put Blackbeard over the top was his fleet's blockading of Charleston, South Carolina, in May 1718, until locals complied with the pirates' demands for medical supplies.

Blackbeard headed north, a successful CEO of sorts who knew his ships needed repair and who was aware the British government was actively hunting pirates, while also offering blanket pardons to those who surrendered. Near Beaufort Inlet, he downsized — running his Queen Anne's Revenge flagship aground on a sandbar on June 10 and leaving roughly 375 crewmen marooned in shallow water. He and a handpicked group of 100 continued north to Pamlico Sound in a smaller ship.

Blackbeard sailed to Bath, halfway up the North Carolina coast — a good choice. With about 12 houses, it was the primitive capital of the late-blooming colony, where Gov. Charles Eden and Colonial Secretary Tobias Knight had shady dealings with pirates. Blackbeard procured pardons from Eden and spent some of the following months at Bath while his ship was anchored across Pamlico Sound on the barrier island of Ocracoke.

Blackbeard intended to refit his remaining sloop and head to the Bahamas. But Virginia's governor dispatched two ships to Ocracoke that — despite warnings from Bath — pinned Blackbeard's sloop into a shallow-water hand-to-hand battle the pirates lost. Blackbeard was decapitated and his head was taken to Virginia along with survivors of his captured

crew, most of whom were tried and executed.

In Beaufort, the compact, state-owned NC Maritime Museum covers coastal ecology and more, but the 400-some Blackbeard items there are the main draw. (Photo: John Bordsen for USA TODAY)

In the pirate's wake

Here's where to follow the Blackbeard story.

► Bath — where the pirate may have been born, where he did business and may have lived — is a tiny village just off U.S. 264 and on the Pamlico River. Billboards tout Bath as “North Carolina’s First City,” but the oldest extant buildings date to after Blackbeard’s time. Dockside tunnels allegedly used by pirates to deliver booty to long-gone warehouses have never been found. Benches on the waterside parkland offer pastoral photo ops.

► Beaufort — two peninsulas south — is a vacation-oriented community facing Beaufort Inlet, the passage through the Outer Banks to the sandbar where in 1996 a private salvage firm located the submerged remains of Blackbeard’s Queen Anne’s Revenge.

The compact, state-owned North Carolina Maritime Museum covers coastal ecology and more, but the 300-plus Blackbeard items are the draw. The state/private consortium still investigating the sunken wreck takes its finds to the QAR Conservation Lab, 90 miles inland at East Carolina University, in Greenville (school team name: the Pirates). At the lab, items are cleaned, identified, preserved and cataloged. (Free lab tours, offered monthly on the first Tuesday, show archaeology in action.) Choice finds are sent to the museum.

Earlier this month, the museum debuted an 850-square-foot room for the Blackbeard tricentennial that includes 150 more QAR items (including a 2-ton cannon) and a hologram video of Blackbeard telling his story.

The hologram features Carl Cannon — in costume, a ringer for how many think Blackbeard may have looked — who heads an area “crew” of swashbuckling re-enactors and who organizes Beaufort’s annual Pirate Invasion festival, Sept. 19-20 this year. The museum’s Blackbeard 300 events continue through Nov. 10.

Cannon’s cousin is museum exhibits curator Michael Carraway, who oversees the QAR items on display.

Iron and pewter objects predominate, as they have been “concretized” — protected in a hard lime-sand coating over centuries underwater. That doesn’t tend to happen, Carraway says, with anything lead. Or gold.

Chip Stevens and his wife, Helena, own Blackbeard’s Lodge in the village of Ocracoke. They bought the rambling 1936 hotel -- built by his maternal ancestors – in 2007 and run it as a B&B. (Photo: John Bordsen for USA TODAY)

So where's the treasure?

Ocracoke Island is owned by the National Park Service — except for the 4-square-mile village of Ocracoke, whose bay has been a haven for mariners since Colonial times. It’s a quaint resort destination for pleasure-boaters and for vacationers who reach it only by ferry.

Southeast of town, facing the inlet separating it from NPS-owned Portsmouth Island, you can see the shallow bay where a desperate Blackbeard — his last sloop stuck on sand — cut his anchor and raised his sails in forlorn hopes a breeze could carry his crew to the sea and away from navy ships closing in.

High ground now owned by the NC Coastal Land Trust nearby offers a great view. Paths through the thick Springer’s Point underbrush also lead to a covered well where old-time mariners went for hard-to-find fresh water. It is a place Blackbeard and his crew frequented, according to Chip Stevens.

Stevens and his wife, Helena, own Blackbeard’s Lodge in Ocracoke. They bought the rambling 1936 hotel — built by his maternal ancestors — in 2007 and run it as a B&B.

Used to fielding questions about Blackbeard’s missing treasure, Stevens points out that “Booty was more often hijacked cargo — finished goods, wine and slaves — that could easily be resold, no questions asked.” He agrees with author Duffus that pirates were more likely to share gold with relatives than bury it in chests.

Some buccaneers indeed made a haul. Blackbeard’s quartermaster, William Howard, who took a pardon and escaped the noose, had enough capital to later buy all of Ocracoke Island.

Stevens believes different treasures may be found on Ocracoke: “The anchor Blackbeard cut from his ship has never been found; casks of merchandise may still be buried somewhere.” Also, Blackbeard’s headless body: “Sailors were very superstitious, and it

was very bad luck to just throw a body into the sea. Anyone who died at the Battle of Ocracoke was likely buried on the island.”

By custom and law, discoveries are usually finders keepers. In the Blackbeard’s Lodge lobby is a piece of wood from the Carol A. Deering, a five-master that went down in 1921. Pieces of the crewless “ghost ship” washed ashore at Ocracoke. On a lighter note, a container that fell off a commercial ship in 2006 resulted in massive cargo spillage: Thousands of bags of Doritos bobbed ashore.

The well in Springer’s Point Preserve is a different matter, Stevens says. The ancient well was a likely place for Blackbeard’s crew to bury items. In the 1940s, eccentric millionaire Sam Jones bought the grounds with hopes of finding pirate treasure. While he discovered nothing, in deeding it to the NC Coastal Land Trust he stipulated that anything found there would be shared with Jones heirs.

Jones is buried close to the well; the grave next to his is occupied by his horse, which locals say he treated like a house pet.

Stevens, chairman of Ocracoke’s annual Blackbeard Pirate Jamboree (Oct. 25-28), is not related to Jones.

But he is a direct descendant of Blackbeard quartermaster Howard.

If you go

Other pirate festivals in North Carolina include those at Nags Head (Aug. 15-16), Wilmington (Sept. 15), Southport (Sept. 21-22) and Bath (Oct. 19-20).

Pirate festivals are held from Great Britain to Portland, Oregon. See the calendar at piratefestivals.com.